



Birl Lowery (1950-Present)

Professor, Soil Sciences and Environmental Studies

University of Wisconsin-Madison

"There are too few minorities in this area. It's a wide-open area, with great opportunities." Birl Lowery, 2006.

Overview

Birl Lowery always knew that he wanted a career in the environmental field. "I've always enjoyed the outdoors and outdoor activity, just being in the environment," he explains. "I have always wanted to work outside, so that's how I got started." Lowery grew up on a farm in Starkville, Mississippi. "I enjoyed being outside, working on our small farm," he recalls. "That was what I thought life should be about." He went on to study agricultural education at Alcorn State University as an undergraduate, received his master's degree from Mississippi State in agricultural and biological systems engineering, and his Ph.D. from Oregon State in soil science.

This interview was conducted in 2015.

Career

After graduate school, Lowery was hired as an assistant professor in applied soil physics at the University of Wisconsin, Madison (UW), the institution where he continues to teach today. When he began at UW, his appointment was eighty percent research and twenty percent instruction; today it is an even fifty-fifty. Lowery's research concentrates on the impact of farming on the environment. "I work with growers on every scale," he says. "We have organic farmers that we work with—I work with the whole range—but most problems are associated with large scale farming operations."

Importance of Mentoring to Career

Mentors have not played an important role in the development of Lowery's career, though he has mentored some minority students in his capacity as an advisor. Lowery has been involved in a number of diversity efforts at the university. "When I was chair of the department, I tried to increase the number of minorities within the department," Lowery says. For a number of years, he served on a committee that provided advanced

opportunity fellowships to students of color. Lowery has also been active on the university's equity and diversity committee, and the Minorities in Agriculture, Natural Resources and Related Sciences program (MANRRS).

Highlights

One of the highlights of Lowery's career so far was his experience as chair of the department. "I've also been successful in research," he adds. "Some of my ideas have been adopted by farmers, which is good from both an environmental and a production standpoint." He has remained in the environmental field because he enjoys what he does. When asked for what he believes to be his most significant achievement, Lowery answers, "Just having this job and performing it." However, a low point is definitely the excessive hours. "This is still going on after almost twenty-six years—it may just be my nature," Lowery laughs.

Advice to Young Professionals

Lowery offers the following advice for minorities who are considering a career in the environmental field, "Take it very seriously and go after it," he says. "There are too few minorities in this area. It's a wide-open area, with great opportunities. I would love to see more minorities involved in environmental issues. We need more in this area as opposed to other sciences."

For More Information

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