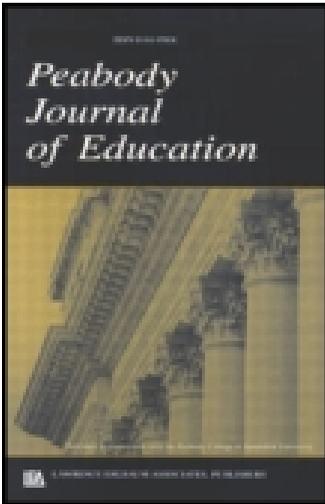


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### From Crisis Management to Academic Achievement: A University Cluster-mentoring Model for Black Undergraduates

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# From Crisis Management to Academic Achievement: A University Cluster-mentoring Model for Black Undergraduates

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In spite of the widening racial achievement gap among U.S. college students (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011), some universities are achieving success in supporting the graduation and postcollege goals of Black undergraduates (Apprey, Bassett, Preston-Grimes, Lewis, & Wood 2014/*this issue*; Baker, 2006; Hrabowski, 2003; Hrabowski & Maton, 2009). Although research has documented efforts to improve students' college academic success in mathematics, science, and engineering (Maton & Hrabowski, 2004), little research has examined the role of undergraduate support programs *across* the academic disciplines to bridge success for students from high school graduation through graduate school matriculation. This is a key link in the pipeline to career and lifelong achievement for Black students. The following case study describes an inclusive cluster-mentoring model for Black undergraduates at a Research I university that includes four elements—(a) student peer-advising, (b) faculty–student academic mentoring and advising, (c) culturally sensitive initiatives, and (d) organized parental support—to create high impact with measurable results. This university-based model can serve as a guide to improve and expand services that support the academic and leadership success of Black undergraduate students in other higher education settings.

No one has ever told me what to do, but rather they laid out all of the possibilities and weighed out the pros and cons of each, allowing me to make the ultimate decision. Likewise, the deans have been a great assistance in non-academic needs. I tend to cope with things by talking about them and, when need be, the deans I speak with are all ears. As a female, it's also been beneficial talking to women that are wiser than me, as to get different perspectives on situations and often to get grounded again. The cultural environment of O-Triple-A [Office of African American Affairs] definitely complements the close knit environment of the Black Community at the university. . . . Overall O-Triple-A is a personal favorite place to go and talk whether it be with peers or deans. There is always an interesting conversation going on.—First-year college student, 2012.

For the 20th consecutive year, Black students at the University of Virginia (UVa) have achieved the highest undergraduate graduation rate for African Americans at any predominantly White public university in the United States (“Black Progress,” 2011). The Office of African American Affairs (OAAA) serves approximately 1,300 Black undergraduate students at the university and is an integral part of this success. Created in 1976 within the university’s Division of Student Affairs, the OAAA was designed to ensure that Black<sup>1</sup> students have a culturally sensitive environment to support their academic and affective needs at the Research I institution.

However, the success of the OAAA does not reflect the larger trend in higher education graduation rates for African Americans. According to recent U.S. Census data, the racial achievement gap among college students continues to widen. As of March 2011, 30.4% of the U.S. population older than age 25 had attained a bachelor’s degree and 10.9% had attained graduate degrees. For Black students, the number of individuals older than 25 holding bachelor degrees rose from 15.7% in 2001 to 19.9% in 2011 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Although this gain is noteworthy, the percentage of Whites older than 25 who attained bachelor degrees increased even more significantly, from 28.7% in 2001 to 34% in 2011, thus widening this achievement gap (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011).

Although graduation rates are one way to gauge the racial achievement gap among college students, academic performance is another, and often underreported, measure. Academic performance is underreported because many institutions do not release the grades of their students due to privacy laws. However, initial evidence indicates that once enrolled in college, Black students do not perform as well as their White counterparts as measured by class rank and grade point average (GPA). According to Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson (2009), Black men at college graduation finish 22 percentage points lower when compared to White men, and Black women finish 24 percentage points lower than White women. Despite the fact that some of these percentage differences may be accounted for in preentry education characteristics, the authors of the study found a gap between 6 to 9 percentage points in class ranking for Black college students as compared to their White counterparts, even when controlling for varying characteristics.

Nevertheless, Black undergraduates at UVa are developing measurable pathways to degree completion at a higher rate than their counterparts at other universities, thereby creating greater potential for successful entry into the workplace and graduate school programs. This is important because the future success of the nation depends upon the high achievement of all students. Beyond graduating from college, students must learn the skills necessary to be active, thoughtful citizens and to contribute in the global realm. To meet this challenge, we must ensure that all students, especially Black aspirants, not only have access to and opportunities for higher education but also are equipped with new skills and ways of thinking to succeed once enrolled in college and other postsecondary programs. As Horsford (2011) has noted, “We must adopt and pursue a moral vision of education that prepares our children for leadership and lifelong learning in this world house” (p. 107).

