



THEE PATH TO IMPACTFUL ENGAGEMENT

PARTICIPANT BIOS

CELIA BURSE, SERVICE LEARNING COORDINATOR, JACKSON STATE UNIVERSITY

Ms. Celia Burse is a native of Jackson, Mississippi and a JSU alum. Ms. Burse is a community advocate, driven by a passion for service work and lifelong learning. With a strong background in educational leadership and community outreach, Ms. Burse currently serves as the Coordinator for Service Learning at Jackson State University. She also is a professor at the university and instructs Civic Engagement. Ms. Burse has made significant contributions through her participation in team-based organizational structures and working collaboratively to help residents achieve their educational goals. She has a Master of Science in Leadership with a concentration in Human Resources from Belhaven University. Ms. Burse is also well-equipped with the knowledge and skills to drive nonprofit fundraising, mentor students, and facilitate community engagement initiatives. In addition to her professional endeavors, Ms. Burse is a member of the Jackson Mississippi Alumnae Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Incorporated, and contributes to established programs aimed for enhancing the well-being of local communities. She also enjoys vocal performance, exploring African American literature, and international travel. Ms. Celia Burse continues to strive towards new challenges that promote educational advancement and community service, embodying the spirit of service and excellence in every endeavor.

SHERNICA FERGUSON, PhD CANDIDATE IN PUBLIC POLICY, JACKSON STATE UNIVERSITY

I am a native of the Mississippi Delta, currently pursuing my doctoral degree as a Ph.D. candidate at Jackson State University, specializing in Public Policy and Administration. My educational foundation comprises dual Master's degrees: a Master of Public Health with concentration in Epidemiology and Biostatistics, and a Master of Science in Genetics within Life Sciences. Throughout my academic journey, I have demonstrated exceptional scholarly aptitude, professional contributions, and an unwavering commitment to fostering positive social change through rigorous academic research and practical advocacy initiatives. I have received numerous accolades in recognition of my academic excellence and was selected for the prestigious "Elevating the Experience: The Graduate Student Success Series" program by the Division of Graduate Studies at Jackson State University. I am also a recipient of the BeyGood Foundation award and the Alpha Kappa Mu National Award. My scholarly work earned me the Best White Paper Award at the Conference of Minority Public Administrators in 2025. I maintain membership in distinguished honor societies, including Phi Kappa Phi, Alpha Kappa Mu, Alpha Pi Alpha, and Omicron Delta Kappa.

With over 15 years of dedicated research and authorship experience, I have established myself as a multifaceted professional. I continue to elevate in my profession both as a mentor and mentee, fulfilling various roles throughout my career. I mentor students in data-driven initiatives in Public Informatics and serve as an evaluator in Mississippi Urban Issues. My research focuses on welfare policies affecting vulnerable populations, and I contribute as a writer to a textbook on curriculum-driven policies in Mississippi. I function as a columnist for the American Society for Public Administration (ASPA) and authored the influential publication "The Winding Path: Religion's Transformative Role in American Politics and Society." My expertise has been showcased through research presentations at the Conference of Minority Public Administrators (COMPA), where I also moderated a specialized session on Governance in Public Policy. I currently serve as President of the Public Policy Student Organization, work as a political advisor in a national Senate campaign for Mississippi, and provide consultation services to nonprofit organizations.

My commitment to social justice and equality extends beyond academia. My advocacy work includes identifying and addressing disparities faced by minority-owned businesses and nonprofits. I spearhead campaigns to address funding equity gaps, conduct educational outreach to empower communities, and advocate for inclusivity and meaningful social change. Beyond my professional endeavors, I appreciate jazz and classical music and explore diverse cultures. I aspire to study international charitable organizations and economic policies abroad. I live by the guiding principle "chance favors the prepared mind," which reflects my approach to both academic pursuits and social advocacy initiatives.

