



Deidre Gibson (1964-Present)

Associate Professor, and Chair
Department of Marine and
Environmental Science

Hampton University

"The field needs a diverse eye on how to solve some of these problems and issues." Deidre Gibson, 2006.

Overview

Dr. Deidre Gibson is an associate professor and Chair of the Department of Marine and Environmental Science at Hampton University. She began her career at Hampton University in 2002 in the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Living Marine Resources Cooperative Science Center. In 2012, she received tenure, was promoted to Associate Professor and the Chair of the Department of Marine and Environmental Science. Being the chair of her department allows her to focus on research, writing grants, and directing a number of mentorship and professional development efforts to bring more minorities into the marine and environmental sciences. Some of her publications include:

- D.M. Gibson, Bookreview: Leaving the Lectern by Dean McManus, L&O Bulletin, 15(2), 37-38
- D.M. Gibson, Autobiographical Sketches of Women in Oceanography, Oceanography, 18,122
- D. M. Gibson, "Plankton", In Water: Science and Issues, ed. E. Julius Dasch. New York: Macmillan Reference USA, Volume 3, pp186-190
- D. M. Gibson and G. A.- Paffenhöfer. Asexual reproduction rates of the doliolid, *Dolioletta gegenbauri* Uljanin (Tunicata, Thaliacea), J of Plankton Res., 24, 703-712
- G._A. Paffenhofer and 39 co-authors. Marine Zooplankton Colloquium 2. Future Marine Zooplankton Research – A Perspective. Mar. Ecol. Prog. Ser. 222:297-308
- D. M. Gibson and G. A.- Paffenhöfer,. Feeding and Growth Rates of the doliolid, *Dolioletta gegenbauri* Uljanin (Tunicata, Thaliacea), J of Plankton Res., 22, 1485-1500
- D. M. Gibson. Dissertation. Feeding and Growth Rates of the doliolid, *Dolioletta*

Early Life and Career

Like many minorities in the environmental field, Deidre Gibson did not come to a career in marine science in a straightforward way. Though she enjoyed boating and crabbing with her family while growing up in New Orleans, she never imagined a career in the research sciences. "[Growing up] I never thought about

a career in the field of marine or environmental science—I had never seen or been exposed to anything like that,” she says.

Gibson first was exposed to marine science while taking undergraduate courses at the University of New Orleans. “I was just searching...trying to have some fun,” she remembers. “I took a SCUBA diving class, and that opened my eyes to a lot of different things that I hadn’t thought about before. I started doing research, and looking at different college guide books.” After taking a number of different science classes and doing her own research, Gibson made the decision to pursue marine science as a career, and transferred to Shoreline Community College in Seattle. After earning both an Associate’s degree in science and an Applied Associate’s degree in marine biology and oceanography, she moved on to the University of Washington, earning her B.S. in oceanography in 1991. As an undergrad, she worked as an EPA “stay in school” intern doing water collection and sampling.

After earning her undergraduate degree, Gibson worked as a research technician at Louisiana University’s Marine Consortium for five years. “I worked for a biological oceanographer, investigating the effects of nutrients from the Mississippi River on the zooplankton community in the Gulf of Mexico,” she explains. While she found the work meaningful, she also cites her later years there as the most difficult of her career. Her boss did not encourage her aspirations; in fact, she actively discouraged Gibson from going to graduate school, saying she was “not good enough.” Fortunately, Gibson did not listen: she earned her Ph.D. in Marine Science from the University of Georgia in 2000, and did research at the Skidaway Institute of Oceanography in Savannah. She then went on to do more marine research at two post-doc positions, at Savannah State University and the University of Connecticut-Avery Point.

Gibson began her career at Hampton University in 2002 as an assistant research professor in the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Living Marine Resources Cooperative Science Center. In 2004, she became a tenure-track assistant professor, in both the Biological Sciences and Marine and Environmental Science departments. In 2012, she received tenure, was promoted to Associate Professor and the Chair of the Department of Marine and Environmental Science. Being the chair of her department allows her to focus on research, writing grants, and directing a number of mentorship and professional development efforts to bring more minorities into the marine and environmental sciences.