In this article, we examine a multifaceted model that has contributed to the academic success of the university’s Black undergraduate students. Specifically, we describe and analyze the ways in which four initiatives—a student peer-advising component, a faculty–student mentoring program, culturally sensitive experience, and organized parental support—work in concert to

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<sup>1</sup>The term Black, rather than African American, is used to encompass African and Caribbean students who also use program services and do not identify as African American.

engage students for high impact. In the process, we seek to move the university from functioning within a paradigm of crisis management to a model of academic and leadership achievement, with sustained learning outcomes for its students. In the first section, we present an overview of the literature in which this study is situated. Next, we describe the context in which the OAAA exists and the cluster-mentoring model within the OAAA. Finally, we discuss implications for future programmatic initiatives and directions.

## THE BUILDING BLOCKS FOR ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

The academic achievement of Black students at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) can be examined with reference to at least three theoretic constructs: (a) the nature and understanding of social belonging, especially within the (racial) climate in which students participate; (b) student engagement theory and its connection to the persistence and retention of Black students at PWIs; and (c) the theory of cultural synchronization, that is, the implicit and explicit transmissions of knowledge, traditions, values, and norms that support and sustain positive behaviors. An explanation of noteworthy literature on each theory can aid in the interpretation of the cluster-mentoring model and the identification of areas for future programmatic growth.

### Social Belonging and Adjustment to School Climate

The desire to be connected to others socially is a basic human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Walton & Cohen, 2007). Social belonging—the sense of having positive relationships with others—is an especially important psychological construct for the academic success of Black students on college campuses (Walton & Cohen, 2011). One of the indicators of students' sense of social belonging can be manifested in perceptions of the racial climate of a school, that is, the degree to which students of different races and ethnic backgrounds express feelings of inclusion, equal access, and fairness in their daily environments.

The social resources available for underrepresented and underserved students within a university are another key factor that can contribute to a sense of belonging and can influence the academic performance of Black students attending PWIs. Prior to the implementation of race-based affirmative action programs, the number of Black students attending PWIs was relatively small. After the implementation of programs on several campuses in the late 1960s and 1970s, the matriculation of Black students increased (Karabel, 2005). However, it is inaccurate to assume that Black students would naturally integrate into campus life after gaining admission, particularly without the existence of comparable social structures that had privileged elite White men for generations (Karabel, 2005). During the transition to desegregated student bodies in the 1960s and 1970s, many universities did not offer the resources or support to help Black students counterbalance discrimination, isolation, and racism that permeated many PWIs (W. R. Allen, 1992; Patton, 2006). In certain instances, social rejection may have caused students to experience pain (Eisenberger, Lieberman, & Williams, 2003) or what Steele (1997) has termed “stereotype threat.” Stereotype threat is a “social-psychological threat that arises when one is in a situation of doing something for which a negative stereotype about one's group applies” (p. 614). Specifically,

Steele concluded that Black students at PWIs were impacted negatively, affecting their academic performance.

However, students who believe that they belong in an environment can thrive, both psychologically and academically, especially if their basic physical and safety needs are satisfied. Walton and Cohen (2011) have received significant attention for their finding that Black undergraduates can achieve positive academic and health outcomes with the implementation of a 1-hr intervention early in their college experience. Their work shows that the group that received the intervention reduced the GPA gap between Black and White students by 52%. The researchers concluded that the intervention increased confidence among the students, which improved their academic performance. This study should be replicated at other institutions to determine whether the type of university or quality of resources may be mitigating factors in the findings.

In a similar fashion, Lyubormirsky, Sheldon, and Schkade (2005) identified that students who participate in “intentional activities” designed to contribute to their happiness may be able to alter their behavioral and cognitive well-being over time. Efforts that offer stable, frequent, nonintrusive interactions to improve social bonds can include in-class academic support from faculty, or participation in out-of-class activities, such as student governance, intramural athletics, and leadership roles (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Quaye, Tambascia, & Talesh, 2009). Such targeted efforts can elevate a student’s self-efficacy and may mitigate potential threats to a sense of belonging that may undermine the health and academic performance of Black students (Walton & Cohen, 2011). In the next section of this article, we extend the notion of belonging related to school climate and discuss the need to activate positive behaviors among Black students to promote academic success.

### Social Engagement: A Crucial Element for Students’ Success

At PWIs, many Black undergraduates have felt a sense of alienation (Suen, 1983) that can lead to poorer academic performance and higher attrition rates among Blacks versus their White peers. Astin’s (1984) seminal theory of student involvement examines the quantity and quality of physical and psychological time that students devote to their academic studies. In other words, simply exposing a student to knowledge may not achieve the goal of content mastery; the extent to which students engage in academic and extracurricular activities can also be a factor in their success in college. Researchers should consider this theory when examining the motivations and learning behaviors of students, as time and energy devoted to implementation are important resources that may go unmeasured.

Similarly, Kinzie and Kuh (2004) specified three criteria for successful engagement: action, purpose, and cross-institutional collaboration. Thus, it is not enough for a student to simply attend class, sign up for review sessions, or be present at student group meetings. A student’s relative action and commitment to a chosen setting are better indicators of one’s persistence, retention, and completion of a college degree than merely being present at various functions. In addition, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) determined that institutions must create opportunities and develop resources to engage students on campuses if college personnel wish to increase motivation, positive behaviors, and active involvement of its students. Therefore, theoretically grounded student engagement practices are essential tools that faculty, administrators, and student

affairs personnel must use to create the necessary environment in which students can survive, as well as thrive, in order to graduate.

