**Session Abstract – Milton Reynolds**

**From the Session: Addressing the Legacy of Eugenics in America**

**Teaching Eugenics: The Challenge of Memory**

My remarks will address the general challenges societies face in addressing more troubling aspects of their history with a specific focus on the history of eugenics in America. I will also shed light on the ongoing efforts of Facing History and Ourselves, an international educational professional development organization to engage educators and students in the process of examining this often unexplored history.

In eleven years of working with teachers around Facing History’s case study – *Race and Membership in American History: The Eugenics Movement* – I have been struck by some consistent patterns in teachers’ understanding of this history.

Invariably, most teachers have had little to no exposure to the history of eugenics during their educational experiences. To the degree they have, for most it wasn’t until college. For the vast majority, the association they make to eugenics is often related to the history of the Holocaust. While this connection is critical to understanding the larger global trajectory of these ideas, and a valid context for exploring a eugenic philosophy, it also suggests that significant challenges exist in helping people understand the broader implications of this ideological movement domestically and in other nations – let alone its legacies in the present.

Among the significant challenges in elucidating this history, the most significant may be the lack of a curricular mandate. In the face of a growing regime of testing and the associated narrowing of the curriculum, this pattern of exclusion will likely continue. The influence of states such as Texas as drivers of textbook development and adoption can also limit opportunities for curricular inclusion and exposure.

Additionally, problematic conceptual frames often used to navigate the history of eugenics or “race” in a general sense can be more reductive than generative and may in fact do more to obfuscate than elucidate the complexities and nuances of this history. The tendency to reduce conversation about race to refer only to people of color or to situate the history of race in this country to the south or to our distant past, represent examples of these patterns.

Even in the midst of these significant challenges there are existing opportunities and resources to help address this collective amnesia. Since the publishing of the *Race and Membership in American History: The Eugenics Movement* case study in 2002, Facing History has delivered dozens of seminars and workshops to teachers nationally. During the time span of 2007-2011 a total of 688 educators attended 36 seminars and they consistently rated the impact of that experience on their own professional development to be very high. This pattern of teacher response and their degree of curricular implementation is hopeful and suggests that with coordinated efforts we can reinforce the importance of this ignored or forgotten history.

Teachers who learn this history can share their expertise. Schools of Education can include this case study in their programs. Universities can develop new courses for both graduate and undergraduate students whose majors may lead to classrooms or other domains of influence.

Professional development organizations, unions, and administrators’ networks can offer support and advocacy.