

Closing the High Achievement Gap
Celebrating the 100th Anniversary of W.E.B. DuBois'
The Souls of Black Folk:
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Leadership, Advocacy and Commitment

The late Rev. Samuel Proctor, Professor Emeritus, of Rutgers University passionately believed that... “The most meaningful and useful function of African-American administrators on white campuses is to become advocates for African American students.” As Dean of the Office of African-American Affairs at the University of Virginia for the past 15 years, I have become a passionately dedicated advocate for African-American students.

In 1976 Black students at the University of Virginia wanted and demanded strong advocates and committed leadership. Following difficult negotiations between black students and the administration over competing needs and goals, the University of Virginia responded by instituting the Office of African-American Affairs. My predecessors, Dr. Bill Harris, Dr. Paul Puryear, and Father Joseph Brown, set the tone and laid the foundation in developing goals and objectives that continue to guide and inspire us for over a quarter of a century.

My primary responsibility in this position is to assist the University of Virginia in creating a supportive, welcoming, nurturing environment for African-American students. Because of the university’s history of segregation, this has not been an easy task, nor was it ever expected to be. Yet, in spite of the difficulty of fulfilling its mission, the OAAA has become a model of success as other institutions nation-wide seek to learn more about our holistic approach to student retention. A recent article in the *UVa Alumni News* stated:

The University of Virginia is one of the nation’s premiere schools in retaining black students. For the class that entered in 1996, the most recent statistics available, the University graduated 87.2 percent of its black students, good enough to place it in the top 15 nationally, behind most of the Ivies and Stanford and Georgetown. But a closer look at the numbers reveals how exceptional the university truly is. Among schools with black graduation rates over 70 percent, the university graduated the most black students -256- which shows [that no university] is better at the dual task of recruiting large classes of black students and retaining them (Le, 2003).

Our message to students and their parents is clear: Someone at the University of Virginia cares for and looks out for Black students’ welfare. Someone respects and

promotes your heritage, and will attempt to prevent the wrongs of the past from seeping into your future.

I was attracted to this position because it called for strong leadership and advocacy for students. The university also committed resources including support from the president, and gave me the flexibility to select my own staff. In 1989 I had the good fortune to hire an outstanding admissions officer who had been instrumental in the recruitment, enrollment and admission of black students at UVA for eight years. Together, we set about the task of reorganizing the OAAA.

It has been a journey of determined struggle and measured triumphs, supporting the success of black students at an institution their ancestors helped build but could not attend. Let me share with you a few quotes from students expressing their appreciation for the OAAA over the years:

- *“I am thankful for the University having the Office of African-American Affairs to address the needs and concerns that students of color face on a predominantly white college campus.”*
- *“The Office of African-American Affairs keeps me informed about cultural events and promotes unity on campus.”*
- *“As a minority student, it is very important to have a place to go where I know that the individuals there understand my needs.”*
- *“It's important to realize that --even if every African-American student on grounds does not visit the OAAA-- they are very aware and appreciative of what it offers.”*
- *I would not have attended UVA had they not offered me the support of the OAAA.”*
- *“The OAAA has been the pillar for me to lean on. The faculty and deans within the OAAA have been helpful and have provided support for me.”*
- *“Without the OAAA, I might feel all alone and somewhat sad. It is nice to see someone who looks like me --teaching me and instructing me in life.”*
- *“They are role models and --without a doubt-- friends. I feel like I would be able to call any of them at home even on a weekend if I had a problem.”*

Just how has the University of Virginia --a school born in segregation--come to that has distinguished itself with an excellent record in the retention and graduation of African-American students??? We might ask the same question regarding other prestigious institutions with excellent track records in the retention and graduation of African-American students. One obvious reason for these institutions' success is that the African-American students they enroll are very well- qualified. They are what W.E.B. DuBois called our “talented tenth”, the proverbial “cream of the crop.”

I tell all Black students and their parents on opening day that they are “miracles”, that their presence here was certainly not the plans of the founding fathers, but here they are- and now they have the opportunity that was denied their ancestors; now it is their responsibility to make the most of what their ancestors struggled and died for, to take full advantage of all that this institution has to offer to prepare themselves to sit at anyone's

‘table’, and, in the process, to pave the way for the next generation to take their place and continue the cycle of excellence.

Retention studies find that students are more likely to persist in an institution when they have: success during their first year; at least one caring person to whom they can turn; a supportive network of peers or faculty; and if they are involved in student organizations and activities enabling them to take ownership in their institutions.

Since 1976, and particularly, for the past 15 years, the Office of African-American Affairs has stressed these four objectives in our support of students. We provide mentoring programs, such as the Peer Advisor Program and the Faculty Student Mentoring Program; we provide personal support through broad networks of students, faculty and administrative staff; we encourage students to take ownership by becoming actively involved in the life of the university; we provide personal one-on-one counseling and advising, taking responsibility for specific classes (i.e. one dean works with first and second-year students, another with third, and one with fourth-year and graduate students). We stay in touch with students through personal notes, letters, birthday cards, e-mails, and interaction with parents; we also present special programs celebrating students’ success and achievements in academics, leadership, and athletics.

