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# Role Models and Mentors for Blacks at Predominantly White Campuses

by Clarence G. Williams

Educators must begin to revisit the topic of mentoring and role models in higher education, especially as it relates to blacks at predominantly white college campuses. There are two major facets of this topic; namely, the existence of role models and mentors for young black administrators, faculty members, and students at predominantly white campuses; and, the objectives and goals of providing role models and mentors for these individuals.

In order to understand the issue of role models and mentors, it is important to define these terms. *Role models* are impressive and important figures in the distance. You can admire, emulate, respect, and almost worship such persons, but the role model does not necessarily have to know that you exist. Or, if they do, role models do not make a commitment to your development. Any aid they provide is by example, not by giving the student direct advice or providing recommendations for fellowships or jobs, spending time with the student discussing their work, or caring about the student as an individual.

One can learn a great deal by observing successful role models. A young black administrator once made the following comment about her experience with role models:

There is a desperate need to see someone like you in a key role in the mainstream of the college or university. There is a special feeling and a confirmation of who I can be. When I was in elementary school, I actually fell in love with my third-grade Jewish teacher. The qualities she possessed were what I admired most. But when I had my first black woman as a teacher, which was in college, it gave me a feeling of total self-worth and self-fulfillment. The woman professor, her presence, gave me a sense of what I could become.<sup>1</sup>

Role models are essential, but they *are not mentors*. And, even if one is fortunate enough to have a mentor, it is still necessary to have role models. Webster's Dictionary defines *mentor* as a "trusted counselor or guide, a tutor or coach."<sup>2</sup> A powerful mentor can make a critical difference in a person's ability to meet educational and career aspirations. Mentors are important not only at the beginning and middle-level career points, but vital to reaching the highest stages of achievement.

There are at least five critical criteria for a person to be



an effective and valuable mentor. First, the mentor must be higher up in the organizational structure of the university or college than the protégé to be effective. Blacks need different strategies for success than nonblacks and a true mentor higher up in the university or college clearly understands this fact.

Second, a mentor must be a recognized authority in his or her field. For the most part, the mentor should be older than the protégé, or, at least, more advanced in experience and knowledge. Third, a mentor must be effective in university and college life. If he or she is to make a difference in the upward mobility of a black student, administrator, or faculty member, a mentor must have a recognized "voice" in the profession and be near the lines of authority and power of the college or university. Mentors usually have a long track record of being influential people, which can be traced back to their early collegiate life. Fourth, the mentor should have a genuine interest in the personal growth and development of the protégé. The mentor should like and respect the protégé as a person and recognize their potential contribution to the profession.

The fifth criteria for a mentor is the willingness to commit time and emotion to the relationship with the protégé. This goes beyond mere interest and is a commitment that, more often than not, is intense. There is mutual trust and confidentiality. They share anxieties and dilemmas as well as triumphs and successes.

What does this distinction in the definition of role models and mentors mean in terms of the existence of role models and mentors for young black administrators, faculty, and students at predominantly white colleges and universities? The outlook is bleak on all levels, but especially for black administrators and faculty members at predominantly white institutions, particularly as it relates to



them serving as mentors to younger peers in the field. It has been noted, for example, that, "In many of the nation's most prestigious colleges and universities, there has been little or no progress [in black faculty representation] in twenty years. Since about half of all black faculty teach at historically black colleges and universities, the odds that a student will see a black face at the front of the classroom at the thousands of predominantly white institutions are about 50 to 1."<sup>3</sup> The overall representation of black faculty members is only 2.3 percent at white institutions. Black representation in the administration of these same institutions constituted 7.2 percent of the total in 1983 and these statistical factors remain virtually the same today.<sup>4</sup>

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The result is that there remains a severe shortage of potential black role models and mentors for the approximately 1.4 million black students in higher education (including two-year colleges).<sup>5</sup> There are just not enough black professionals, especially in four-year institutions, to go around. Without the participation, or, at least, the support of white senior officials, faculty members, and administrators, blacks will continue to face an extraordinary dilemma on these campuses. Too often black administrators on white campuses are faced with trying to carry out their basic job responsibilities while simultaneously meeting often conflicting demands from both blacks and whites at their institutions. Too frequently, they serve as "assistant" to white administrators, and, for the most part, are without power and authority in the traditional sense. Black administrators are expected to "fry like an egg, grow like grass, flow like a river and bounce like a ball" while not as much is expected of others in the same positions.<sup>6</sup> Yet, black administrators, despite their relatively low-level positions at colleges and universities, have contributed, perhaps, more than any other group on campuses to the welfare of black students. They continue to play a meaningful role in generating respect between faculty members and students regardless of race. Their very presence continues to be a pillar of psychological comfort and support for black students.

