

# *UNC Asheville Focus Group*

## *Session 2*



### *Final Report*

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*(Educational Consultant on Race)*

*April 18, 2011*

*UNCA's road to creating an authentic college experience that is understanding, accepting, and empowering for its Black student body...*

## *Focus Group Demographics*

<b><i>Ethnicity</i></b>	<b><i>Gender</i></b>	<b><i>Socio-Economic Background</i></b>	<b><i>Religion</i></b>	<b><i>GPA</i></b>
<i>10-African American/Black</i>	<i>1- Male 9- Female</i>	<i>3-Low Income 7-Middle Class</i>	<i>10-Christian</i>	<i>2.9-GPA (mean)  6 of 10 with a 3.0 or above.</i>

\*At the second annual African-American UNCA focus group session, 10 students attended with the purpose of assisting the UNCA family with gathering data through the sharing of experiences and exchanging of ideas. It is our hope that the gathered information will ultimately lead to student programming that more effectively adheres to the needs of the Black student population leading to an increase in Black student satisfaction and retention. This year's focus group participants were overwhelmingly female in gender at 90% and 100% Christian in the classification of religion. All participants identified as "Black" or "African-American" although controversy arose over the reluctance of some in the past to identify themselves as such. This very issue was discussed at length in the 2010 Focus Group report under the section "To Be Seen or Not to Be Seen...Black Students and the Idea of Invisibility at UNCA" and will be revisited in a subsequent section. As noted in the 2010 focus group, 70% of participants were raised in middle class households as this distinction becomes relevant when discussing the differing needs of each socio-economic class even within the Black community. Lastly, the mean GPA of the 2011 participants is a 2.9 with 60% of group members averaging a 3.0 or higher demonstrating that the experiences that are shared in this report are representative of students who find themselves in excellent academic standing as well as students have not yet met their full academic potential.

## *Statement of Purpose*

It is an honor for me to be able to report to the faculty and staff of UNCA both the desires and concerns of a representative group of the UNCA Black student population. It is on behalf of them that I speak. Throughout the following document, I will attempt to marry the issues of Black UNCA students with like concerns facing Black college students across the nation who find themselves in predominantly white institutions. Furthermore, I will introduce theory and research from some of our nation's leading voices on anti-racist pedagogy in order to produce recommendations that will in turn lead to highly effective programming customized to the needs of the Black student population here at UNCA.

It is my sincere hope that I, as one person, do not have to bear the load in this report of attempting to convince the reader that America did indeed historically create systems of advantages and disadvantages based on race that, even in its prosperity and greatness, today are still perpetuated (sometimes unknowingly) in its institutions. The savage, racial disparities in housing, crime, wealth, and education speak for themselves in highlighting the fact that there is something systemically wrong, which can only to be questioned by some who may believe that such drastic gaps in racial achievement are the natural order. If such disparities themselves cannot convince readers that it is systems of inequality that breed inequality and not the people themselves, than neither can this focus group series or report. While neither the reader nor I were at the table at its inception, we are at the table today and are morally obligated to our nation to do our part in providing equal opportunity to all. I applaud UNCA for taking up the mission of diversity and seeking to make the Black student experience at UNCA a culturally rich and fulfilling one. Therefore, as the Black student population at UNCA makes a bold attempt to make their voices heard by means of this focus group series and report, please honor their commitment with Paulo Friere's words in mind ... "Washing one's hands of the conflict between the powerful and powerless is to side with the powerful, not to remain neutral."

# *My UNC Asheville*

When asking a small sampling of students about their initial reasons for attending UNC Asheville, they answered the question under the instructions of differentiating their responses based on what they were told about UNCA, what they saw and experienced at UNCA prior to enrolling, what they thought about UNCA from their own perceptions, and lastly what they read about the institution. The students were impressive in their knowledge of the school before officially making the decision to apply.

**As far as information they acquired through literature, they listed the fact that UNCA:**

- Ranks high on the “BEST VALUES” schools
- Is close behind Chapel Hill in the UNC network
- Has a 2% Black population
- Is ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> best Liberal Arts Public College in the state
- Promotes diversity
- Ideal for students seeking smaller institutions
- 10:1 Faculty Student Ratio
- Highly affordable

**The following statements were told to them at various points in their application process by UNCA Staff:**

- Can receive one-on-one help when needed
- UNCA is a very diverse school
- If I produced in sports, I would get more scholarship money ( an unfulfilled promise)

**The following statements were said by Black UNCA students and heard by Black applicants:**

- You can receive a good education from here.
- That I would not fit in
- The professors are really good
- There were less than 10 Black professors on campus
- I might be the only Black student in my major
- I shouldn't come here
- Almost all the Black students are athletes

**While visiting the campus during the application and acceptance process, Black students listed the following as what they saw and experienced:**

- Similar to my neighborhood, almost all white
- Very clean, well kept campus
- Saw Black people on the cover of every brochure, but not on the campus
- Only Black people I saw were on the basketball team
- Saw 2 Black track runners

