

**“A Great Light: The Office of African-American Affairs at the University of Virginia,
2006-2015”**

An overview commemorating its fortieth anniversary by Professor Ervin L. Jordan Jr.,
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*The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light.
—Matthew 4:16 (New King James Version)*

*The history we share should give you hope. The future we share should give you hope.
Your generation is poised for success unlike any generation of African Americans
that came before it.
—Barack Obama*

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On the eve of its fortieth anniversary (2016), the Office of African-American Affairs (OAAA) at the University of Virginia can look back on a praiseworthy record against the backdrop of two recently notable examples of racial and gender-based change in America and at the University: the 2008 election of Barack Obama as the first African-American president of the United States, and the 2010 election of Teresa Sullivan as the University’s first female president—events unimaginable a decade ago.

This essay is a 2006-2015 historical overview of the OAAA and supplements my previous piece, “The First Generation: Thirty Years of the Office of African-American Affairs at the University of Virginia.” More than merely a cultural refuge, the OAAA facilitates solutions to issues of university concern as a substantial intellectual resource whose forty-year journey on stony paths intermittently potholed with controversies has not always involved only race matters.

Among its most impressive aspects are stability and leadership as exemplified by current dean Dr. Maurice Apprey, professor of psychiatric medicine and neurobehavioral sciences, former associate dean for diversity at the School of Medicine, and member of the university faculty since 1980. In furtherance of his work in social change management, Dr. Apprey received a second doctorate, in executive management, in the spring of 2006. Named interim dean in August 2006, he became the OAAA’s fifth dean in his own right in June 2007; since then he has been (and is) a steady hand at its helm, perceptively navigating it and the university community through racially troubled waters. Dean Apprey’s nine-year deanship is the second longest in OAAA history, and he has proven an imperturbable and influential leader whose very voice, presence, and character inspires confidence. Individuals and institutions are well-served by his experience in minority student recruitment and retention, and as an international authority on ethno-national conflict resolution.

BACKSTORY: 1975-2005

Sustained protests led by the Black Student Alliance and supported by nearly all of the University’s then-500 Black students culminated in the 1976 establishment of the Office of Afro-American Affairs (Office of African-American Affairs since 1993) at the Luther P. Jackson

House on Dawson's Row, an area of slave quarters during the nineteenth century. Portland State University architecture professor Dr. William L. Harris Sr. was appointed its first dean and assistant provost. The OAAA officially opened its offices in March 1977 at #4 Dawson's Row (a former nineteenth-century university parsonage) as the Luther P. Jackson (LPJ) House and during October that same year formally dedicated an adjacent building (and former slave quarters) at #3 Dawson's Row as the Luther P. Jackson Black Cultural Center (LPJBCC), both named for Dr. Luther Porter Jackson (1892-1950), a Virginia State College history professor and civil rights activist known as "Mr. Civil Rights of Virginia." The LPJ House became a haven for Black students and their organizations and its 3,000-volume Nat Turner Library an invaluable resource and study space. The staff enhanced OAAA's visibility by advising student organizations, serving on university committees, and participating in relevant state, regional and national organizations.

Five African-American men have held its deanship: Dr. William L. Harris (1976-1981); the late Right Reverend Dr. Paul Lionel Puryear Sr. (1981-1986; 1930-2010); Father Joseph A. Brown, S. J. (1986-1988); Dr. M. Rick Turner (1988-2006), and, Dr. Maurice Apprey (August 2006-present). Their mutual challenges have involved inadequate funding, staffing, facilities and resources in the face of disrespect and less than complete cooperation from traditionalists who internally obstructed and publicly questioned its purpose. Undeterred, Dean Harris and his successors issued annual "State of Race" reports whose recommendations, more often than not, were ignored despite the University's publicly stated commitment to affirmative action, multiculturalism, and inclusive diversity. OAAA's successes in academic mentoring, advising, tutoring, career counseling, social and cultural programming, recruitment, retention, and graduation rates owes much to their vision and fortitude.

DEMOGRAPHIC CROSSROADS

Dean Apprey and the OAAA are not without Black critics who unreasonably fail to appreciate that sometimes it is difficult if not impossible to implement solutions instantaneously in racial matters. Charlottesville's only African-American newspaper complained of university (and community) leaders' diversity efforts as little more than lip service in a city stuck in a 1940s-1950s time warp and at a school resembling founder Thomas Jefferson's slave plantation. This perception of passivity seemed bolstered by a Journal of Blacks in Higher Education 2006 report of a 19 percent decline in admissions with only 260 first-year Black students enrolled compared to 319 during 2005. Speaking in the Rotunda's Dome Room, Apprey's first "State of Race" address as OAAA dean (February 2007) declared academic achievement a top priority and urged the University do more to support Black students in the fields of business, international affairs and medicine, citing the low number of Black doctors and diplomats in the United States.