### Cultural Synchronization and Transmission

An understanding of the shared traditions, values, and norms of Black students is essential to support behaviors that lead to their academic and personal success (Irvine, 1990). “Cultural Synchronization” is present when two or more people or groups communicate in ways that reflect knowledge of the features that distinguish one culture from another. Many Black students, for example, share an African-based heritage that Boykin (1986, p. 61) summarized in nine inter-related dimensions: spiritualism, harmony, movement, verve, affect, communalism, expressive individualism, oral tradition, and a social time perspective. Within learning settings, particularly in classrooms, the communication patterns and relationships between teachers and students can be impacted by the teacher’s ability to understand these cultural expressions and apply them to instructional design and praxis. A lack of synchronization can result in miscues related to language and voice patterns, questioning techniques, the degree of eye contact, and the way in which information is acquired and processed. The most common miscues or lack of synchronization in learning environments for Black students relate to interpretations of style (i.e., movement, dress/appearance), language (i.e., dialects or speech expressions that are not considered Standard English), and cognition (i.e., the ways of thinking and interpreting information).

One intention of the racial desegregation of the University of Virginia in the early 1970s was to create a student body that reflected more accurately the racial and cultural composition of the commonwealth (and the United States). This shift, although designed to generate a more diverse learning environment, often created cultural incongruence (or mismatch) between the newly admitted Black students and their White, predominantly male professors and instructors (many of whom had taught at the university for years). As Irvine (1990) summarized,

The distinct African-American culture of Blacks can result in a lack of correspondence between Black students and their teachers, particularly as it relates to Black students’ perception of self, their language, and their ways of knowing and processing information. . . . Lack of cultural sync leads to hidden conflict, hostility, infrequent communication, ineffective instruction, detachment, and negative teacher and student expectations. (p. 42)

The display of such behaviors at PWIs can jeopardize the academic success of many Black undergraduate students, who may feel disconnected from teachers and encounter a different classroom climate than their previous schooling. In K-12 settings, for example, many Black students have learned to cope with their circumstances by “code-switching” their language and mannerisms to the dominant paradigm for acceptance and access to knowledge and resources. Other students have engaged in cultural navigation (Carter, 2007) on a more sustained level to avoid cultural conflict (Delpit, 1995) or cultural collision (Beachum & McCray, 2008).

To succeed in the current college environment, Black undergraduate students must learn or reinforce coping mechanisms to express themselves effectively, yet retain the attributes of their racial and cultural group identity to be connected to their cultural roots. Learning to maintain such a holistic self-concept is particularly important at UVa, where the academic mission, institutional

structures, and traditions are rooted in the often-contradictory philosophies and practices of Thomas Jefferson, the founder of the university and author of the Declaration of Independence.

### THE CONTEXT AND CREATION OF THE OFFICE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN AFFAIRS

An understanding of the setting in which the OAAA has operated for the past 35 years aids the interpretation of the structure and significance of its cluster-mentoring model for Black students today. Similar to the history of many other U.S. higher education institutions, Black students were barred admission to UVa en masse until the late 1960s, when they often met with racial hostility and a collegiate environment that was unprepared to adapt to their presence (Jordan, 2006).<sup>2</sup> By 1969, 27 Blacks were enrolled in the College of Arts and Sciences and 10 in the School of Engineering and Applied Science (H. W. Allen et al., 1987). When the university became coeducational in 1971, a few Black women were admitted in that initial group. The lack of cultural synchronization became evident by 1975, as the Black student population increased to nearly 500 (3.2% of the student body). The overall university climate remained unwelcoming to Black students through the mid-1970s, which prompted the creation of the Office of Afro-American (later changed to African American) Affairs in July 1976.

Throughout its history, the OAAA has been instrumental in not only creating a safe environment for Black students but also promoting their academic success. Since its inception, the OAAA has had five deans, with M. Rick Turner occupying the position from 1988 to 2006. During that time, the university first claimed the title of having the highest graduation rate of Black students of any public PWI in the country (Jordan, 2006). Since 2006, Dean Maurice Apprey has built on the success of his predecessors by hiring professional staff and shifting the focus of the Office, as the title of this article indicates, from crisis management to academic success.

Currently, the OAAA has six staff members: one dean, one associate dean, three assistant deans, and an office manager. In addition, six undergraduate students work part-time in the office during the fall and spring semesters. The associate and assistant deans are each responsible for particular tasks and focus areas. The associate dean largely handles academic interventions for students in the humanities and social sciences, the promotion of graduate school studies, and the coordination of a faculty–student mentoring program. One assistant dean is responsible for academic support for students in the physical sciences and oversees the largest program in the center, a peer-advising program. Another assistant dean, the staff member with the longest tenure, is in charge of operating the cultural center, including all cultural programming, and supports academic interventions for students with GPAs below 2.0. Finally, the newest assistant dean is responsible for supporting students in mathematics-related courses across the university curriculum.