**After the school visits, brochures, phones calls, and final acceptance letters, Black students recorded these feelings by the close of the first semester at UNCA:**

- Because I am one of the only Black students, I have to speak for the race
- Weird because students act like they can't understand Black people
- Like an outcast because people acted like they couldn't relate to me
- This would be better for me because I will learn how to work in the white working world more than if I went to a Black college
- Welcomed by Black staff
- Truly like a minority. Even though my high school was white, the Black students had a voice, but we don't here in comparison to other groups
- Confused because I knew that I would feel more comfortable at an HBCU (Historically Black College/University) because I would relate to people who are more like me

In conducting the focus group, I carefully introduced the topic of race by asking students to share their UNCA college experience as Black students. The original request was purposefully stated in a general manner as to not to lead students in my questioning by requesting that focus group participants tell me the problems of Black students on UNCA's campus. With that understanding, you have already seen and will continue to see a few things in this report that will make UNCA proud as it will serve as a reminder that UNCA's commitment to recruiting, serving, and eventually graduating its Black students is not an abstract goal, but a working reality.

At the onset of the session, the activity I implemented to serve as a mere icebreaker actually began to yield very important information. The students were to pair up while 1 partner of the pair was charged with providing clues until the other guessed this famous person in Black history. Of 10 students participating, not 1 pair was able to guess Malcolm X, Toussaint L'ouverture, Sonya Sotomayor, and the Little Rock 9. Immediately my years as a History teacher sent me into lesson-mode as I would be doing the ultimate disservice to the very people I have given my life's work for if I allowed this teachable moment to go

unaddressed. The students were highly attentive and excited to be learning about people who looked like them. They began commenting on the lack of classes they have at UNCA where such information would be taught. Interestingly enough, this was the same sentiment expressed by a number of Black faculty and staff. These Black students have been craving this information. While we will explore the empowering nature of knowing oneself and one's history in subsequent sections, it is appropriate to offer a brief explanation in the words of one of our highlighted heroes, Malcolm X himself, who said "people who don't know that their people did anything will never do anything".

While participants displayed quite an impressive knowledge base on UNCA attributes from which they based their decisions, they overwhelmingly encountered the issue of race the minute they set foot on campus. More apparent than the high rankings on the "Best Values" list and more obvious than the 10:1 teacher student ratio was the idea that they truly are a minority. While there is nothing wrong at all with being a member of the smaller group in any given space, there is still a cognitive dissonance that takes place which forces one to make a choice of whether to stay strong in your personal beliefs and value system even if it is not accepted by the dominant group in the room, place your identity and anything that classifies you as different in your back pocket and take on the characteristics and ideas of the dominant group, or simply leave. Randal Pinkett validated this mental fight in his book **Black Faces in White Places** following his historic victory as the first and still only Black winner of Donald Trump's The Apprentice TV show. As evidenced in the Black student attrition rate and personal student interviews, UNCA has witnessed each of these decisions first hand. As I returned to UNCA almost one year to the day, I was saddened to see that 3 of last year's focus group participants were no longer enrolled. To their credit, I do not have the right to be surprised as they were forthcoming in last year's session in admitting that they would not be back for another year under UNCA's present conditions. A number of other Black students have taken the second approach of total assimilation and have found it more beneficial to bow out of Blackness and relieve themselves of their duty to the Black community. However, UNCA has also had the privilege of working with young African Americans who, in the midst of the tough decisions, choose to stand proudly on the norms, values, and belief systems of their Black identity in spite of their minority status. The very nature of conversation in this year's focus group overwhelmingly attracted the latter student personality.

This group of students recorded that 100% of them have been asked to speak on behalf of the race multiple times while in the classrooms and halls of UNCA. 8 out of 10 expressed a strong dislike for doing so, but admitted to representing the Black race when the moment presented itself out of fear of appearing weak. The same trends were true in last year's focus group while I still maintain my position that it is always necessary for a minority to speak up because without it, no minority view would ever be given. It is difficult for any one person, let alone a 19 year-old student, to carry the weight of an entire race on their shoulders as they attempt to prove ethnic worthiness in the face of a dominant group. However, the Black race would be proud to have young, college educated, socially conscious African American students from UNCA to speak on its behalf and share the minority viewpoint in a dominant group setting. It should be the focus of our joint efforts to empower them to do so, as a strong Black student who learns to speak on behalf of their group in class may one day learn to speak on behalf of their group in society.

