Episode #10: Interview with Dr. Kinnis Gosha, Academic Program Director for Software Engineering, and Executive Director of the Morehouse Center for Broadening Participation in Computing

Dr. Erin Lynch:

Hello, and welcome to Collaborative Strategies for Inclusive Change. This is your official podcast of the NSF INCLUDES Coordination Hub, your source for exploring the innovative projects and partnerships transforming the STEM Enterprise. Each episode of this podcast series will feature an in-depth conversation between myself, Dr. Erin, and special guests of the groundbreaking work that they're doing in broadening access and participation in STEM fields. Here we discuss a broad range of topics from outreach programs to implementing best strategies that ensure underrepresented groups can reach their fullest potential. Plus, you'll gain valuable insights as to how we can increase diversity and create real lasting change among our STEM community.

Today's guest is the director of the Cultural Relevant Computing Lab at Morehouse College, Dr. Kinnis Gosha. Join us as we talk about partnerships and authentic implications of those opportunities. So good afternoon. We are actually really excited to have you, Dr. Gosha, in this conversation today, and today's conversation and topic is about partnerships. And so, we would love for you to be able to start with an introduction of yourself and some of the work that you are currently doing.

Dr. Kinnis Gosha:

Okay. Thank you for having me. Dr. Kinnis Gosha, I'm starting my 13th year at Morehouse College as a Hortinius I. Chenault endowed professor of computer science. I'm also the Academic Program Director for the first and only software engineering program at HBCU, as well as the Executive Director for the Morehouse Center for Broadening Participation in Computing.

Dr. Erin Lynch:

Thank you. So with all the varying hats and projects that you're engaged in, it sounds like you do a lot in terms of partnerships. Can you talk to us about some of the partnerships you've developed?

Dr. Kinnis Gosha:

As a HBCU, I believe that it's really important to maximize partnership for a couple reasons, but I think one is that if you're at a HBCU and you have limited resources you can get access to other people's resources through partnerships. Let's say your library doesn't have access to certain journals and things like that, right? Okay, well, you have a collaborator at certain institutions that might have those resources. They can help you to get those resources. Or, I'm just finding out now that certain institutions have startup funds and folks have reached out and said, "Hey, we will invest in you to support collaborative projects. We'll fund it out of our own institutional funds." So you don't even have to write the grant, people are so excited to partner with HBCUs and to build those kind of partnerships they will even fund themselves.

What I would say to my HBCU colleagues is that lots of times people will ask you for what they want but we don't ask them for what we want. And when we do ask, those asks aren't reasonable sometimes, and

so I think asking is one thing but really when you can ask for things that you feel it can make a case that are mutually beneficial, I think those things would have a higher success rate to happen. I think for someone that is tenure track, on the tenure track, working towards even full sometimes, it's really hard to invest a lot of time in the service category. But I think once you get to full, I think those partnerships become really valuable as you work towards getting different fellows and things like that. I think doing that service and partnering with those organizations in a heavier way, I feel like it's kind of that stage for those folks that kind of get to the full professor stage and probably even for folks that's going for full, having a strong showing and presence in your professional societies I think is important.

Dr. Erin Lynch:

You provided two ways of looking at it, right? Partnerships in which institutions are approaching us at HBCUs, and then partnerships in which we go out and we try to cultivate our own and we approach other institutions or organizations. And so, I want to start with us approaching other institutions and organizations because you mentioned something that many people don't necessarily know is a resource, the serving as an affiliated faculty member. So what does that look like to approach someone in which you potentially want to cultivate a partnership with, starting with providing your intellectual capital as an affiliate faculty member?

Dr. Kinnis Gosha:

I think that it helps to make sure you're in a situation so if you want to make that proposal you have the credentials to make it. I think it really kind of starts at home before you can really maximize those other partnerships sometimes at certain levels. I think one has a reservation that a lot of people have with HBCUs is their abilities when it comes to grant writing, is their ability to get grants submitted. I think lots of times we don't appreciate the act of submitting proposals and submitting them on time. I think going through the process, the mental exercise of submitting and making sure that you have all your supplementary documentation done, you understand what the process is to submit on time, you can submit your documents on time, you know who you got to get signatures from.

You know where does your dean sign, does your chair sign? Does the business and finance office sign? Does your provost office sign? Does your sponsor research ... Knowing how to route those things, knowing what that process look like, what forms you got to fill out. How do you fill those forms out? What do the forms say specifically? What do they really want to see? If you can't do those things, then it's going to be hard for you to build those partnerships, especially when it comes to proposals because they're not going to put you as a co-PI on a proposal and it's time to submit and no one submits because you didn't get your stuff out because you didn't know that you can't submit this grant in two days or three days like you thought you could. Or, you didn't know that there's a step you had to take or your department chair is out of office and he had to sign for it.