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<sup>2</sup>Relations between Blacks and the university date from its founding in 1819 by Thomas Jefferson, the third president of the United States. Jefferson, like George Washington and James Madison, was a slave owner (Wilkins, 2002). Some of the first buildings on the Grounds, as the UVa campus is called, were constructed by enslaved workers. For generations, several faculty and students had personal servants to support their lifestyles; this practice continued after the Civil War (H. W. Allen et al., 1987).

### The OAAA: “Your Home Away From Home”

The structure and physical space of the OAAA aid the office in carrying out much of its work. The OAAA is housed in a complex of three separate buildings, called Dawson’s Row, that are conveniently located on the Central Grounds of UVa. The structures are behind larger buildings at the end of the Lawn, a grassy quadrangle that is considered the center of the university and home to select faculty, administrators, and student leaders. The main two-story brick building once housed slave masters in the university’s early days. The second and third buildings, which are much smaller, were areas that sheltered enslaved workers during this period. However, most of the offices that support student activities are located in Newcomb Hall, a short walk away. Some undergraduates perceive the physical distance between the OAAA and other student-oriented services as indicating their social distance as well.

The main building contains the offices of three deans and the office manager. On the entry level, there is a library, which contains reference books for checkout and an area for students to congregate and study. Adjacent to this room is a computer lab, which has four Internet-connected computers and printers that students may use free of charge to work and print papers for class assignments. Directly adjacent to this building is the Luther Porter Jackson (LPJ) Black Cultural Center. The office of one OAAA assistant dean is located there, with a conference room that accommodates student groups for meetings and small events. Behind this building is the third site, the W. E. B. Du Bois Center, which houses another assistant dean and the graduate student intern. This building also has a conference room for meetings, as well as cubicles for student organizations to plan their work and store materials.

There is a great deal of fluidity between each of these buildings as staff and students move regularly in and out of each site. Students sometimes use the “houses” as a respite between classes and describe a definite sense of comfort and safety within this complex. At any time, there can be a wide range of conversations and activities occurring simultaneously in the three sites. This is consistent with Patton’s (2006) research on the central role that such physical spaces play for Black students at PWIs because they “provide a safe and supportive environment that facilitates student learning” (p. 8). Patton found that students who use such centers feel validated at PWIs; this can aid in the ability of students to navigate racially tense or unwelcoming climates throughout the university.

### THE CLUSTER-MENTORING MODEL OF THE OAAA

The UVa OAAA assumes broad responsibility for the creation of a supportive environment that promotes full participation of Black students in the academic and extracurricular life of the university. The OAAA seeks to enhance the sensitivity of the larger community to the needs, interests, and culture of its Black students (Apprey et al., 2014/*this issue*). The four core elements of the model that guides these efforts are the Peer Advisor Program (for 1st-year students), the GradSTAR Program (for 2nd-, 3rd-, and 4th-year students), the cultural initiatives sponsored and supported through the LPJ Black Cultural Center, and the Parents Advisory Association (PAA). In this section, we describe each program’s unique features; we then highlight their interconnectedness to support academic and social success for undergraduates.

## The Peer Advisor Program

The Peer Advisor Program was established in 1984 to create and cultivate a positive environment for entering students (1st-year and transfer) who identify as Black by facilitating their entry and transition to the university community. Each student is automatically assigned a peer advisor (PA), affectionately called a “big brother” or “big sister,” to advise and mentor him or her through the transition into the university, and this formal relationship begins during the summer prior to matriculation. One of the strengths of this program is that the students do not opt into it; every undergraduate student who identifies as Black at the university is assigned a mentor. This supports a common experience among Black students, meant to increase their affinity for the university. In fall 2011, 303 first-year and transfer students were assigned peer advisors.

### Selection and Training Process

PAs are selected through a formal application process. Minimum selection requirements include maintaining a GPA of 2.8 or better (many are well above a 3.0) and demonstrating leadership skills in other university clubs or academic-related organizations. All PAs undergo an extensive training in both the spring and fall semesters to ensure they are prepared to assist entering students with issues common to new undergraduates. Training topics range from assuming personal responsibility, building positive peer relationships, and understanding the university’s Honor Code to coping with homesickness, attaining new living arrangements, and choosing courses. PAs are also oriented to university resources (e.g., financial aid and counseling services) and Charlottesville local services (e.g., transit, library, nonprofit groups) to promote relationship building. They are encouraged to become acquainted with many individuals, including academic advising deans, student affairs deans, student health professionals, professors, resident advisors, and teaching assistants, who can make the transition of students entering the university as smooth as possible.

### Program Description

Through student role modeling and other programmatic initiatives, the Peer Advisor Program actively seeks to promote academic excellence and community involvement. The program also recognizes the success of entering students through biannual public celebrations called Harambee, which is the Swahili term for “coming together.” In conjunction with the other academic support services provided by the OAAA, PAs volunteer weekly to tutor entering students and peers at a regular session known as GradSTAR: Raising-the-Bar (RTB). They also facilitate small-group review sessions in high-interest STEM courses such as biology, chemistry, and calculus.