## *Stereotypes at Play*

Among one of the experiences that a number of participants individually shared is having to hold back their frustration after repeatedly hearing the phrase "...you must be an athlete". When only 1 of 10 in the focus group have any affiliation with a sports team at UNCA, yet this inaccurate assumption has been placed on more than half of them by students and professors alike, it is well worth addressing. I ask that we be careful not to minimize this concern by weighing the effect of the comment based on the good or bad intentions of the speaker (as both the participants and I assumed no malice in the speakers' intentions) or turning this into a devaluation of athletes and their accomplishments in perfecting their craft. Rather it is more appropriate to focus on the repeated assumption itself and the effect that such a statement has on its intended audience. To begin, we must be honest in stating the reality that the assumption that "you must be an athlete" is not placed on the heads of all races, but is very specific to African Americans. When Black students at UNCA who are not athletes repeatedly hear "you must be an athlete", that non-threatening statement that mentions the normally honorable status of being an athlete changes in the ears of the hearer and sounds like "...you must have had help getting here", "...you must not have gotten here because of your academic merit", ...and "Black people are naturally gifted in sports". While a natural response to the wrongful assumption that someone is an athlete may be simply, "No, I am not", the mental response

of focus group members and other African Americans in the same position is “... It was my intellect and not my physicality, foremost, that guaranteed my acceptance into this distinguished university, and why would you assume otherwise?” Now, if a heavily disproportionate number of accepted Black students at UNCA are in the Athletic Department, then the University, having the best of intentions, unknowingly feeds the very stereotype that it seeks to eradicate.

Under a similar umbrella, the Black faculty specifically receives a great deal of respect from focus group participants. I also would like to take this time to join in with the students and honor UNCA for welcoming two new Black professors for the 2010-2011 academic year. The students have stated numerous times throughout the session how they desire the rare occurrence of walking into a UNCA classroom and seeing a Black professor leading the instruction. I will not reiterate my entire argument about the need for more Black professors as it can be found in the 2010 report under the topic **Comparison of Academic, Financial, and Social/Emotional Support for Black Students** as well as the **Working on the Work** recommendation section. In short the stereotype threat (as researched by Dr. Irwin Katz in the 60’s, Dr. Claude Steele, and Dr. Joshua Aronson in the more recent past) of having the fate of the whole race rest on your right or wrong answers in class are close to eliminated when the expert in the front of the room is a member of the minority group on trial. Secondly, having Black undergraduates who intend to achieve beyond their UNCA bachelor’s degree greatly benefit when the Ph. D standing in front of them for an entire semester is a Black professor who they can not only learn the curriculum from but use as a model in their acquisition of advanced degrees. Lastly, Black faculty, while imparting knowledge, also serve as stereotype breakers themselves to the members outside of the Black community. Any student that graduates from UNCA having learned under the tutelage of Black professors would become life-long allies in the quest to debunk the notion of Black intellectual inferiority. The difficult idea to digest, however, is the fact that slow progress or failure to welcome more Black faculty (that span across various academic departments in UNCA) will continue to leave the UNCA classrooms fertile for the idea of Black intellectual inferiority to exist and continually grow.

Lastly, the diversity in which UNCA prides itself does not feel much like diversity to the Black student body who according to the 2010-2011 UNCA report only comprise 2% of the student population with 90 students while the campus has roughly 4,500 total students. As one of the focus group members stated earlier, “Even though my high school was white, the Black students had a voice, but we don’t here in comparison to other groups”. When a

small group is underrepresented in such disproportion with (as they perceive) no voice, you end up with a “true minority” which is not only not representative of diversity but counterproductive to the very concept it. Without adding the effects of not having a voice, the sheer numbers of Black students in comparison to those of other groups at UNCA put stereotypes and assumptions into play. When UNCA rightfully establishes high academic standards and maintains a competitive application process, the bold message stated is that UNCA accepts nothing less than North Carolina’s best and brightest. As UNCA students attend classes throughout the week, the racial percentages that seem bold in reports are even more apparent when they translate into actually seeing an average of only 1-2 Black students per class. When the overarching message of “UNCA accepts the best and brightest, nothing less” is merged with the sight of 1-2 Black students in a classroom of white students, then the implied message is that the best and brightest in North Carolina has a white -Black ratio of almost 50:1. To place this in perspective, Hampton University students in Virginia have gone as far as to put systems in place to counteract and minimize the prejudicial concept of female intellectual superiority due to the University’s reality of a 5:1 female-male ratio. If a 5:1 ratio dominated by females causes the idea of intellectual superiority/inferiority to show its face, how much more rampant and widespread would the intellectual superiority/inferiority concept be on an academic powerhouse of a campus with a 50:1 race-based ratio?

Neither you at UNCA nor I established this system where Black students are not only made to overcome the natural obstacles that accompany the journey to and through college, but to also fight the uphill battle of defining themselves in a positive, authentic light in the midst of stereotypes placed on the group from dominant cultures. However, you and I are here now... and we can help prepare our Black students at UNCA today to define themselves and their own culture so that they may break through all racial barriers, succeed in spite of negative stereotypes, and then be empowered to eradicate them.

