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Increasing the Number of Black Health Professionals: A Case of Commitment and Belief in Students

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Increasing the Number of Black Health Professionals: A Case of Commitment and Belief in Students

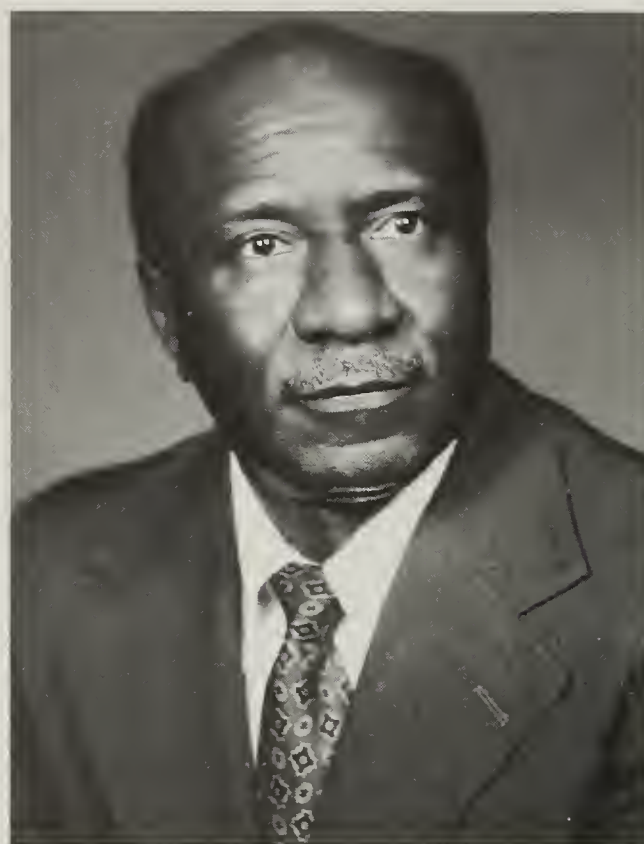
by Harold Horton

Play It Again, Sam

The infant mortality rate is as high as ever in the Black community; dental care is yet nil or almost non-existent for the vast majority of Black children; and hypertension continues to be a major problem in the Black community.¹ Hence, even as we approach the 21st Century, healthcare in the Black community is yet, as the song stated in the movie, *Casablanca*, “it’s still the same old story.” There is seldom, if ever, a single solution to a catastrophic problem, but some kinds of solutions do stand out as logical and effective. Training Black physicians, who would be privileged to practice in their community, could contribute greatly to health awareness and healing in the Black community. Unequivocally, there is a definite need to increase the numbers of Blacks in the health professions, in as much as their underrepresentation in such fields is directly related to poor healthcare and services available to Black Americans. However, here again “it’s still the same old story” in that the percentage of people of African descent in the health professions in the United States remains statistically and significantly low. Nevertheless, we continue to hear prestigious medical schools say, “We would love to increase our percentage of students of color, but we just can’t find them, plus they are so poorly academically-prepared when they leave high school, as well as college.”

Perhaps as the authors of the *Bell Curve* and other such publications, and even some educators at prestigious universities propose, the problem is that Blacks are born innately intellectually-inferior, or perhaps simply unable to cope with rigorous science and math curriculum in high school nor in college, let alone in medical school. I am of the opinion however, that children begin school curious and open to learning even the most complex subject matter. This one belief can be the basis for producing more Black doctors and health professionals, and hence generating a healthier Black community.

The Head Start Program has shown that urban students can perform well, academically, in spite of their poor backgrounds and uncaring schools. Teachers in urban schools usually have negative attitudes toward their students and the conditions in their schools and urban communities at large. Urban public school teachers tend not to prefer working in such areas. Likewise, many



teachers graduated from white middle-class universities and colleges of education that programmed them to think that Black and Latino children were problem students, troubled or emotionally-disturbed. Hence in many urban school districts such as Boston, the percentage of students of color in “special education” classes is near 25% of the total students enrolled in the school district; whereas the national average of students enrolled in special education in any given school district in the nation is 7%.

Black urban students, unequivocally, though they may be members of low-income or single-parent families, are as capable as any student of learning cognitive, intellectually academic content.²

The Committed Ones

Today, a small Black college with very limited resources, currently leads all colleges and universities in the nation in preparing and getting Black students admitted to medical school, due in part to this kind of philosophy and the work of committed educators. This university, which remains the only Black Roman Catholic college in the United States, even surpasses the most prestigious schools of the nation, including Stanford, Johns Hopkins, Harvard and MIT. In 1993 Xavier University placed 49 Black students into medical school; in 1994, 55 students and in 1995, 69 students.

The need for physicians and other professionals of color in the medical field is obvious and conclusive. The question, today, is when will leading universities and colleges cease complaining about what they cannot do with regard to this matter and get on with the job of growing their own? Black students from urban areas such as Chicago, Boston, New York, Atlanta, Los Angeles and Cleveland seek out Xavier University. Why?

The primary reason is because of educators like Dr. J.W. Carmichael, Jr., professor of Chemistry and the pre-medical adviser who believes that urban students have the

potential and capacity to learn rigorous academic content. Professor Carmichael respects urban students and sets high standards of expectations of them. He and the staff at Xavier University challenge students rather than pity them. He encourages students to believe in themselves and realize that they are capable of becoming whatever they are willing to work and study to become. Dumb, stupid, uneducable, and other such derogatory ways of referring to urban students is not in the vocabulary of Dr. Carmichael. As Professor Carmichael explained, "...promoting (positive) self-esteem is not a euphemism"³ at Xavier. Dr. Carmichael's and the attitudes that other professors hold toward the students are probably the most crucial factor contributing to the academic success of students at Xavier. Students at every level of schooling are cognizant of the attitudes that teachers hold toward them, hence, when students are treated as being uneducable it follows that they respond in like manner.⁴

Children begin school curious and open to learning even the most complex subject matter.

As stated earlier, with a student enrollment of nearly 3,000, Xavier University is the leading producer of Black medical and pharmacy students in the nation and many of these students have combined SAT scores no higher than 850.⁵ Undoubtedly, Dr. Carmichael and other professors maintain faith in the students' ability to learn physics, chemistry, calculus and other academically-challenging science and math courses.

In the Scriptures, at one point, Paul stated to the Thessalonians, that "I not only shared the Gospel of our Lord and Savior with you, but as well, I shared my very self with you."⁶ Thank God for professors, administrators, as well as the Board of Trustee members at Xavier who give of themselves in assisting students to succeed in college, as well as getting admitted to medical schools. If more universities believed in the potential of Black students, and ensured the presence of committed educators, then in just a few years this country would significantly increase the number of Black professionals and doctors.

Notes

¹J.E. Blackwell, "The Health of Black Americans." *The Black Community: Diversity and Unity*. (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 400-420.

²"Black Issue Profile of Dr. Frank Hale, Jr.: Higher Education's Man for all Seasons." *Black Issues in Higher Education*, (December 21, 1989), 5.

³Susan Chira, "Tiny Black College Takes High Road in Sciences." *New York Times*, (March 28, 1990).

⁴Kenneth Clark, *Dark Ghetto*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 128.

⁵Susan Chira, "Tiny Black College Takes High Road in Sciences."

⁶*The New Testament*, I Thessalonians Chapter 2:8.

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