Four years later, Black students largely remained undergraduates in Arts and Sciences, and the traditional fields of architecture, engineering, law, education, and medicine. The demographic makeup of the student body remains predominately Caucasian (53 percent female in 2014), followed by Asians, African-Americans, and Hispanics. In the fall 2013, Black students comprised 6 percent (900) of 15,000 undergraduates but with an 83 percent graduation rate among the highest at major American public institutions of higher education. In contrast, 1,186 Black students comprised 18 percent of a 21,800 enrollment in 2014. Faculty recruitment and retention, too, saw mixed trends. A generation earlier, of 55 black faculty, 13 (23 percent) were tenured in 1985. Of 2,724 salaried tenured, tenure-track and non-tenure track faculty reported by the Office of Institutional Assessment and Studies (IAS) in May 2015, 91 were Black; 59 (65

percent) were tenured, mostly in Arts and Sciences and the schools of medicine, education, and engineering. While having more practitioners in these professions bodes well for Black America in the long term, overall the number of Black faculty and students has alarmingly declined since the beginning of the twenty-first century, relegating them as the second largest ethnic minority. Inherent complex factors historically and collectively suggest second place as an American racial minority group foreshadows benign neglect and de facto racism.

CELEBRATIONS AND INITIATIVES

The OAAA's thirtieth anniversary celebrations began in the fall of 2006 with several well-attended public events. Then-associate dean Sylvia Terry explained: "We wanted to provide the University community with a 'history lesson' about the racial climate and progress during the time prior to, during and beyond the founding of the Office." The kickoff celebration's guest speaker, long-term university professor and authority on the University's 200-year-old racial history and culture Ervin L. Jordan Jr., declared the OAAA as chosen by "fate and history . . . as an indispensable cornerstone." It published Still I Rise: Thirty Years of Success (2007), a collection of photographic essays by selected members of the classes of 2007-2010 reflecting on their experiences as African-American students. Its first public release occurred as attendee gifts during an official anniversary dinner addressed by 1977 alumnus and Virginia Supreme Court chief justice Leroy Rountree Hassell Sr. (1955-2011).

While continuing its sponsorship of Black History Month and Martin Luther King Jr. commemorations ("Community MLK Celebration: Honor-Reflect-Act-Arc of Justice") that invited nationally-recognized scholars and held public events to "educate, motivate, liberate," the OAAA established an annual "Donning of the Kente" ceremony ("An African-American Celebration of Achievement") in the spring of 2005 for fourth-year graduating African-Americans and two faculty and/or administrators recognized for their individual "contributions and dedication to the students of the University community." Each received customized West African Kente cloth stoles as marks of distinction; individual honors were conferred upon select students: "Longevity of Excellence Academic Award" (highest cumulative grade point average); "Longevity of Excellence Athletic Awards" (two student-athletes nominated by the Department of Athletics); "Luther Porter Jackson Community Service Award" (for diligent service to the African-American student community and the University community-at-large), and, "Office of African-American Affairs Dean's Awards" (OAAA's highest award, to two "transformative student leaders"). Co-sponsored by the OAAA, the Office of Vice President for Student Affairs, the OAAA's Northern Virginia Chapter Parent Advisory Association, and the Black Leadership Institute, rising attendance by graduates' exuberant families necessitated the relocation of this event to the Martin Luther King Performing Arts Center at Charlottesville High School.

During 2006, as a Black student initiative of founders Reggie White and Krystal Commons, the OAAA joined with the Department of Counseling and Psychological Services at the Elson Student Health Center in establishing and sponsoring Project RISE, a confidential, one-on-one peer counseling service offering African-American students "an outlet for emotional expression without the fear of being stigmatized . . . a comfortable environment in which they feel that they are able to culturally relate as well as . . . substantial information that will offer coping mechanisms and consistent support while at the University." Current assistant OAAA dean Dr. Michael Gerard Mason formerly served as project director.