You got to work through those things at your own institution and show that you can do that to kind of build trust with other institutions that you want to collaborate. And to be honest with you, it's kind of both ways. I mean, you should want that if people want to collaborate with you. So I think going through that exercise and preparing yourself for those partnerships is really important to get those partnerships.

Dr. Erin Lynch:

So how do you start small? What would be your recommendation for someone who has served as an individual PI but really wants to branch out and scale what they're doing? What would be the immediate small scale step, you think, before getting into those big national consortium type partnerships?

Dr. Kinnis Gosha:

I think it's okay to collaborate and not necessarily be a co-PI. You can be a collaborator but just not be a co-PI. When you can kind of be on these proposal teams to see how they operate and see how organized they are. I'm at Morehouse and I'm near Georgia Tech so obviously I collaborate a lot with them, but they've had workshops where all the people come to Atlanta and it's a two day workshop and it's breakout groups and stuff. This is to write a proposal. I've never seen it before in my life but that's the level of organization and thought that they put into these multi-million dollar proposals. If you can come in and just get in where you fit in, in any kind of role, I think that's really valuable. It's a lot of people that don't agree with that standpoint, that feels like, "Oh, well you shouldn't have to be this, you should be the co-PI, and they should give you this big chunk of money and you shouldn't let them get over on you."

And it's like, no, you got to learn first. You know what I'm saying? Sometimes you just got to be in the room. You got to just observe that thing. You got to even be able to see that, okay, they planned this out. This is when they started working on the proposal. This is who are the people they brought in. Why did they bring these people in? What is my contribution? What do they want from me? How are they distributing the writing on this big proposal? How are they centralizing the PI versus the external affiliates? How do they engage companies? How do they fund grad students versus post-docs?

There's so much that you can learn from being a part of those proposal teams that when people do come and ask you to join, sometimes it's less about trying to get as much money out the proposal and more about trying to learn as much as you can. So if they're not inviting you to all the meetings, let them know that you want to be invited to all the meetings. Let them know, "Hey, I want to learn as much about this kind of proposal writing as possible."

Dr. Erin Lynch:

Now let's reverse it. So we've talked about from us serving as the focal point, but now what about institutions that come to HBCUs or other minority serving institutions? What do you want to see or what are you looking for when you are approached for potential partnerships?

Dr. Kinnis Gosha:

I think at one point I really wanted to just get grants because I want to get tenure and I want to get promoted. Then I think at this point now in my career I can collaborate on a project. It's not as important to me to be a co-PI necessarily. It's not important to me to get the most amount of money all the time. What's more important to me is making sure that whatever I do fits into the bigger picture goals that I have for myself. Because, at some point, if all the funding is scattered around and you're doing 18 different things, you're going to look up and you're going to be contributing to everybody else project but you don't have anything to speak of of your own.

And so, I want to make sure that I can do something that I could scale into other people's proposals, something that's going to help me and my objectives in terms of as a researcher or as a academic program director, as a faculty member. It really needs to align with what I want to get done and I kind of value that more than some of the other factors I used to.

Dr. Erin Lynch:

What do you think makes for an authentic partnership? Being at, I've now worked at two HBCUs and now an organization that serves all minority serving institutions and being approached frequently because of the population that we typically serve and there's always that hint of like, is this really an

authentic? In your perspective, what do you think makes for an authentic partnership and do you think that that allows a project to be more successful?

Dr. Kinnis Gosha:

I think there's a misconception that a stakeholder comes and they have these great intentions or they have these bad intentions. What I've learned is that are you ready for that partnership? So if you're getting called and people want to engage with you, do you know what you're looking for out of the partnership? Is that clear? Because if it is clear, you can be very direct with people and you'll say, "Oh, well, that partnership is authentic because I needed X, Y, Z, and they provided me X, Y, and Z." If you don't know what you're looking for out of these partnerships, then you might come and say this person is not authentic because they didn't give me X, Y, and Z, but did you really ask for it? Right? I can recite what I'm looking for to make sure that I'm getting something reciprocal.

That comes from years of experience and years of grant writing and preparation and planning, where if you haven't done that then I think, as a PI, you're thinking about it more like, okay, is this person's intent genuine versus it's more business and less kind of feelings to say, "Hey, you want to engage in a business partnership transaction. Okay, this is what I'm looking for for my services or my engagement." I think if you have that mentality, it takes the emotion out of it.