Contributions

Gibson says the highlight of her career so far has been directing with such diversity programs. “There’s a big push in marine science now to increase diversity—being involved in these programs has encouraged me to stay in [the field], and be a part of making that difference,” she says. She is most proud of her first NSF program, the Diversity in Research in Environmental and Marine Sciences (DREAMS) project. The DREAMS I project was a collaboration between Hampton and the Virginia Institute of Marine Science (VIMS), and DREAMS II with VIMS and Elizabeth City State University. These programs aimed to expose HU and ECSU marine science students to research opportunities. “While the students took classes, they were also doing small projects on the Hampton campus to get a feel for research and working as a group. That experience prepared them for internship experience at VIMS, and others research institutions” Gibson explains. In addition to her involvement with DREAMS I & II, Gibson also co-directed the Hall-Bonner program (a fellowship program for minority Ph.D. students), is a mentor in both the MS PHD and ASALO Multicultural Programs, and co-directed the Mid-Atlantic Center of Ocean Science Education Excellence, and the COSEE-Coastal Trends programs, which exposed college, K-12 students and teachers to the marine sciences.

Mentoring Others

Gibson takes her own role as a mentor very seriously. She first realized her potential to be one when leading students on tours of the Skidaway facility and talking about research there. “I didn’t realize it at the time, but I was kind of a mentor to some of these students,” she says. Later, when working with programs designed to attract minority students to scientific meetings, she was surprised by how excited other minority students often were to see “someone like them” going on to graduate school. One of those students calls Gibson her mentor to this day; she is now Dr. Eria Holloman. Currently, as the only black professor in marine science at Hampton University, Gibson is a mentor to other students at the historically black school, a role she considers a major accomplishment in itself: “I would say my most significant achievement is being considered a role model.”

As for her career, Gibson says, “A lot of good things are happening for me.” She was able to finish her doctorate in only four years, an accomplishment made even more special when she got the chance to show it to her former boss, who told her that she would never succeed in graduate school. Currently, Gibson is encouraged by the success she has had providing minority students with access to the research sciences. She enjoys the “small atmosphere” in her program, and the ability to work directly with students. She counts getting several student programs and research grants funded as major accomplishments, and is excited that it is allowing a number of African American students to pursue higher education in the sciences. “When I started at Hampton University, many students were not thinking of grad school as an option,” Gibson says. “Getting these grants funded has increased their level of interest in research and eventually going on to grad school.” Her students have gone on to become Marshall Scholars, graduate students at Yale, UCLA, University of MD, ODU, VIMS, U Mass Boston, and many others.

Importance of Mentoring to Career

Gibson has benefited from the guidance of many mentors throughout her academic career. Jack Serwald, her advisor at Shoreline Community College, saw her scientific potential and encouraged her to take all of the science courses offered there. At the University of Washington, Oceanographer Mary Jane Perry inspired and encouraged Gibson and continues to serve as a mentor today. Gustav Paffenhofer was Gibson’s graduate advisor; she notes that not only did he encourage her to pursue her goals and to push her work ethic, “He was very honest with me...we were very different, and we learned a lot about our different cultures,” she says. Ben Cuker, who runs a diversity program aiming to bring minority students to scientific meetings, helped her meet other minority students—and potential mentors—in her field. “Until participating in the ASLO-MP program, I was the only African American in the room,” Gibson notes. She credits that program with helping to nurture mutual mentorship among African American female scientists, including Ashanti Pyrtle, Dionne Hopkins, and “too many others to name.”

Advice to Young Professionals

Gibson notes that as those in the marine and environmental field grow to see diversity as more important, opportunities for minorities in the field will grow as well. “There’s a reason why there’s a big push [from funding agencies] for minorities to be involved in the field...because we’re all affected by the environment,” she says. “Sometimes it takes a different point of view, a different culture to see things in a way the mainstream may not think to solve problems.” She encourages minorities to get involved in

the marine and environmental arena: “Part of our responsibility as a community, is to solve environmental issues. The field needs a diverse eye on how to solve some of these issues and problems.

For More Information

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This interview was conducted in 2015.