The question of inadequate numbers of black faculty members presents the most serious problem on any predominantly white college campus for a number of key reasons. This problem severely reduces the opportunities for black students to see role models and to interact with some of them as mentors. In addition, many of the black faculty members, themselves, who are on campuses where there are few black colleagues, find there is virtually no serious dialogue among themselves or with nonblack faculty colleagues, and, as a result, have become very bitter and alienated. This problem results in counterproductive role models and mentors. Too often, such faculty members

are so concerned about their own status in an academic department (first black, etc.) that they talk a "strong game" about increasing the number of black faculty members, but their track record of producing black Ph.D.s as potential faculty members is virtually nonexistent.

Nowhere are the problems of access and opportunity more persistently acute than in graduate and professional study, particularly in science and technology. Blacks continue to fall behind in the percentage of Ph.D.s awarded in these fields. In fact, in 1992, African Americans received only 951 or 2.5 percent of all doctorates awarded, down 1,001 or 2.7 percent from 1991 levels. It was recently reported that "African Americans earned 15 percent fewer Ph.D.s in 1992 than they did 15 years earlier in 1977."<sup>7</sup> Blacks are proportionately in the shortest supply across the entire spectrum of quantitative degree curricula. Often black students in these fields do not receive the early mentoring and guidance that are needed to avoid being left behind. Finding advocates and recognizing early that a successful academic career often depends on being well-connected to important faculty members in graduate programs are key points that many minority students need to understand, as well as how to obtain this kind of advocacy. Finding black mentors or identifying black role models on the faculty will continue to be difficult as long as there is a major underrepresentation of black graduate students to move into the ranks of the faculty on majority campuses. Furthermore, the dropout and graduate rates of black undergraduate students must be contained and maintained at the same rate as their white counterparts if these students are to advance into graduate programs.

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There is virtually no predominantly white college or university today that can proclaim that they have accomplished such a retention and graduation rate for blacks. To add to this problem, many black students who, fortunately, receive degrees will be unprepared to participate in certain fields destined to be in the mainstream of society's future activities. The existence of role models and mentors is central to encouraging students to go in new directions in pioneering fields. Yet, academic advising continues to be less than satisfactory in enhancing the survival rate and occupational outlook of black students. Black students, it appears, are not fully benefiting from proper mentoring and there is a serious question as to the faculty's ability to generate academic achievement among black students. The lack of mentoring of black students is too often associated with faculty attitudes and behavior at white institutions. The quality of mentoring and academic advising in particular programs or majors within an institution is extremely important to black students, since a college degree alone (of virtually any kind) no longer



guarantees employment opportunity and economic mobility.<sup>8</sup>

Black administrators must continue to serve as role models and mentors to black students. They must maintain a high quality of work performance in order to be in a position to demand (because it will not automatically happen) promotions to senior-level positions. They must make the effort to get the necessary training or advanced degrees for positions they hope to obtain; learn how to conduct meetings by mastering Robert's Rules of Order; and study the techniques and procedures of successful individuals.

It is extremely important that black administrators hold positions that are in the mainstream of the university. Black administrators must be seen by black students as professionals who are always attempting to improve themselves, as role models as well as professionals who are in a position to take advantage of an opportunity. Black administrators and faculty members must understand that the most useful and meaningful function for black administrators on white campuses is to become advocates for black students. As Dr. Samuel D. Proctor stated;

Black students need us; my generation was toughened by segregation, George Wallace, Bilbo, and Talmadge. We grew calloused to being called "nigger" and "boy". But our children have had just enough of an open society to be caught in a "no man's land," with segregation outlawed on paper but integration resisted by the mores and cultural norms. What we learned to laugh out of our consciousness is pain to them. The fact is that they really do not know how deeply they are resented by so many on these campuses. So, they need some of us who have a longer view to take time with them, to help them to sort things out, to call things by their right names, and to point them to goals worthy of their striving.<sup>9</sup>