We do not work in isolation. Our approach is holistic. We have been able to establish collaborative and cooperative relations with faculty, staff, and administrators in essential offices and departments throughout the university. For instance, we work closely with the Office of Admissions, participating in their recruitment of prospective students and parents during Fall and Spring activities. We have a strong relationship with the Deans of the College of Arts and Sciences, where 85% of African-Americans students declare their majors. We often meet with the head Men’s and Women’s athletic coaches and their staffs, because we “play football and basketball” when prospective athletes and their parents come to the University. Our interaction with staff in the Residence Halls is also crucial to students’ success. The atmosphere in the place where students sleep and wake up is of utmost importance. Having a well-trained, diverse staff in the residence halls is extremely important to parents and students alike. Seeing a significant presence of black RA’s, both students and their parents feel more welcome. The OAAA participates in the training and orientation of R.A.’s on a regular basis.

Fifteen years ago, we established a Parents Advisory Association. This association of Black Parents assists the OAAA in providing support for African-American students by hosting get-acquainted activities for entering students and their families; by meeting with University administrators, faculty, and staff; by co-sponsoring cultural events, fund-raising activities, and by providing funds for emergency loans to students. Black Alumni also play a significant role in our success; their committed financial and spiritual leadership continue to play prominent roles in the OAAA cultural and academic activities.

As pleased as we are with our successes, we recognize that there is much more work to be done in support of African-American students’ collegiate experience. If we

are completely honest with ourselves, we need to recognize that we have other challenges and issues we need to address. In bell hooks' book *Rock my Soul; Black People and Self-Esteem*, she states, "I have observed a broad spectrum of brilliant young black students from varying class backgrounds and social circumstances. At the same time as I marvel at their brilliance and promise, I am concerned that they often seem to have in common- a low self-regard. Whether they came from materially privileged homes, where they had access to everything money could buy and seemingly devoted parents, homes where Mom and Dad were both present, or from working-class or poor, single-parent homes, they often seem to share a grave sense of self-doubt. Many of them see the problem of crippling low self-esteem in their lives as stemming from the expectations that they should be high achievers who always excel. Many of these students will call attention to the ways racism has been a factor in their self-doubt rather than looking at other issues in their family life that might have affected their self-concept and self-esteem. How do we help these brilliant young black students who are graduating from these institutions to understand that to be truly successful after they leave these institutions, a strong sense of self is necessary? I strongly believe that, in many instances, students who are trying so desperately to excel at the same time as they are facing crippling self-doubt, often have their doubts reinforced by their interaction with unenlightened professors, white and nonwhite, who chip away at self-esteem. The tragic result of this interaction is often seen when students who once worked so hard to over-achieve begin to falter and fail." Unless strong, conscious people care and advocate for black student interests, this insidious cycle will continue to erode students' confidence, negatively impacting the construction of their self-concept and self-esteem. bell hooks further asserts that, "while black children educated in predominately white settings are more likely to have a diverse group of friends, they are also likely to have greater self-doubt about their worth and value."

Another area of concern is reflected in a comment by Dr. Michael T. Nettles, Executive Director, Educational Testing Service, Center for Policy Research and Evaluation:

"It is important in the midst of efforts to make progress, to occasionally stop, take stock and regenerate ideas to make farther progress. It is now fairly well documented that African-American students attending the most selective public and private institutions are graduating at high rates. What is often overlooked as we begin to celebrate these successes, is that there is still a persistent gap."

In a recent article in the Chronicle of Higher Education, "Closing the Nagging Gap in Minority Achievement", Derek Bok, president emeritus of Harvard University, and the author of *The Shape of the River* found in his study that "black undergraduates in 26 selective colleges finished with grades that placed in the 23rd percentile-the bottom quarter- of their class, and Hispanic students graduated at the 36th percentile. Observing those records, many people assume that they merely reflect the lower board scores and high-school grades that minority students had leaving to college. Not so. Lower grades and test scores account for slightly less than half of the racial gap in college grades. The remaining difference is commonly described as "underperformance." Bok seems to believe that if colleges could help students of color overcome underperformance, the

class rank of black and Hispanic students would jump to approximately the 38th and the 44th percentiles, respectively. One of the rewards of such improvement, according to Bok, could be that more Black and Hispanic students would qualify for admissions to professional schools without the need for racial preference.

The data in *The Shape of the River* clearly show, the better the grades, the more students appreciate their undergraduate experiences and the higher their earning in later life. At the University of Virginia, when we recognized the achievement gap between black and white students, and between black males and females, after their first semester, the Director of our Peer Advisor Program created a program with her Senior Peer Advisors called “Raising the Bar.” Every Sunday and Tuesday nights, the highest achieving Peer Advisors, whose job is not tutoring, but rather providing personal support and extracurricular involvement, now tutor first year students in Calculus and Chemistry. They are trying to close this “Nagging Achievement Gap.”

I do not believe that the University of Virginia has made as much progress as it could in minority recruitment within the faculty ranks, and promoting multi-racial leadership, and in encouraging members of the UVa community particularly students to learn from each others’ differences. In these areas, much remains to be done. Although our success in the retention and graduation of black students has been noteworthy, more attention need to be paid to providing black students with services that will strengthen their self-esteem and feeling of belonging, which in turn can assist them in closing the gaps in achievement and lead to further successes.

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