## *The Needs of a Disempowered People*

Jim Cummins in a 1986 article published in the Harvard Educational Review proposed the philosophy that every interaction a minority engages in with a member of the dominant group will prove to be empowering or disempowering to the minority. My community as a

whole, the African American community, is what Cummins accurately refers to in America as a disempowered group. The Black students at UNCA are members of that community and are therefore members of the disempowered group. Make no mistake, attending college and earning a degree from UNCA or any other higher level institution does not and will not free the Black educated class from the American consequences of Blackness, so UNCA students will not be spared the continuing fight for equality (whether some cling to the classification of Black or if “unclassified” itself has become their classification of choice...they, too will not be spared).

One of the many American consequences of the Black experience is the deliberate exemption of noted Black accomplishments in the woven fabric of American history. The term “noted” precedes the term “accomplishments” because the accomplishments of the Black community are found in every single aspect of our great nation, but one would never know, Black or white, if your source was an American history book. Morgan Freeman is quoted saying “Black history is American history” yet according to every last picture and paragraph in the American history textbook History Alive, our contribution to this national story was one dimensional...slavery. We as educators then speculate, through authoring books and serving as news contributors, why Black students are trailing their white counterparts academically in what has become known as a national achievement gap. It begins to become obvious that Black students at UNCA or any other university did not teach themselves how to be invisible, but rather were taught about their invisibility by the systems and institutions that were supposed to grant African Americans equality. According to Cummins, Black students have been engaging school and the professionals hired to educate them for years and have been systematically disempowered daily as they’ve stepped into history classes that spoke of America’s greatness but never mentioned the African Americans that contributed that greatness, math and science courses that honor Greeks such as Pythagoras of 600 BC by using his Pythagorean Theorem (the mathematical equation needed to build a period) and Hippocrates of 460 BC for which our medical Hippocratic Oath is aptly named, that never found it important enough to mention that Pythagoras’s pyramid equation was being used in East Africa by Ahmose back in 1600 BC as he was the architect of the beautiful pyramids that can still be found in Egypt today or Imhotep (also of East Africa) in 2667 BC who was recognized as the “Father of Medicine” for diagnosing over 300 illnesses and 150 cures in his medical journals over 2000 years before Hippocrates came to be. So as educators come together to discuss how we can empower the Black community, and more immediately the Black student body at UNCA...let’s begin undoing the damage that has been done in traditional schooling... Let’s

begin teaching our Black students who they really are...Let's begin the process of empowerment right here at UNCA.

Black students at UNCA should be taught to honor Minister Malcolm X for uniting Muslims from Africa, Asia, and America around the cause of Black equality in the states. X's story is empowering to all who look like him. Imagine how empowered Black students at UNCA would feel if they knew that while George Washington led the 13 colonies to independence and America was spending the next 30 years learning self government, that it was a "Black George Washington" by the name of Toussaint L'ouverture who as a slave led the largest slave rebellion in the world, ended French occupation in the Caribbean, and established the world's first free, Black republic in a land called Haiti. Why is the history of Black America attached to this hero? It was this rebellion in America's backyard that sparked the outbreak of countless American slave rebellions making slavery unsustainable in the American south and ushering this nation's Black population into freedom. A number of Black UNCA students themselves find their not so distant ancestry in the Caribbean. Toussaint L'ouverture is the George Washington of Black freedom. How would America view its students if they couldn't identify George Washington as the founder of this free nation? How would an America institution view its instructors and curriculum if neither addressed the topic? Furthermore, how prepared would an American be to thrive in American society without the most basic knowledge of its history and legacy? As the Black community in America continues in its honorable fight to overcome the gaps in economics and education, it looks for leadership from those African Americans who have been able to rise through the ranks of education into a place of empowerment. UNCA is blessed to have some of the best and brightest African American students in the country, and they will soon take their rightful places as strong, influential leaders of a disempowered Black community. Therefore, UNCA has a great charge and mandate to not only continue to promote academic excellence among its Black students, but to foster an atmosphere in which their understanding of identity, knowledge of their people, and pride in their culture increase accordingly.

Also, groups who have been systematically disempowered learn to operate, and some even learn to succeed, within the same system that confined them to their second class status. With that being said, disempowered groups usual tend to put up with more discomfort than others in order to maintain whatever progress has been gained (no matter how small). Just as the Black community as a whole has been attempting to merely survive the