DIVERSITY DILEMMAS

Blacks have long understood it is not other peoples' duty to fight their battles. Civil rights icon and university history professor Julian Bond (1940-2015) once defined the concept of 'race man' as Blacks who defended and fought for their race as vanguard civil rights activists. Although Dean Apprey has stated his role is not that of university spokesman on racial matters, he and the OAAA have been excoriated for defending people of color. Programs benefitting minority students are deemed 'reverse discrimination' by campus conservatives, reflecting a nationwide backlash by neo-advocates of 'white privilege' who contend homophobic, xenophobic, racist, and misogynistic views are protected free speech and inalienable rights under the Constitution and the principles of academic freedom. University officials have reaffirmed its commitment to racial diversity and inclusiveness, especially where people of African descent are concerned, but not all Cavaliers and Wahoos got the memo.

When the Cavalier Daily student newspaper bowed to public protests and compelled the resignation of a cartoonist for a cartoon widely perceived as racist in September 2007, socio-political pundits threw temper tantrums alleging this signified censorship, liberal bias, 'politically correct' intimidation, and threats to freedom of the press and the newspaper's First Amendment rights. Detractors stridently derided Apprey as "the self-appointed grand inquisitor of the campus Thought Police . . . blinded by racial grievance-mongering" but he unperturbedly replied: "I think the young man who wrote the cartoon . . . did not seem to understand is that what you intend is not necessarily how something will be received . . . I think this is an important lesson for him."

Disparaging what it dubbed "sprawling administrative empires created by the diversity industry" at Virginia's colleges, a 2012 Richmond newspaper article denounced the University's six diversity offices, including the "seven-person Office of African-American Affairs," as wasteful expenditures of tax dollars. (The Office of Equal Opportunity Programs came under similar, internal bureaucratic attack during the 1980s-1990s as budget cuts and administrative restructuring threatened to disempower its ability to ensure hiring diversity and investigate affirmative action complaints.) A June 2012 Charlottesville weekly news magazine's ranking of the area's thirty-five 'power players' highlighted nine university officials; none were African-American. Among those overlooked: Dean Apprey; athletic director Craig Littlepage; Deborah McDowell, Alice Griffin Professor of English and director of the Carter G. Woodson Institute for African-American and African Studies; Richmond lawyer and Board of Visitors member (later rector) George Keith Martin, and Dr. Marcus Martin, vice president and chief officer for diversity and equity. African-Americans pointed to this as evidence of a persistent race prejudice that denigrates the credibility of Black leaders as visible, meaningful members of society.

"HOW DID THIS HAPPEN?"

The Martese Johnson incident galvanized the University and the nation when the arrest of this third-year Honor Code Committee member and highly respected Black student went viral on social media thanks to bystanders' videos that captured his surreal and violent arrest outside a local Charlottesville pub by three Virginia Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control officers on St. Patrick's Day, March 2015. "How did this happen?" a handcuffed and bloodied Johnson asked incredulously--the universal lament of the wronged. Dean Apprey and Dr. Martin, diversity vice president and professor of emergency medicine, jointly issued an impassioned email voicing theirs and the university community's outrage: "This was wrong and should not have occurred. In the many years of our medical, professional and leadership roles at the

University, we view the nature of this assault as highly unusual and appalling based on the information we have received. . . . Our students have the right to a safe environment in which to obtain their education. We are deeply concerned about the safety of all students, faculty, staff, and community members.”

Misdemeanor obstruction of justice without threats or force, resisting arrest, profane swearing, public intoxication, and underage drinking charges against Johnson were eventually dismissed; a state police investigation subsequently cleared the arresting officers of any wrongdoing. Given the apparent increase in police brutality and use of deadly force against Blacks by law enforcement officers across America during 2010-15 that triggered national protests, the anticlimactic resolution of Johnson’s case raises grave questions about the limits of racial justice and validity of ‘Black Lives Matter.’

CONTRIBUTIONS AND COMMITMENT

Since its founding, Office of African-American Affairs staff and student employees have demonstrated exceptional credentials and expertise to the benefit of their respective academic disciplines and the University. From a pool of forty-five candidates, then-third-year politics honors program and African-American Studies student Ms. Adom Getachew was elected by the Board of Visitors as its 2008-09 student member. Born in Ethiopia and raised in Arlington, Virginia, this Echols Scholar and OAAA peer adviser served on five board committees including the Special Committee on Diversity and the Student Affairs Committee.

Dr. Patrice Preston-Grimes, associate OAAA dean and Curry School of Education associate professor, was appointed to the President’s Commission on Slavery and the University (PCSU) by President Teresa Sullivan in 2013; this twenty-six-member commission of administrators, alumni, faculty, staff, students, Charlottesville community and Monticello representatives is tasked to “provide advice and recommendations to the President on the commemoration of the University of Virginia’s historical relationship with slavery and enslaved people.” The 2011 recipient of the Office of Equal Opportunity Programs’ Champion Award for her commitment to equal rights and social justice, Dr. Grimes also directs OAAA’s GradSTAR mentoring program, contributed an essay to the widely acclaimed Pride Overcomes Prejudice: A History of Charlottesville’s African American School (2013), and published in national education journals such as the Journal of Social Studies Research, Theory and Research in Social Education, and Teacher Education Quarterly.

