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Wheelan, Belle S.

By: Hilton, Adriel A.

(10 Oct. 1951–),

educator, was born in Chicago, Illinois, to Adelia Leonard Smith, an elementary school teacher, and Frank David Smith. Wheelan graduated from St. Gerard Catholic High School of San Antonio, Texas, in 1968. In 1968 Wheelan entered Trinity University of San Antonio, Texas, and graduated in 1972 with a double major in psychology and sociology. She became the first African American at Trinity to be included in *Who's Who in American Colleges and Universities*. It was to be the first of many milestones in a career that covered more than three decades. She went on to study at Louisiana State University and received a Master of Arts degree in Developmental/Educational Psychology in 1974. That same year, Wheelan became an associate professor at Alamo Community College District at San Antonio College. Recognizing the importance of advanced education, she left that position in 1984 to enroll in a doctoral program at the University of Texas, earning a doctorate in educational administration with an emphasis in community college leadership. Returning to the Alamo Community College District, San Antonio College, Dr. Wheelan eventually became director of counseling, later director of developmental education, and finally director of academic support services. Her postdoctoral training included the American Association of Community Colleges President's Academy as well as the Harvard University's Institute of Lifelong Learning.

Dr. Wheelan relocated to Hampton, Virginia, in 1987 when she accepted a position at Thomas Nelson Community College as dean of student development services. It was there that she began developing her focus on a comprehensive student programming strategy designed to enhance development of the "whole student." Her student development focus eventually raised her profile in educational circles around the country, garnering the attention of Virginia higher education leaders. Dr. Wheelan then received an appointment as Provost at Tidewater Community College's Portsmouth Campus in 1989. In addition to her duties as provost, she

served as the chief administrative and academic officer of the local campus in a multicampus, comprehensive community college, roles that would position her to become president of Central Virginia Community College in 1992, making her the first African American woman to serve as president of a two- or four-year public institution of higher education in the commonwealth of Virginia. Dr. Wheelan left the Central Virginia campus in 1998 to take over as president of Northern Virginia Community College, becoming the first African American woman in Virginia to serve as president of not just one but two public higher education institutions. Northern Virginia Community College is the largest institution in the Virginia Community College System and the second largest in the nation. She served as its president until 2001.

In 2002 Dr. Wheelan was appointed the Commonwealth's Secretary of Education and was the first African American woman to serve in this capacity. Known for her efforts to diversify the student body, faculty, and staff of Virginia's higher education system, Wheelan came under fire for having what some critics called an excessive number of minorities on her staff. She refused to back down, pointing to the historical underrepresentation of minorities to justify a deliberately inclusive hiring policy. Since 2005 she served as president of the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools—again as the first African American woman in that capacity. Dr. Wheelan also served as the chief executive officer of the Regional Accrediting Commission for eleven Southern states and Latin America (Mexico, Costa Rica, and Venezuela).

Her numerous awards and recognitions include four honorary degrees from Virginia Seminary and College (1995), Marymount University (2002), Bridgewater College (2002), and Virginia State University (2006); and the Distinguished Graduate Award from Trinity University (2002) and from the College of Education at the University of Texas at Austin (1992). In addition, she was the recipient of the Pioneer Award from the National Council on Black American Affairs and the Award of Distinction from the American Association of University Women. Dr. Wheelan held membership with Rotary International, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., the board of directors of American College Testing, Inc., the American Association of Community Colleges' board of directors, and the President's Roundtable of the National Council on Black American Affairs among others.

Despite an impressive career and a long list of accomplishments, Dr. Belle S. Wheelan is often quoted as saying her greatest achievement has been raising her son, Reginald.

Further Reading

- Wheelan, B.S. *What's It Like Being the Only Black Woman Here?* (1995).
- Wheelan, B.S. *Making Public Education Work for Black Males* (1991).
- Wheelan, B.S. "More teachers learning I.T." *Washington Business Journal*, 1999, p. 55.