### Program Structure

A specific tiered accountability structure supports the management of the Peer Advisor Program. The program director is responsible for general oversight, program success, and planning for

the major programs that involve entering 1st-year or transfer students. She or he also trains the Senior Peer Advisors (SPAs) to lead the Executive Committee and the PAs. The Executive Committee consists of the two to three SPAs and the peer advisor committee co-chairs. The SPAs are appointed by the program director to chair the executive committee based on their demonstrated leadership capabilities and their program commitment. SPAs manage executive committee work and cultivate a sense of “family” among the PAs. They also plan mandatory monthly meetings (which serve as time for information sharing and additional training) and work to raise the profile of the program on Grounds. SPAs are also required to mentor a small group of incoming students (i.e., a caseload) to ensure that they remember what it is like to mentor a new student. Committee co-chairs are appointed annually by the program director and are responsible for building community while discharging the committee duties. They also provide personalized and sensitive support to 1st-year and incoming Black students. Co-chairs are expected to attend biweekly 1-hr meetings with the entire executive committee and plan monthly meetings for their committee members.

There are four PA Program Committees: (a) the Orientation/Training Committee, which plans and facilitates Fall Orientation, the Mid-Year Retreat, and the Spring New-and-Returning Peer Advisor Orientations; (b) the Selections Committee, which recruits, screens, and selects the incoming class of new PAs; (c) the Communications Committee, which produces the publications *First Year Achiever* (for 1st-year students), *Stayin’ Connected* (distributed during biannual Black Alumni Weekend), and an electronic *Peer Advisor Program Yearbook*; and (d) the Pre-Health Committee, which provides academic support to those interested in pursuing careers in the health professions. The RTB coordinator is also a member of the PA Executive Committee and acts as a liaison between the GradSTAR program director and PAs to coordinate mutual academic support workshops and programs. From time to time, ad hoc committees form to meet other needs.

### The GradSTAR Program<sup>3</sup>

GradSTAR, the newest of the three cluster-model initiatives, was created to target the academic success of all Black undergraduates, especially those in their 2nd (sophomore) and 3rd (junior) years. A second objective of GradSTAR is to promote personal growth and involvement of Black students in all facets of university life, so that students develop the interpersonal and leadership skills needed to succeed in today’s global society. Three GradSTAR components infuse a variety of pedagogical elements: (a) “Raising-the-Bar” (peer tutoring and skill/resource acquisition), (b) faculty–student mentoring (role modeling and relationship building), and (c) postgraduate preparation efforts (leveraging academic and intellectual capacity). Embedded within these programs is a value system based on historically identified best practices of African American educators (Preston-Grimes, 2010) and guided by the strategic vision of the OAAA: to achieve and sustain successful student outcomes in a culturally sensitive environment.

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<sup>3</sup>Elements of this program were based on a student support model at Xavier University (LA). We thank Dr. Derrick Novaris for his expertise during the early stages of the current program design.

## RTB

During this weekly, scheduled “hands-on” program, RTB offers individual and small-group tutoring and enrichment led by the OAAA deans and accomplished UVa students in a semistructured environment. Undergraduates receive no cost, course-specific tutoring in foreign languages, calculus, economics, financial accounting, statistics, and the physical sciences for a 2-hr period on Sunday nights. Originally designed for 1st-year students as an informal study hall and social time, RTB has expanded to include weekly information sessions that precede tutoring and focused study at a university library site. Student and faculty guest speakers present a variety of time-specific topics that are designed for all undergraduates. Fall semester topics include *It’s About Time (Management)*, *Studying Abroad*, *The Honor System—What You Should Know*, and *Prepping for the Next Step* (university-sponsored career fairs). Spring topics include *Preparing for Graduate Admission Exams*, *Making the Most of Your Summer*, and *Exploring Your Interests through Research*. With no centralized student support service facility that serves undergraduates, students are encouraged to take advantage of the UVa Writing Center, department-based academic services, and the Center for Undergraduate Excellence, which advises students about research opportunities, national scholarships, and fellowships.

The relationships and reciprocal input developed in these sessions outside of the classroom (and away from the OAAA administrative office) strengthen the communication between Black students and the deans and help to promote OAAA programs. At least one OAAA dean attends each session to provide academic “re-advicing,” that is, to aid student decision making. This is important not only for the selection of courses and extracurricular choices but also to guide Black students as they learn the implicit, long-standing (and to some, foreign) language and traditions that define the university culture (Office of the Dean of Students, 2012).

Peer advisors also play a key role in RTB. Each year, one or two students supervise RTB scheduling, logistics, and publicity and meet bimonthly with the associate dean. All peer advisors must attend at least four RTB sessions each semester to model participation for 1st-year students. This also facilitates information dissemination and incidental enrichment. Since its redesign in 2010, RTB has become a popular training site for students to implement academic and life skills, and a “safe haven” as they navigate the implicit codes-of-practice that define UVa. Evidence of an increased focus on academics among 1st-year Black students is promising; the Class of 2014 obtained a mean first semester GPA of 2.951, or almost a B average. This represents a nearly half-point increase in the GPA of this most recent group versus students in the Class of 2009, who obtained a 2.509 mean GPA in their first semester (Apprey et al., 2014/this issue). The format continues to evolve, based on student needs. Studying explicit academic initiatives over time, like RTB, may help the deans to identify other reasons for this rising trend.

