



Meet the Leader: Carlotta M. Arthur, PhD

Interviewed by Birgit Smith Burton

I considered it an honor and indeed a pleasure to spend an hour getting to know Dr. Carlotta Arthur.

Carlotta M. Arthur, PhD is many things. You may know her as the program director for the Henry Luce Foundation's Clare Boothe Luce (CBL) Program, where she directs the foundation's efforts to support women in science, mathematics, and engineering in higher education in the United States. Arthur joined the Luce Foundation in 2012. Since then, she has deftly led CBL, which is the most significant source of private support for women in STEM disciplines in higher education in the nation. In her role, she leads the program, conducts strategic planning, manages all grant making and administration, and consults current and prospective grantees, among other responsibilities.

In addition to being a philanthropic leader, she is an engineer and a licensed psychologist. Arthur was the first African American woman to earn a bachelor's degree in metallurgical engineering from Purdue University. She earned her PhD in clinical psychology from the State University of New York at Stony Brook. Arthur has provided leadership and volunteer service through her involvement with the Society of Women Engineers Research Advisory Committee and the American Psychological Association Leadership Institute for Women in Psychology Advisory Committee.

Prior to joining the Luce Foundation, Arthur directed the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship and Diversity Initiatives Programs at the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. She was a member of the inaugural cohort of W.K. Kellogg Scholars in Health Disparities at the Harvard University School of Public Health. She also served as an assistant professor at Meharry Medical College, an HBCU in Nashville, Tennessee; an Andrew W. Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow at Smith College; and as an adjunct assistant professor at Dartmouth College's Geisel School of Medicine.

With a career spanning academia, industry, and philanthropy, Arthur is a visionary who defies easy categorization. She is a budding children's book author, an aspiring television writer, an aspiring podcaster, and a blogger. And in her (limited) spare time? She likes exploring off-the-beaten-path neighborhoods in New York City and learning how to play flamenco guitar.

A native of Indianapolis, Indiana, Arthur was a first-generation college graduate from a working class family. Her mother was among the first in her family to graduate from high school and would have enjoyed being an astronaut, had there been such opportunities at the time. Her mother's deep interest in science fiction spurred Arthur's interest in math and science. Her father was an immigrant from Barbados, and moved to the United States for greater opportunity. Arthur's parents were supportive of education and knew the benefits that came from higher levels of education. While her parents did not know much about the intricacies of higher education, they knew it meant more opportunity.

When asked what she wished she had known earlier in her career, Arthur replied, "I wish I knew more about the diversity within the higher education sector."

She explained that she wished she had known more about what kinds of opportunities were available in higher education. It has been something she has wondered about, although she acknowledged that she might not have done anything differently. Arthur has brought these experiences with her as she mentors others. She said she tells them about the different kinds of institutions there are and encourages them to "aim for the best, the top, and not to let cost frighten them...aim for the best they can possibly get into, because it will be good for them in the long term."

Arthur credited her mother and father for being the biggest influences in her life. She said her parents were "both very committed to hard work and passionate about doing the best that they could." She added, "I'm sure that if they had the opportunities that I had, they would have taken advantage of them."

Arthur described how some of the strides that were made in the country and the opportunities that had inspired her parents are now being lost, gradually and slowly, being taken away. She said, "We're going backwards at least in terms of opportunities (in general) for people from underrepresented groups, and I fear for my nephews, both of whom are African American boys, now teenagers, and what their future holds."

When reflecting on what keeps her up at night, Arthur offered a heavy response, "The state of the nation." She said, "In my personal opinion, not speaking as a representative of the Foundation, I feel like we're going backwards as a nation, particularly in terms of human and civil rights." When asked about her legacy, Arthur said she wants others to remember her for making a difference, "...because not only did I help move the needle by helping them to actually access higher education, but I also helped to develop the next generation of leaders and people who are going to address some of the challenges that I believe that our nation faces in the future. Maybe they will even address the systems, and be the ones to change the systems that need to be changed in our nation, in higher education, and beyond."