many of ills of the inner city ranging from crime and poor schooling to unequal access to employment, so have Black students at UNCA around their concerns of what they perceive as inadequate social/emotional support from UNCA faculty/staff and cultural discomfort stemming from interactions in the classroom among professors, the campus among other students, and student services surrounding programming. In spite of this discomfort, 100% of focus group participants stated that they had plans on staying at UNCA for the duration of their college experience (which was good to hear considering the unfortunate transferring of the 3 focus group members who I had the privilege of meeting this time last year). A number of them openly acknowledged they would be more comfortable at a Historically Black College which would undoubtedly provide them with a culturally uplifting educational experience but were willing to stay because they think this experience will help them learn the hidden rules of the culture of the dominant society as to help them more effectively navigate America's corporate environment. The theme of disempowerment continues as they already have concerns about fitting in and being successful in America's industries where they will continue their minority status. While these Black students are committed to staying while feeling racially uncomfortable at UNCA, members of the dominant group rarely stay anywhere they feel racially uncomfortable. As a matter of fact, Americans who receive skin privilege and financial privilege many times select circumstances that are very comfortable for them culturally and otherwise. That is a privilege in itself. However, members of disempowered groups have learned the culture of long-suffering with no choice but to fight the good fight because simply leaving is often times not an option. At UNCA, some Black students have opted to continue their education in other institutions in past years, and some (although not represented in the focus group) may plan on doing the same at the end of the academic semester. However, focus group members who have the power to alter their college location are not doing so, and are instead attempting to use their power to alter their college experience at UNCA. 80% of students that attended this year's focus group did so because they viewed this as a chance to raise their minority voices (or more appropriately gain their minority voice) in order to be heard and break from the veil of invisibility as Black students.

Neither you at UNCA nor I established this system where the Black community and its students have been placed in a second class citizenship where they were meant to think and operate as a disempowered people. However, you and I are here now... and we can give our Black students a voice and effectively train their voice to not only lead the Black

community at UNCA but the African American community in this country into a place of empowerment.

## *Working on the Work: Recommendations*

*(The following are not to be viewed as solutions or answers to perceived problems of race on campus but are instead my personal recommendations based on data collected from focus group participants, my personal research in working with various universities on the issues of race, as well as the research from outside studies all focusing around race and education. The implementation of any or all of the suggested recommendations will serve as bold steps in achieving UNCA's goal of improving the overall college experience for not only Black students, but all of its students of color.)*

*Overarching Philosophy-When dealing with race and its effect on education, it seems more effective to break from the traditional format of "solving the problem". Instead, the recommendation portion will seek to respond to the reasons for the problem as shown by the data, instead of responding to the problems themselves. For the sake of this report, the problem is as follows:*

**Problem: The Black student population at UNCA does not feel that UNCA is providing an overall college experience that is understanding and accepting of, as well as empowering to the African American culture and the various subcultures of those who classify themselves as "Black".**

**Reason 1: Black students do not feel that UNCA faculty and staff understand the needs and desires of the larger Black community and thus the Black student population.**

## **RECOMMENDATION: INCREASING BLACK FACULTY & STAFF**

Focus Group students were specifically asked about their desire for more Black professors. 90% quickly shared that increasing the number of Black professors who were not only willing to teach but specifically mentor Black students would be a major indicator that UNCA is indeed listening to the needs of the Black student body and would greatly increase their desire to stay and complete their studies at UNCA. Once again, their desire for Black faculty directly coincides with the dominant theme throughout research concerning professors of color. For example, **The Push For More Black Teachers** article in the Sun Reporter on August 15, 2002 says, “there is a need for more Black teachers who can relate to those children and will be less inclined to set them up for failure because of low expectations.” Ehrenberg and Rothstein praise HBCUs for having higher proportions of Black professors and simply explain that they recognize that Black professors are needed to serve as role models for Black students. Kunjufu gets more specific and theorizes that Black professors are more likely to promote Black pride through readmitting Black accomplishments into academia and reminding the Black students that they are part of the great African Diaspora. In turn, Black students who are taught about their cultural greatness and potential are motivated to achieve greater academic success (more specific to this study, to seek advanced degrees). By no means are these researchers claiming the Black professors are superior in knowledge or ability to their white counterparts, but I agree with their findings that the need for cultural pride can be quenched as a cultural representative of the student body leads the instructional practice of the classroom. While 80% of focus group members feel compelled to enter their UNCA classrooms each day to prove the worthiness of their race to both students and professors, the burdens of this stereotype threat can be lightened and they can begin to feel the same freedom to learn that their white counterparts have the privilege of feeling in almost every classroom across campus.

## **RECOMMENDATION: PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT (ONGOING)**

After years of facilitating conversations around race and education with staff ranging from junior high school through college in various states, I have found (in my personal experience) the most difficult concept for white educators to confront is this idea of what Tim Wise refers to in **White Like Me** as “racelessness” which espouses the false and misleading notion that “one does not see race”. He most eloquently argues:

“[so many of our kind, dedicated, and well intentioned] teachers say things like... “I treat all my kids the same and don’t even see color when I look at them.” This is neither true nor desirable as their kids in fact do have a race, and their race matters because it says a lot about the kinds of challenges they are likely to face. To not see color is to not see the consequences of color; and if color has consequences, which it does, yet you’ve resolved not to notice this thing that provokes those consequences, the odds are pretty good you’ll inadequately serve the needs of the students in question every time.”