## Faculty–student Mentoring Program

The OAAA Faculty–Student Mentoring Program is designed to support student academic achievement and encourage cross-cultural understanding within the university community by sponsoring one-on-one pairings of adults and undergraduates outside of the classroom. Returning 2nd- (sophomore), 3rd- (junior) and 4th- (senior) year students are paired with university administrators, faculty, and senior staff to forge meaningful relationships. Through these connections,

students can experience intellectual stimulation, receive academic support, and gain career guidance. Mentors offer advice and are encouraged to engage students in a broad range of university service and research-related opportunities.

### Recruitment and Selection

During the summer before the new academic year, UVa faculty members and key administrative staffers receive an invitation to participate in the Faculty–Student Mentoring Program. In past years, mentors have come from a wide range of schools and university units. All who apply become mentors; participation is entirely voluntary. Interested applicants complete a short questionnaire to aid in the process of matching the faculty member with a student based on mutual interests and goals. Mentor candidates also agree to attend one annual orientation session (usually in September) and to meet with their assigned student at least three times per semester. Mentors are expected to work toward achieving an understanding of the student’s future goals and career plans and to advocate for student success at the university. As an advocate and confidante, mentors can play a key role in encouraging students’ goal setting, both during and beyond the college years.

Students are recruited to apply through publicity in the office and student e-newsletters, through referrals from OAAA deans and peer advisors and, in some cases, professors and university staff recommendations. Interested students submit a short application and essay that explains why a student wants a mentor. Then, the associate dean interviews each student applicant and conducts small-group orientations to explain program expectations (e.g., responsible communication between parties, open-mindedness, and notification to the associate dean if there are problems or concerns). At that point, students who agree to the guidelines and to commit for 1 academic year are matched with mentors, who often share similar interests. Throughout the semester, the associate dean schedules individual and small-group sessions with students to “coach” them on successful communication, organizational, and social techniques to maximize the relationship. As the program develops, students will assume more program management responsibilities to increase accountability and promote leadership skill development.

### Program Structure and Future Plans

Once matched, all participants can meet twice each semester at a luncheon sponsored by the OAAA, designed for exchanging information and ideas in a large-group setting. Periodically, the associate dean meets individually with mentors and students to support a relevant experience. At the end of the academic year, participants complete a survey to aid in future program planning. Based on feedback in the 2011–12 academic year, plans include (a) revising the orientation materials and sessions offered to both groups, (b) hosting an annual informational reception for all faculty and administrators to highlight OAAA activities, and (c) meeting with faculty and student participants more frequently to help them develop specific action-steps to maximize their paired encounters. The goal is to create quality, culturally responsive relationships that span the university for sustained, meaningful connections during their undergraduate years and beyond.

## Postgraduate Preparation

An increasing function of the OAAA is to provide academic advising and specialized outreach to students interested in professional and graduate school opportunities. Currently, the OAAA offers individualized counseling to students seeking admission to business schools (including the university's McIntire School of Commerce) and to those who are pursuing careers in the health professions. In 2012, students from the UVa Law School worked with undergraduates to revive a chapter of the National Black Law Students Association. Pathways are emerging within the OAAA for students, especially those in the College of Arts and Sciences, to receive focused support for undergraduate research leading to master's- and doctoral-level program admission.

The associate dean, as the GradSTAR program director, also develops relationships with external constituents, who seek to identify promising students for postgraduate study and careers within academia and the corporate sectors. Through RTB and other OAAA-sponsored workshops, the GradSTAR director guides students on how to use university resources (e.g., libraries and media centers, career services center, writing center, undergraduate research center) to develop and execute postgraduate plans. During the academic year, the GradSTAR director coordinates the distribution of *OAAA Weekly*, an electronic newsletter that publicizes events and information about UVa events and service-learning projects, career-related programs, graduate school application/admission sessions, and undergraduate research opportunities. Review sessions, discussion groups, and problem-solving sessions (often held at the OAAA) complement the personalized support. This emerging component of the cluster model is becoming central not only to maximize undergraduate engagement and retention but also to ensure that students graduate with specific academic, career, and philanthropic paths to life-long success.

## Cultural Initiatives for Skill Building and Leadership: The LPJ Black Cultural Center

Black cultural centers at PWIs are a vital resource for students of African heritage. They can serve as de facto think-tank units that partner with other campus stakeholders to organize, disseminate, and actualize initiatives for the university community. Some of these units include academic affairs, residence life, judicial affairs, faculty, central university administration, admission, alumni/donor relations, and the surrounding community. These partnerships affirm not only the needs of the student population but also the university community in which they are nested.

The LPJ Black Cultural Center<sup>4</sup> coordinates and implements cultural, educational, and social programs and activities throughout the academic year. These events include, but are not limited to, the annual University Kwanzaa Celebration, the annual Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Commemoration, and Black History Month Programming. Through the center, many internationally respected scholars and artists have presented lectures, workshops, poetry readings, dance performances, exhibitions, films, and other activities related to the African diaspora to university and community audiences. In addition, the LPJ Black Cultural Center supports initiatives that

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<sup>4</sup>Luther Porter Jackson (1892–1950) was an African American professor, historian, and civil rights activist in Virginia. In 1935, he founded the Petersburg League of Negro Voters and wrote a weekly newspaper column entitled "Rights and Duties in a Democracy." He was a key figure who challenged racial segregation in the public transit system in Richmond, Virginia.

enhance the university tradition of student self-governance: the Black Leadership Institute (BLI), Leaders Guiding Leaders, and the Black Male Initiative Program.

