The Sistah Network was created in 2012 by Dr. Nicole M. Russell, Assistant Professor at the Morgridge College of Education. At Predominately White Instructions (PWIs) there exists great potential for disconnect between espoused intentions, theory and practice as it relates to inclusive excellence (IE) (Danowitz & Tuitt, 2011). Given these realities, Black women in graduate programs are rarely afforded the opportunities to engage in the four dimensions of IE including equity, positive campus climates, robust learning and development, and diversity in the curriculum. Dr. Russell developed the Network to provide women who identify as Black, in graduate programs across the University of Denver, opportunities for academic and professional development that honored inclusive ways of engaging with the learning process. The Sistah Network also promotes and facilitates the psychological, social, and emotional success of Black women in graduate programs. Originally, the Sistah Network was comprised of current Black women from doctoral programs across DU.

In the winter of 2012, Dr. Russell submitted a proposal to the Center for Multicultural Excellence and received a grant and the support from the Associate Provost for Inclusive Excellence, Dr. Frank Tuitt, to develop the group. Upon Dr. Tuitt’s recommendation, Dr. Russell partnered with the Director for IE College Access and Pipeline Programs, Anthea Johnson Rooen to develop the framework for the group meetings and plan the first session. January 18, 2013 was the first meeting and it was a success, welcoming 15 Black women from various doctoral programs. Word of the Network spread and by the second meeting the membership had grown to 25 women. The scope of the group also expanded as more DU Black graduate women in Master’s programs across campus learned about the Sistah Network and wanted to join. On April 16, 2013, the Sistahs had an opportunity to enjoy an evening with Mrs. Clara Villarosa, the only African American female on the Trustee Board. Ms. Villarosa was interested in who we are and wanted to hear about our different experiences here at DU. She is vested in the future success of the Network. In May, the group celebrated the graduation of four Sistah’s: two PhD’s and two master’s. At the end of the year celebration, the graduates had an opportunity to reflect on their experience at DU and share advice with the other Sistahs. Today, 44 Black graduate women are members of the Sistah Network. Our logo, Self Portrait, is by a young, talented artist, Daisy Giles, who generously granted us permission to use her work to represent the Sistah Network.

Written by Anthea Johnson Rooen