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Dear AIR Colleagues:

Rarely am I speechless, but when Heather Kelly called to tell me I'd been selected for the 2021 Sidney Suslow Scholar Award I literally choked up. And when Heather's and Christine Keller's formal letter of notification arrived I choked up yet again. To say I am honored and humbled hardly does justice to my gratitude to the Association for giving me a professional home and to my AIR colleagues, a great many of whom have become my friends as well as my advisors, mentors, co-authors and co-presenters.

When I began my career while completing my first master's degree – yes, I have two – I went to work for the War on Poverty in Chicago, where Richard J. Daley, “da mayor,” exercised incredible control. As a planner, my role was to write proposals for programs to receive federal funding through the Economic Opportunity Act, money funneled through the city. My first day on the job, a colleague took me aside and told me the key to understanding organizations and politics was to “follow the money.” That lesson, and that I worked with diverse staff members whose life experiences were so different from my own, gave me a sense of realpolitik and the ways in which racial/ethnic diversity shape decisions and lives at all levels.

When I began my career in higher education, I was one of 25 individuals hired as the first cohort of full-time faculty in a new community college in Chicago's northern suburbs. Those early years reminded us of the old Micky Rooney and Judy Garland movies, but instead of “putting on a show” in the barn, we “started a college” in reconverted factory buildings. Many of the ideas that shaped the college in those early days – such as that students have different learning styles, it's important to engage students and not just lecture, and creating forms for the sake of having them – made Oakton a truly innovative and energetic institution. Add to this the timing. Oakton opened its doors to students in September 1970, a turbulent time in higher education when concepts of hierarchy, the importance of grades, and deference to faculty were being put to the test. As a traditionally-trained, newly minted Ph.D. in political science, I quickly learned that students were more diverse in their capacities and academic skills than I'd experienced previously, that work and family responsibilities competed with school for students' energy and attention, and that it was important to help students practice effective learning strategies in addition to learning the content of the courses I taught. These lessons informed my commitments to students and to the critical role community colleges could and should play in opening access and academic success to students who had previously been shut off from higher education.

How do these early career lessons relate to my life as an institutional / scholarly researcher? I moved from my faculty position to become an institutional researcher because I wanted data to inform decisions and wanted to test whether the assumptions I and my colleagues had about

students were based on fact or myth. I also wanted to test my wings on a wider stage, not content to remain a classroom instructor. My challenge was to find ways to connect with colleagues outside my college and to demonstrate that community college professionals were as competent and knowledgeable as our university brethren. Thus I attended my first Association for Institutional Research Forum in Denver, knowing not a sole and being awed by the range and depth of presentations. Though I skipped the next year's Forum, I returned to AIR the following year when the Forum was in Ft. Worth. That's when I truly found my AIR home, meeting IR professionals from across the nation, giving three presentations, and deciding I wanted to become involved as an active member of the Association. In the following years I was able to sit on a number of committees, the Board, and eventually to become president.

All the while I continued to do research, present in a variety of professional venues, and publish. My early lessons about realpolitik, racial/ethnic diversity, and helping students succeed stayed with me as I selected research topics, interpreted my data, and searched for ways to improve policies and practices. In other words, I wanted to be a scholar-practitioner.

As a scholar-practitioner, I continue to push institutions with which I consult to use their data and national research; present data clearly without clutter (thank you Edward Tufte); develop, implement *and evaluate* whether what they are doing is leading to intended outcomes; be willing to sunset what's not working; and remain open to change to address new issues, new student demographics, new ways of teaching and learning, new ways of funding and, in the last 14 months, incredible Covid-induced challenges. I hope I never am seen as the old guard resisting change.

In his letter of acceptance, last year's Suslow Award recipient Vic Borden noted "It is somewhat cliché to refer to 'standing on shoulders of giant' when recognized by an honor like this, but nothing better describes how I feel." I couldn't say it better, and know that if I began naming names of all those who have been so important to me in my IR career this letter would be way too long, and I'd still inadvertently leave out key friends and colleagues. Yet I'd be remiss not to mention Rick Voorhees, who spearheaded by nomination. Rick, since we had lunch together in Ft. Worth you've been a treasured colleague and friend; thank you!

My daughter and son remind me often that I've done a splendid job of flunking retirement. My failure is based in large part on my continuing interest in researching and understanding our dynamic, complex, life-changing world of higher education. And it is based, as well, on my strong desire to continue to collaborate and learn from my AIR colleagues and the resources provided by the organization.

With great gratitude,

Trudy Bers