### Support for Student Self-governance

Unlike many colleges and universities, much of the decision making at the University of Virginia is entrusted to students, designed to reflect the Jeffersonian ideal of independent thinking and learning through individual thought and action. The University Judiciary Committee, Honor Committee, Student Council, and *Cavalier Daily* newspaper, for example, are staffed and lead exclusively by students. Since 2005, three student organizations have emerged among Black undergraduates to aid self-governance efforts. The first, the BLI, convenes Black student leaders in many university groups for leadership training and community development. It provides resources that sustain communication, solidarity, and cultural consciousness among its members and encourages support between organizations. Students meet regularly to share ideas, build leadership skills, and provide input to the OAAA on various topics. The second, Leaders Guiding Leaders program, draws on the talents of members of the Black Graduate and Professional Student Organization and the BLI to mentor undergraduate leaders. Members meet monthly to discuss postgraduate planning, lifestyle choices, and leadership strategies. The third (and newest) is the Black Male Initiative, which addresses the unique challenges facing Black male undergraduates at the university. Its membership includes individuals from within the university (i.e., undergraduate/graduate students, faculty, and staff) as well as Charlottesville community participants, who promote student-driven initiatives to promote academic achievement, personal development, and social/cultural enlightenment. A book club series and regional conference are examples of two recent successful programs.

### The PAA of the OAAA

Support from family, friends, and the local community can play a vital role in the continued success of Black undergraduate students. Family cooperation, in particular, is important to the well-being of undergraduates and can contribute to the stability of the student experience at the university. For more than 25 years, the PAA of the OAAA has assisted the OAAA in providing a welcoming and nurturing environment for Black students. It offers support through meetings with university administrators, faculty, and staff; engages student leaders; and sponsors a variety of events throughout the academic year. For example, the PAA organizes annual get-acquainted activities in the home communities of families of 1st-year and entering transfer students before they matriculate in the fall. During these summer sessions, families meet the OAAA staff and get face-to-face answers to questions about the university and college life. PAA representatives also meet yearly with the university president in informal settings for updates on various university activities and to address issues of diversity, recruitment, and retention. Through its independent fund-raising efforts, the PAA provides emergency loans and scholarships for students to support academic study on Grounds and abroad.

Parents organize geographically to implement the programming within their local community. Currently, two chapters—Northern Virginia and Greater Richmond—manage PAA activities.

Families from any region not served by the chapters, including those who live out of state, are welcome to participate and can start their own affiliated groups at any time. At the heart of these efforts is a shared goal that every undergraduate Black student who enrolls at the university will graduate.

The evolution of the OAAA Cluster Mentoring Model and its signature initiatives—Peer Advisor Program, GradSTAR, Parents Advisory Association, and an explicit cultural component—attests to the collaborative efforts and partnerships built in a culturally sensitive environment for more than 35 years. Nevertheless, as the OAAA prepares to serve the next generation of students, it is confronting new challenges. The widening racial opportunity gap in K-16 schooling, competition among all students for undergraduate admission into the state’s flagship university, and sustaining student access to financial aid resources are growing concerns. Therefore, the vision, positioning, alignment, and praxis of future efforts in the OAAA must be strategic to ensure that Black students have continued higher educational access, high retention, and life-long success after graduation.

## SUSTAINING SUCCESS BEYOND THE UNIVERSITY

In his April 2012 address to the University of Virginia Board of Visitors, Dean of African American Affairs and Professor of Psychiatry Maurice Apprey stressed the importance of strategic consistency among all stakeholders (i.e., the OAAA, the Division of Student Affairs, the university, and students), to move the perception and operations of the Office from crisis management to academic achievement. Analyses of the academic performance of Black students in the university’s graduating classes of 2005 through 2011 suggest that the objective to align high graduation rates with correspondingly high GPAs is taking hold (Apprey, 2014). During his tenure, Apprey has led the OAAA to envision a multifaceted goal of scholarship—implemented through the cluster-mentoring model—for sustained improvement of Black student GPAs and graduation rates. The last section of this article describes steps toward that vision of engagement, inquiry, and transformation that unite OAAA programs.

### Maintaining and Increasing Student Engagement

In an era of fiscal budget cuts and restructuring in higher education, programs and services that target a particular population, such as the OAAA, are often criticized for being irrelevant and promoting division, rather than unity, on college campuses (Patton, 2006). Although institutions must demonstrate fiscal responsibility, the track record for the graduation of Black students from UVa has remained very high and contributes to the overall success and national reputation of the university (“Black Progress,” 2011). This is particularly important for a flagship institution that legally and systematically denied Black students access to the public higher educational pipeline for generations.