It is impossible, and not necessarily desirable, for the few black faculty members on campus to serve as mentors to all black students. White faculty members must be challenged by the central administration and the black community on campuses to nurture black students by providing mentoring and academic advising as they do with majority students. Without the few white mentors on these campuses in the past, there would not have been the progress that has taken place so far. In academic departments where, historically, blacks have not enrolled, white faculty members will have to recruit black students and learn how to generate scholarship among these students. In many cases, white faculty members who have been isolated from the presence of blacks will need some training or re-education to subdue any latent racist behaviors and distorted perspectives they may have, as well as learn new ways of working with black students. Black and nonblack faculty members and administrators and trusted white faculty members will have to press for such

retraining of nonblack faculty who are racist and, often, unconscious of their negative behavior toward black students.

Perhaps, efforts by the few black faculty members and administrators on these campuses will be the most everlasting solution to mentoring and role models for black students and young black administrators. Self-improvement programs guided by black professionals would provide a valuable model. The fundamental core of such a program must acknowledge the extraordinary courage, brilliance, beauty, creativity, and contributions of black people who struggled and who continue to struggle each day for their affirmation, for justice, equality, and dignity, in this society. Periodically, blacks in predominantly white settings need to reaffirm their experience and historical struggle based on a thorough knowledge of the following: where black people have been; where black people are now; the historical, economic, and geographical relationships black people have with other people in the society; the appropriate strategies for the society and the time in history necessary to transform the conditions of black people in higher education; and, where black people in higher education should go from here.

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The success of such efforts depends on an institutional commitment that influences the college's entire, overall atmosphere. In fact, a 1986 report titled *Improving Minority Retention in Higher Education: A Search for Effective Institutional Practices*, issued by the Educational Testing Service, selected four institutions that had outstanding minority undergraduate retention programs. Successful characteristics at these institutions were: the presence of a stated policy; a high level of institutional commitment; a substantial degree of institutionalization; comprehensiveness of services; dedicated staff, systematic collection of data; monitoring and follow-up; strong faculty support; and nonstigmatization of participants.<sup>10</sup>

Despite all of the "equal opportunity employer" rhetoric that accompanies nearly every advertised vacancy in higher education, there is still very little that has changed in two decades regarding significant appointments of blacks into the "old boy network." Therefore, nothing is going to change until presidents and senior university officers take appropriate steps to bring about change.

It remains for these successful characteristics to be taken seriously as permanent fixtures on most major college and university campuses. It is not that we in higher education do not know what is wrong or what to do. We just need the will to do what is right to save ourselves. Perhaps, Derrick Bell is correct when he proclaims that "black people will never gain full equality in this country. Even those herculean efforts we hail as successful will produce no more than temporary 'peaks of progress,' short-lived

victories that slide into irrelevance as racial patterns adapt in ways that maintain white dominance. This is a hard-to-accept fact that all history verifies. We must acknowledge it, not as a sign of submission, but as an act of ultimate defiance.”<sup>11</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Diane Wilhoite-Smith, Unpublished term paper, March 26, 1987.

<sup>2</sup> Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, 1987, 742.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Anderson et al., "Why the Shortage of Black Professors?" *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* (Autumn 1993): 25.

<sup>4</sup> *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 1 (August 1993): 24; *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (June 13, 1984): 1.

<sup>5</sup> *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 3, (Spring 1994): 35.

<sup>6</sup> Samuel D. Proctor, "Black Administrators on White Campuses," *Proceedings of the First National Conference on Issues Facing Black Administrators at Predominantly White Colleges and Universities* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1982), 8.

<sup>7</sup> *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 2, (Winter 1993/1994): 17.

<sup>8</sup> Lorenzo Morris, *Elusive Equality: The Status of Black Americans in Higher Education* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1979), 135.

<sup>9</sup> Proctor, "Black Administrators on White Campuses," 8-9.

<sup>10</sup> Beatriz C. Clewell and Myra S. Ficklen, *Improving Minority Retention in Higher Education: A Search for Effective Institutional Practices*, Research Report, (Princeton, N.J.: Educational Testing Service, 1986), 1-62.

<sup>11</sup> Derrick Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of The Well: The Permanence of Racism* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 12.

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