In my growth in attempting to understand other cultures including the dominant culture in America, I was taught by white educators that their intentions behind their ascribing to the approach of racelessness was to ensure that their actions towards students of color were no different than their actions towards white students and in no way meant to ignore someone’s cultural identity. White educators who have since progressed from the idea of racelessness realize now that their former attempts to provide equal treatment to disempowered students ironically left those very students disempowered. They previously refused to see the specific cultural needs of their Black students and thus continued to simply give them what other students were given instead of what they specifically needed. In the cases where institutions provide and mandate ongoing staff development and its educators are urged to do the internal work of battling with racelessness and other politically correct approaches to race, the open-minded, reflective institutions begin to better service the students in question every time. G.K. Chesterton claims “it’s not that they can’t see the solution, it’s that they can’t see the problem”. The Department of Student Services at UNCA have already launched boldly into such professional development in which over 20 Student Services employees including Dr. Newsome and various leaders under the Student Services umbrella voluntarily met to delve into the issues facing the Black student population and further learn what they could do to assist in supporting these students. In just 1 session, this motivated, engaged group of UNCA staff put their heads together and brainstormed over 30 ideas around programming that they could offer that addressed the specific needs and desires of Black UNCA students.

Now that Student Services has taken the extremely bold step towards a more culturally aware, acceptable, and empowering UNCA for Black students, it is my recommendation that the faculty and other staff that work with students directly or through programming be fully committed to a 5 session professional development series that unapologetically explores the past and present systems that disempowered the Black community that Black UNCA students come from, and develop the most culturally appropriate and effective programming that will ensure that the campus becomes a more understanding, accepting,

and empowering institution for its Black students. For staff development that directly addresses the needs of UNCA around the issues of race and education, I would strongly recommend a 5-session series that specifically covers the following topics:

5 –SESSION SERIES
TIM WISE-AMERICA’S MYTH OF MERITOCRACY
PEGGY MACINTOSH-WHITE PRIVILEGE
DR. JUWANZA KUNJUFU-CULTURAL RELEVANCE
GLORIA LADSEN-BILLINGS- CULTURAL RELEVANCE
DR. CLAUDE ANDERSON- EMPOWERING THE BLACK COMMUNITY

## **RECOMMENDATION: MENTORING PROGRAM**

Compounding the fact that 90% of focus group participants place consider the need for more Black faculty to be a high priority, every single member supported the notion of instituting an official mentoring program between Black staff, Black faculty, and Black students. Among the most interesting aspects of this idea is the fact that this exact concept was brainstormed and discussed in detail during two different meetings throughout the day. The first of these meetings was a sit-down gathering of Black professors and department heads throughout the campus during which a department head raised the idea of establishing and sustaining a relationship with 5-6 Black students whom they would hold accountable and mentor academically. The mentor in turn would help provide the nurturing support that research has shown to be so effective in Black colleges. The second discussion around mentoring was started by one of the students during the focus group

who began by expressing her gratitude for Mr. Barkley Barton's relentless approach of checking in with students and seeking them out instead of waiting to be sought out. Across the room, words of gratitude began to circulate repeatedly mentioning other influential African American staff members such as Ms. Beth Bartlett and the Dean of Admissions, Patrice Mitchell. There was also a joint excitement about the possible opportunities to pair up with the new African American additions to the UNCA family such as Dr. Newsome and the husband and wife team of Dr. Agya Boakye Boaten and Dr. Tiece Ruffin. Students also expressed their openness to being paired with a mentor for a time but having the option of selecting a second mentor if their needs in a mentor are going unmet. As per the staff and faculty, they explained that mentor/mentee interactions can range from simple office visits to attending campus events in which mentees are involved. It is very important that I speak on behalf of a few of the Black student participants and mention that not all Black staff and faculty need to feel the pressure to become a mentor, nor should non Black staff and faculty feel a need to opt out because they are not Black. It was made clear by focus group members that any professor or staff member that seeks to help Black students overcome the obstacles of race and succeed at UNCA would make more than adequate mentors. This recommendation is that of the Black student body and the Black staff at UNCA, and will humbly submit one addendum to this proposal. All mentors should receive a university stipend for extended time and extra responsibilities that will be associated with instituting both an effective and sustainable program that, if done thoughtfully, will significantly add to the support system of African American students at UNCA.

**Reason 2: Black students feel that there is a lack of courses, curriculum, and activities that address Black culture and history in which they and members of all races can learn about the Black experience.**

### **RECOMMENDATION: BLACK GREEK-LETTER ORGANIZATIONS**

Since the very concept of integration began to take hold in educational institutions across the country, a May/June 1977 edition of the Journal of Higher Education already found it necessary to delve deeper into the implications of the African American undergraduate self esteem and confidence in an article labeled **Graduate School Success of Black Students**

**from White Colleges and Black Colleges** by Ernest Anderson and Freeman Hrabowski. In it, the researchers made the simple statement, “There is a concern of the effect of being Black and attending an all white school”. At too many of our nation’s higher Ed. institutions, Black student communities (in the sense of true cohorts of Black students being organized under an organization or department in which their social, emotional, and academic wellness is priority) are non-existent or in some cases rendered ineffective due to lack of true understanding of the needs and desires of the Black undergraduate population on the part of the institution itself. UNCA has instituted a few key concepts that have proven to be sustaining forces in college experiences of focus group participants.