SREENATH PANCHAGNULA, PhD CANDIDATE IN CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY, JACKSON STATE UNIVERSITY

Sreenath Panchagnula is a Clinical Psychology PhD Candidate at Jackson State University (JSU). He currently serves as the Graduate Student Adviser to the Graduate Students Association at JSU. Previously, Sreenath was the Past President, President, President-Elect, and Vice President of the GSA at JSU. As President of the GSA, Sreenath was instrumental in bringing the Three Minute Thesis (3MT) competition to JSU for the first time during the GSA's annual Research Symposium in the Spring semester. Additionally, he kept a clear line of communication with Provost Mosley to address graduate student concerns and resolve issues. During his undergraduate career at Washington State University (WSU), Sreenath was actively involved in student body government as a Senator representing the College of Arts & Sciences for the Associated Students of WSU (ASWSU). He has also served in many other leadership positions at JSU and WSU within these institutions and externally with professional organizations such as the American Psychological Association and the Mississippi Psychological Association. After graduation, Sreenath plans to become a Licensed Clinical Neuropsychologist working with all ages in an academic medical center setting.

MARKYEL PITTMAN, MS NAACP YOUTH & COLLEGE DIVISION PRESIDENT

Markyel Pittman is a dynamic and results-driven political strategist, advocate, and leader dedicated to shaping public policy and advancing social equity. As a native of Grenada, MS, Markyel has a robust background in political science and public administration, he has

demonstrated exceptional leadership in campaign management, civic engagement, and health equity initiatives.

Markyel holds a Bachelor of Science and a Master of Science in Political Science from Jackson State University, where he actively contributed to student and civic organizations. He is currently pursuing a Doctorate in Public Administration at Liberty University, further strengthening his expertise in governance and policy development.

Professionally, Markyel has excelled in roles that bridge policy, community engagement, and public service. As the Men's Health Program Manager at the Institute for the Advancement of Minority Health, he directs initiatives that address health disparities through an equity-focused lens. Previously, he served as a Central Region Field Organizer and Youth Civic Engagement Coordinator with Mississippi Votes, leading statewide efforts to mobilize young voters and foster civic awareness. His experience extends to policy advocacy and constituent services, having interned with Congressman Bennie G. Thompson and worked as a Community Organizer with the NAACP Mississippi State Conference.

Beyond his professional endeavors, Markyel is deeply involved in leadership and service. He is the State President of the Mississippi NAACP Youth & College Division and a proud member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. His dedication to community impact has earned him prestigious accolades, including the Congressional Record from Congressman Bennie G. Thompson, the Inaugural Mississippi Votes Emerging Leader Award, and Jackson State University's Top 40 Under 40 Alumni Award.

An accomplished speaker and thought leader, Markyel has delivered keynote addresses at the NAACP National Convention, Mississippi State Conference, and the Institute for the Advancement of Minority Health's Black Men's Equity Council. With a passion for advocacy and a commitment to public service, he continues to champion policies that drive meaningful change for marginalized communities.

SCOTTIE D. WILLIS, JR., DIRECTOR OF STUDENT LEADERSHIP & ENGAGEMENT, JACKSON STATE UNIVERSITY

Scottie D. Willis, Jr. is a dedicated educator and student affairs professional with over seven years of progressive experience in higher education. As the Director of Student Leadership and Engagement at Jackson State University, he is committed to fostering an environment where students thrive academically, intellectually, and socially. With a passion for leadership development, student engagement, and community building, he has successfully implemented initiatives that enhance the student experience and prepare future leaders.

Prior to his current role, Willis served as the Upward Bound Director at Hinds Community College, where he provided strategic oversight for federally funded TRIO programs, led recruitment efforts, and implemented innovative engagement strategies for first-generation and low-income students. His tenure at Jackson State University also includes serving as the Coordinator of Student Leadership, where he played a pivotal role in launching impactful

programs such as the JSU Student Hall of Fame, the Blue S.T.R.E.A.K Freshman Mentoring Program, and the Men of Excellence Male Mentorship Initiative—the first of its kind at a Mississippi HBCU.

A champion for student advocacy and organizational leadership, Willis has spearheaded digital transformations, including transitioning student government elections to an online platform, resulting in a 77% increase in participation. His branding and engagement efforts have revitalized student programs, significantly increasing social media reach and student involvement.

Beyond his professional work, Willis is a sought-after speaker and mentor, having presented at national and regional conferences on leadership, student engagement, and diversity in higher education. His commitment to service extends into the community, where he serves as a Senior Pastor at Big Creek MB Church and actively contributes to outreach initiatives.

Willis holds a Master of Science in Leadership from Belhaven University and a Bachelor of Science in Interdisciplinary Studies from Delta State University. He is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Urban Higher Education at Jackson State University.

Passionate about empowering the next generation, Willis remains dedicated to shaping transformative student experiences and fostering inclusive leadership development.