Dr. Erin Lynch:

Yeah, yeah, definitely a much more transactional approach. I think of a specific instance where I reached out to a much larger research institution about a potential project because I knew that they were going down a certain discipline area and a certain vein of research, and so I preemptively reached out and was like, "Hey, just wanted to have some conversation with you." My intent was that we would be at the table in the early formations of what I knew was coming down the pipeline, and no response. And then, what ended up happening, probably about five months later, I'm pulled into a meeting with the very person that I reached out to at the other university where now they were wanting our university on the project because they had been told they didn't have enough access to communities of color.

And so, it wasn't until after the fact that they were told by the agency that they needed to include more communities of color that we were approached. And so, when I brought it up it's like, "Oh, it's so great to finally connect with you when I reached out some months ago." And the response was, "Oh, well, I have to triage my emails so I don't respond to everything." "Oh, and yet here you are now. Wonderful. Let's have a conversation." So that didn't really set the stage for what would be, in my mind, an authentic partnership in which someone's really interested in knowing what it is that we bring to the table to benefit the project. And so, in instances like that have you experienced ... And yes, there is a transactional component to it, but have you experienced anything where you've had to redirect to make sure that everybody is getting what they mutually agreed and would benefit from in a partnership?

Dr. Kinnis Gosha:

I've gotten a lot of emails, why are you sending me this? I can share examples of, "Hey, the grant is due in a week. We need you to commit to A, B, C, and D, and we have no money for you to do A, B and C." I've seen some wild stuff. Some of it is, it's a blend of arrogance and some of it is ignorance. They just don't know. They don't know the HBCU professor. It's almost like you're a different species kind of, the way they engage. Some people just don't have hard feelings. I know because I've had people reach out with really weird circumstances, like you said, and real suspect circumstances, and I just calmly explain to them why what they did was shady. And they'll be super apologetic, they will go and say, "Look." They'll go back to the other co-PIs and say, "Look, we blew it, we came wrong. If we want them to

collaborate with us, we got to make money for them." And they've readjusted their budgets and found money for me to contribute to the project.

And so, I think some people can be saved. I think that other people are just arrogant and just look at HBCUs as these second tier schools and they're going to act like that. You can't change everybody but I think that's kind of, when you go back to the business standpoint and say, "Well, hey, if you're not proposing something that is of mutually interest to me business-wise, thanks but no thanks, and that's okay.

Dr. Erin Lynch:

Final recommendations in terms of building partnerships. What would you ... We'll give it down to three. What would you say are your three core recommendations when it comes to building a partnership?

Dr. Kinnis Gosha:

I think the first thing I will say is think through ahead of time what things you want when you get that email. Do you want to supplement students, undergrad students, and fund undergrad research? Do you want to fund course releases so that you can participate? Do you want to learn and get access to different labs and things like that from different institutions? Do you want to do a visiting professorship? Do you want to have doctoral students come and service TAs? Right? If you think about what you want to do and what that costs ahead of time, I think that when you do get those emails, I think that you can get straight to the point and be able to screen them better. That way you can focus on things that align with what you want to get done and what you want to focus on. I'll say that's number one.

Number two, I would say that if you come into a situation where, if you don't acknowledge, some people just don't know, you're going to lose out on a lot of collaborations that you would've gotten. Some people just don't know and you have to calmly explain to them like, "Hey, I know you did this. It's very disappointing that you could have done this. It would've been the more respectable thing to do to do X, Y, and Z," and just kind of teach people. They don't teach this stuff in a PhD program. They don't teach this stuff at their own institution so some people just genuinely just don't know. And so, I would say that's number two. Then the third thing I would do is make sure the partnership makes sense. You don't want to bite off something just to get funding that you can't do well because what happens is that if you do well, this is a small network of faculty and researchers and they're going to go and tell it.

If you're a good partner and a good collaborator, people are going to knock down your door because people are going to sing your praises. So make sure that when you have these collaborations, make sure you're strong. Make sure you allocate the time to do whatever you told folks you were going to do, if it gets funded. And, make sure that not only you open doors for yourself but you don't close doors for others. Because I've been in conversations too where people just don't want to work with HBCUs because they've had a bad experience. So realize that you're not just representing yourself, you're really representing your institution and HBCUs overall.

Dr. Erin Lynch:

Yeah, that last piece, I feel kind of some kind of way with that one, but I understand. It's not always the case with these large R ones where they don't have the extra pressure of having to represent all R ones, but that is a reality for minority institutions and minority researchers so I value that completely. Yeah though, we want to thank you so much for your time, Dr. Gosha, today. Thank you, of course, for your contributions to this work and this space. What you have done for black men in the computer science

field is just incredible and what you will continue to do we are very excited to see. So thank you so much for your time today and your experience.

Dr. Kinnis Gosha:

All right, thanks for having me on. Appreciate it.