1. The BSA (Black Student Association) for social/emotional support
2. Financial Aid Office with the names Patrice Mitchell and Elizabeth Bartlett being mentioned on numerous accounts (for financial support)
3. Official and unofficial advising (for academic support)
4. NUE NOIZ (Step Team)
5. Ambassadors

Limited school forums for African American students, a disproportionately small Black faculty, and isolated events of racial insensitivity continue to deprive the Black college student population at UNCA and other non-HBCUs of the motivational components that are not only key to a fulfilling and culturally-rich college experience but components that are naturally afforded to Black students who do attend HBCUs.

It is on this premise that I speak on behalf of the UNCA Black student population and strongly recommend the implementation of the Pan Hellenic Council and Black Greek Letter organizations on the UNCA campus. As unmitigated successes throughout the Black college network (and white college networks that play host to Black fraternities and sororities) Black Greek Letter organizations are known to foster a sense of brotherhood and sisterhood that have yet to be seen in too many other groups experienced by college-aged students. Through the forward thinking of Dr. Newsome, fundamental aspects of building a Black Greek community are already being set in motion to be ready to introduce UNCA’s first Black fraternity and sorority.

## **RECOMMENDATION: SUMMER PRE -COLLEGE PROGRAM**

EOF programs, football programs, marching band programs, and student leadership programs at various higher level institutions across the country strategically require such student participants to begin their college year as early as the first week of August. More so than simply jumpstarting the year with more practice and more classes, the summer sessions required by these programs serve as a key ingredient to establishing family-like bonds for involved individuals that program leaders hope would act as solidified support systems throughout the year as academic and social responsibilities increase. When your program occupies the campus alone, there is a feeling of intergroup dependence and bonding that takes place. This is especially true for incoming freshman as the friendships they build in their first month of college (when feelings of vulnerability are peaking) most often are remembered through graduation. It is my recommendation that UNCA entertains the idea of implementing a pre-college experience for newly accepted African American students with the hopes of building lasting bonds between Black students and Black staff that will serve as a consistent support system. While I arrived last year and this year to find a number of Black students struggling to find their place on the UNCA campus, I realize that with a pre-college program for students to begin their UNCA experience with supports already in place, I would return to meet with a focus group who would feel more favorable about their UNCA experience because they would have never had an opportunity to fall behind. From that point forward, UNCA focus groups would simply serve as a temperature check and no longer as a reactive session that causes UNCA to spring into action and recover student confidence that may have been lost throughout the past year. While the programmatic logistics (such as what enrichment classes or credit-based courses they would be able to start in the summer and what would their daily schedules look like) need to be discussed, it would be the team and community building activities that would prove most valuable in creating the tight-knit Black community desired in the program goals.

## **RECOMMENDATION: THE EVALUATING AND POSSIBLE REFRAMING OF SOCIOLOGY, PSYCHOLOGY, AND POLITICAL SCIENCE COURSES TO ADDRESS ISSUES CONCERNING PEOPLE OF COLOR AND AMERICA'S URBAN CITIES**

Focus group participants raised the important issue of not seeing themselves represented in course curriculum throughout departments and courses in which they would expect to discuss the minority experience such as in, but not limited to, Sociology, Psychology, and

Political Science. Not knowing the specifics of every class offered under the following departments here at UNCA, I would grant anyone permission to assume that as the three departments focus on society's effects on individuals, individuals' effects on society, and systematic policies that effect both the larger society and the sub groups found within it that the plights of Latinos and African Americans would run throughout the curriculum (being the two largest minority groups in the country). It is expected that that any UNCA student belonging to either of these groups would find themselves and their cultural groups being discussed in great length. If this is case, then I applaud those departments in addressing the most pressing issues of 21<sup>st</sup> century America. However, if the Black and Latino UNCA students do not see themselves and their stories throughout the curriculums in the Sociology, Psychology, and Political Science departments, then these courses in higher education are continuing the process of disempowerment begun in the most formative schooling years of Black students across the country.