Associate dean Dr. Kimberley C. Bassett, member of the University’s Crisis Management Team, directs the peer advisor program and advises health and natural sciences undergraduates. Former assistant dean Dion W. Lewis served as director of the Luther P. Jackson Black Cultural Center, and as one of several editorial reviewers for Slavery at the University of Virginia: Visitor’s Guide (2013), a multi-page color brochure sponsored by the OAAA, the Office of the Vice President and Chief Officer for Diversity and Equity, the Thomas Jefferson Foundation, and the University Guide Service. Assistant dean and Curry School of Education faculty member Dr. Michael Gerard Mason succeeded Lewis in spring 2015 as LPJBCC director. For reasons of his considerable experience at the University and elsewhere, Dr. Mason mentors fourth-year Black students as they transition from university life to full-time careers.

Dr. Apprey, a member of the Academy of Distinguished Educators at the School of Medicine, became the inaugural recipient of the Black Faculty Staff-Employee Resource Group’s Armstead Robinson Faculty Recognition Award in May 2015 (named in honor of Carter G. Woodson Institute director [1980-1995] and history professor Armstead Louis Robinson

(1947-1995). [Founded in 2013, BFS-ERG’s mission is to “actively engage in the recruitment, mentorship, collegiality, professional development, and retention of its members as well as promotion of an inclusive environment that will benefit all UVA faculty, administrators, staff and the Charlottesville community.”]

As active contributors to the pedagogical body of knowledge, OAAA deans and staff published a trifecta of collaborative articles in an issue of the Peabody Journal of Education: Issues of Leadership, Policy, and Organizations (2014, volume 89, issue 3) prefaced by Apprey’s own “Advising, Mentoring, and Advancing African American Students in Higher Education”:

- Maurice Apprey, Kimberley Bassett, Patrice Preston-Grimes, Dion W. Lewis and Beverly Wood, “Strategy Precedes Operational Effectiveness: Aligning High Graduation Rankings With Competitive Graduation Grade Point Averages”
- Apprey, Preston-Grimes, Bassett, Lewis and Ryan M. Rideau (Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University), “From Crisis Management to Academic Achievement: A University Cluster-mentoring Model for Black Undergraduates”
- Apprey, Shelli Poe and Preston-Grimes, “Key Issues From Policy and Strategy to Program Implementation.”

This same issue included an article (co-authored with a Maryland psychologist) by Dr. Cheryl Burgan Apprey, former director of graduate student diversity programs in the Office of the Vice President for Research—an admired prolific scholar and wife of Dean Apprey.

“UNIQUE SENSE OF PURPOSE”: THE PAST AS PROLOGUE

In the summer of 2015, as this essay is being written, the OAAA begins its fourth decade in the 396th year of the African Diaspora in America (1619); the 196th year since the University’s founding (1819); the 150th year since the abolishment of racial hereditary slavery in the United States (1865); the 80th year since an African-American first attempted to enroll (Alice Jackson, 1935); the 66th year since the first lecture by an officially invited Black scholar (Dr. Luther Porter Jackson, 1949); the 65th year since the first admission of a Black student (Gregory Hayes Swanson, 1950); the 62nd year since the first African-American graduate and alumnus (Dr. Walter Nathaniel Ridley, 1953); the 48th year since the first Black faculty appointment (Dr. Nathan Edward Johnson, 1967), and the 45th year since an African-American professor received tenure (Dr. Johnson, 1970). One of President Obama’s eloquently insightful Black college commencement speeches is applicable to the OAAA’s accomplishments, ongoing mission and potential: “That’s the unique sense of purpose that this place has always infused--the conviction that this is a training ground not only for individual success, but for leadership that can change the world.” [<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/05/19/remarks-President-Morehouse-College-Commencement-Ceremony>.]

In closing, has the (re-)election of presidents Obama and Sullivan improved racial dialogue and attitudes in America and academia? Rhetoric is one thing; real-world results are another. Nevertheless, it is in pragmatic anticipation that the Office of African-American Affairs’ dedicated deans, staffs and students will, in unity of spirit, purpose and zeal, continue to achieve great things and persevere over the next forty years as a motivating institutional presence throughout the course of the University of Virginia’s third century.