As a key resource for the entire student body, the OAAA has helped students to understand and deepen their group identity by maintaining “safe spaces” for the sharing of cultural norms, traditions, and values. Whether through public events (e.g., Harambee I and II, the annual Kwanza commemoration, Donning of the Kente Graduation Celebration) or informal settings (e.g., peer

advising, gatherings at the Dawson's Row building complex, advising with deans at RTB), the opportunity for Black students to participate in meaningful engagement is key to 1st-year retention. These interactions can increase feelings of social belonging and enhance self-identify to help students navigate the established norms of a university climate embodying Jeffersonian traditions.

The emphasis on 1st-year outreach through academic advising and the Peer Advisor Program, in particular, supports the persistence and success of Black students at a crucial time of transition (Pascarella & Terrenzini, 2005; Reason, Terrenzini, & Domingo, 2006). These efforts have ensured that 1st-year students are able not only to adjust to the culture and climate of the university but also to adapt to a rigorous academic life. During this period of targeted outreach, GPAs have increased (Apprey et al., 2014/*this issue*) and students' participation in university life has broadened.

### Achieving Success Through the Undergraduate Years

Although some 1st-year students need academic and social support, others struggle in their upper-class years. Some Black students, unlike their counterparts of other races, do not show significant gains in their GPAs after their 1st collegiate year (Roth & Bobko, 2000). To succeed, Black students must maintain engagement to make sound choices when faced with more rigorous academic courses and expanding extracurricular options. This time is also essential to prepare for postgraduate opportunities. However, some students disengage because they think the initial support systems through the OAAA are geared toward incoming students and are no longer available or relevant to them. Although these students may have a greater chance to graduate than those who did not receive initial services, they may not achieve a particularly high GPA or develop the skills necessary to compete successfully for graduate school or particular fields of employment. Thus the GradSTAR Program, created in 2010, was designed to promote academic inquiry and excellence among Black students through personal growth and focused involvement throughout their university experience.

The OAAA is moving toward more strategic implementation through structured academic group support, expanded mentoring opportunities with UVa faculty and senior staff, and targeted academic advising (especially in the humanities, business, and health professions). Recent initiatives have included (a) the hiring of OAAA deans who possess a broad range of academic credentials and knowledge of the undergraduate student experience and (b) expanding involvement and collaborations between the OAAA and faculty, academic, and service units across the university. This increased level of engagement among stakeholders is creating pathways for greater academic achievement among Black students and aids the identification of specific benchmarks for sustained results.

Students who are academically prepared and positioned to engage in the full range of university experiences will graduate with the most options for career and lifetime success. At predominantly White institutions of higher education, however, many Black students are challenged to thrive in environments in which they experience isolation and hostility. Student-run organizations such as the Black Male Initiative, BLI, and Black Student Association contribute to an atmosphere of acceptance and become training grounds for development. The success of all Black students

at any university, therefore, rests on a culturally sensitive environment that aids their positive academic, personal, and social attainment (Hurtado, 1992; Patton, 2006).

### Future Directions

At UVa, the OAAA strives to create “a home away from home” for student growth and achievement. At the same time, it seeks to assist all academic and nonacademic units at the university to meet the challenges of service delivery to Black students. The OAAA has accomplished this by hiring individuals to whom students feel they can relate and discuss how race and other identity elements are engaged at the university. Rather than focusing on short-term intervention strategies, OAAA deans and staff have identified long-term outcomes aided by “an informal curriculum that addresses better decision-making in course selections, use of tutoring, study groups, mentoring, and advising” (Apprey et al., 2014/*this issue*, p. 314). Improvements continue on the informal curriculum to help individuals best navigate academic and social pathways at the university. At the same time, the promotion of cultural events through the LPJ Black Cultural Center fosters a collective identity that can create communities, both within and outside of the university, for shared and enriching experiences.

The sustainability of the OAAA requires the efficient use of current resources and exploration of new ideas and tools (e.g., social media and technology) to realize the strategic vision of creating caring, competent citizens and future leaders. In the past 6 years, the orientation of the OAAA has shifted its specific attention away from intervention activities to scholarship, achievement, and service. Aided by the cluster-mentoring model, students must “start early and start strong” to increase the number of graduates who enter graduate and professional schools, as well as lead in competitive workplaces and their communities. The OAAA will continue program development and welcome sharing their challenges, as well as best practices, with other institutions.

In this article, we have presented a case study to document how an academic support unit at a university can best promote academic achievement among and for its Black students. Through the implementation of a cluster-mentoring model that includes a physical site, a staff that represents a variety of academic backgrounds, culturally sensitive programming, and a variety of outreach programs, the OAAA has achieved successes as measured by the academic GPAs of its students. In time, this success can result in increased graduate school placement and selective employment opportunities for a higher number of Black graduates. Early indicators for the classes of 2014 and 2015 suggest that some students are more deliberate in postgraduate planning than in past classes, including taking advantage of study-abroad and career-related internship opportunities before graduation.

All institutions of higher education should value the recruitment, retention, and success of students from underrepresented groups in general, and Black students in particular, because society benefits from a well-educated, talented, and competent citizenry that represents all spectrums of society. With a strategic commitment and concrete action plans to ensure success for all of its students, colleges and universities can achieve the broader civic and social goals of creating and sustaining leaders of an inclusive, productive society.

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