*\*The following are research points and theoretical concepts presented to the Department of Student Services reflecting the ideas and concerns shared by focus group participants the night previous to the volunteer staff development session. As Student Services staff absorbed the data and theories presented below, they were asked to respond to the same question after each theory, "So what are we at UNCA going to do about it?" Staff responded swiftly and thoughtfully with over 30 recommendations of their own:*

Research and Theoretical Concepts	Source
<p><b>According to the most recent statistics, the nationwide college graduation rate for Black students stands at an appallingly low rate of 43 percent.* This figure is 20 percentage points below the 63 percentage rate for white students. On this front, the only positive news is that over the past three years the Black student graduation rate has improved by four percentage points.</b></p> <p><b>In each of the three years before the turn of the century from 1998 through 2000 there was a one percentage point decline in the overall graduation rate of Black men. But for the past five years the graduation rate for Black men has improved by one percentage point and now stands at 36 percent. Long-term, over the past 16 years, Black men have improved their graduation rate from 28 percent to 36 percent.</b></p>	<p>Journal of Blacks in Higher Education</p>

<p><b>This year the college graduation rate for Black women rose by one percentage point to 47 percent. And over the past 16 years the graduation rates for Black women have shown strong and steady gains. Turning in a powerful performance over the past 16 years, Black women have improved their college completion rate from 34 percent in 1990 to 47 percent in 2006. So for Black women, we appear to be very close to the point where one half of all students who enter a particular college will go on to earn their degree from that same institution.</b></p> <p><b>So what are we at UNCA going to do about it?</b></p>	<p><u>White Like Me: BY</u> <u>Tim Wise</u></p>
<p><b>“[so many of our kind, dedicated, and well intentioned] teachers say things like... “I treat all my kids the same and don’t even see color when I look at them.” This is neither true nor desirable as their kids in fact do have a race, and their race matters because it says a lot about the kinds of challenges they are likely to face. To not see color is to not see the consequences of color; and if color has consequences, which it does, yet you’ve resolved not to notice this thing that provokes those consequences, the odds are pretty good you’ll inadequately serve the needs of the students in question every time.”</b></p> <p><b>So what are we at UNCA going to do about it?</b></p>	<p>Gloria Ladsen-Billings</p>
<p><b>Ladson-Billings contends that culturally relevant teachers “engage the world and others critically,” and in order to do this, “students must develop a broader sociopolitical consciousness that allows them to critique the cultural norms, values, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities.”</b></p> <p><b>So what are we at UNCA going to do about it?</b></p>	<p>Dr. Claude Anderson’s <u>Powernomics</u></p>
<p><b>As per the overarching value system of the Black community, African Americans on the larger scale, are rarely motivated by the idea of rugged individualism, but more so communal cooperation to reach a communal goal.</b></p> <p><b>So what are we at UNCA going to do about it?</b></p>	<p>Gloria Ladsen-Billings</p>
<p><b>Many African American and other non-white students perceive school as a place where they cannot be themselves because their culture is not valued in American schools. Ladson-Billings contends, “Culturally relevant teachers utilize students’ culture as a vehicle for learning.”</b></p> <p><b>So what are we at UNCA going to do about it?</b></p>	<p>“Racial Identity and Academic Achievement”: University of Michigan</p>

**racial identity (Oyessman, 2000)**

**So what are we at UNCA going to do about it?**

**Another study that had similar findings involved a study conducted by Dr. Chavous and colleagues, where racial identity and academic attainment among African-American adolescents was also studied. The results showed that students in the buffering group who had high centrality (view their race as important), low public regard but high private regard excelled the best in an academic setting. These students believed that society devalued Blacks, however, they themselves think well of African-Americans and being African American is important. One way to interpret their success is that the low public regard meant they perceived an obstacle, and therefore had to work twice as hard.**

**“Racial Identity and Academic Achievement”:  
University of Michigan**

**So what are we at UNCA going to do about it?**

## *Closing Points*

UNCA has taken bold steps in its willingness to openly address the issues of the Black student population on campus. If Student Services implements as many as 3 of their ideas brainstormed at the staff development session, it is predicted that UNCA will see positive results within a year by way of increased Black student involvement on campus, a more unified Black community within the greater UNCA community, and a more empowered Black student body with a deeper sense of self-identity and cultural pride. Make no mistake that such emotional and social support as shown in the recommendations that (let me reiterate) were created by dedicated staff members in Student Services and various leaders throughout the UNCA family from the Admissions Department to the Department of Africana Studies will assist the Black student population in making UNCA their true home. This is an interesting time at UNCA. Examine the members of the focus group. These are Black students who were told a number of unfavorable things about race relations on UNCA’s campus...and they still came. They reported not feeling culturally understood or accepted, but not one said they seriously considered leaving UNCA. Then consider the staff. The Black faculty and staff members are conducting meetings to decide how they can personally mentor young students of color while the Department of Student Services also voluntarily met for staff development to further learn about the needs of the Black student population and how to meet those needs. These are the right students, the right staff members, and the right time for UNCA to set in motion plans and programming that will allow Black students at UNCA to have a fulfilling college experience that is second to none.

Throughout the process, I ask that you remain vigilant in your mission to become a truly diverse school that effectively adheres to the needs of all of its students. It is admirable for a highly-esteemed university to find itself on the perpetual road to becoming excellent, for once an institution believes they have arrived, it is then that they cease progressing and begin the unproductive process of regressing. UNCA, keep moving forward as you work to create an overall college experience that is understanding, accepting, and empowering to your African American students.