

THE COLOR OF SERVICE

If the black middle class isn't concerned with black poverty, who should be?

By Toby S. Jenkins

TWO YEARS AGO, I accepted a community outreach position with the Black Cultural Center at the University of Maryland, College Park. I immediately conducted an in-depth review of traditional community service programs offered on campus, particularly ones coordinated by student organizations and directed toward communities of color (such as community cleanups, donations of food to homeless shelters, participation in Adopt-a-Highway, and so on). I found that many of these programs provided very good but very basic service. The programs served their purpose—engaging students in service—but most of them lacked an in-depth educational experience focused on civic responsibility and cultural awareness.

Furthermore, I began to look at my students and see a community of educated individuals who were disconnected from the majority of their community. I began to see more clearly the invisible wall that had been built between the middle-to-upper-class black professionals and the poorer black community at large. Not only were my students completely unaware of the

major political and social issues affecting the black population in America, but they were also living a life physically isolated from this population, literally separated by the gates of their majority white institution. What was

even more disheartening was that I realized that many of them were not striving to gain professional stature so they could work for the very communities of people that had raised them. Instead, many saw service to their community as a one-shot hour of their life—a car wash, an Adopt-a-Highway morning—rather than a lifetime commitment of their professional talents. And more important, I realized that although such one-time service is needed, someone in the higher education arena must also provide students with an intentional experience that teaches a deeper understanding of civic responsibility and encourages communities of color to see community ser-

vice through a very different, more meaningful lens. Consider the possible outcomes when college students are encouraged to see how their jobs can be a form of service. What could be the results of encouraging young black and Latino college students to obtain medical

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degrees so they could open practices in black and Latino neighborhoods and provide more quality health care to communities of color? And what of our future teachers? Outstanding education graduates may be more likely to lend their talents to a high school in an urban community if they are provided with a sense of connection and an understanding of the need for their presence in that community. If the black middle class isn't concerned with our poor and disadvantaged, why should the political and economic elite be? As Cornel West and Henry Louis Gates point out in *The Future of the Race* (p. xvii):

Dr. King did not die so that half of us would make it and half of us perish, forever tarnishing two centuries of struggle and agitation for our equal rights. We, the members of Du Bois's Talented Tenth, must accept our historical responsibility and live King's credo that none of us is free until each of us is free.

WE ARE DOING a grave disservice to communities of color if we groom potential leaders of color with no sense of their own culture, no connection to their own community, no awareness of their race's struggles, and no desire to live and work in these communities. We have in a sense taken the hope, the role model, and the human visual example of success out of the sight of the young disadvantaged. In Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* there is an essay entitled "Of the Meaning of Progress." In this essay Du Bois recounts his experience as a young teacher working in a very poor, rural black community in Tennessee. Throughout his years teaching at the black school, he often stayed overnight with the families of his students, went to visit the parents of truant children, and lived with the community. What is most interesting to

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me about this essay goes beyond its spoken messages: the tie that bound people of color who, regardless of education, at some level ate off of the same plate of "joy and grief . . . hardship and poverty, poor land and low wages . . . and the sight of the Veil that hung between us and Opportunity" (p. 54). Though these messages were undoubtedly powerful, what was most salient for me was the realization that this impoverished community was taught by Du Bois—a scholar noted as being the foremost black intellectual of his time. Today it seems that even a middle-class black neighborhood is not an attractive venue for the most simple professional experience, such as an internship, and does not gain the attention of the most average-performing college student.

The demand is great for more intense civic service programs within higher education. We—particularly those departments that specifically serve communities of color—must be dedicated to going beyond the standard service formula and work toward that great new breakthrough that molds active and conscious citizens. It is critical that these departments begin to collaborate with the community service departments on campus to

provide more comprehensive diversity-focused service programs. The need for these programs goes beyond satisfying student interest in community service. It speaks to what West and Gates called "the future of the race." The future of any race is bleak if its own professionals—its doctors, lawyers, teachers, engineers, politicians, and corporate leaders—have no sense of self and no desire to advocate for the very racial population to which they belong. One can only imagine how

viable a community could be if it housed the brightest teachers to educate its young, if it hosted the talented doctors of color to provide adequate health care, and if it were able to rest secure knowing that somewhere in Washington, D.C., or New York City there were conscious lawyers, politicians, and corporate leaders who consistently advocated on its behalf because service to their community was their occupation—their job was merely the medium.

Our students are entering the college environment with very little formal education in the histories and cultures of people of color. Often their only education

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about their culture is personal experience or what their family has passed down to them. It is important that the academy take an active approach in offering varied educational experiences to provide students with a continued and consistent connection to their race and ethnic group. Additionally, we must be challenged to go even deeper to provide enhanced learning on the history and current social circumstances of these communities in America, which students may have been deprived of in their K–12 education.

This does not mean encouraging a one-dimensional concern only for their race, but rather empowering students to be educated about all communities of need, and to understand that one of these communities may be the one to which they are racially or socially tied. Instilling civic responsibility and cultural awareness is an essential component of the holistic development of leaders of color. As Cornel West asserts in *Race Matters*: “To be a serious Black leader is to be a race-transcending prophet who critiques the powers that be and who puts forward a vision of moral regeneration and political insurgency for the purpose of fundamental social change for all who suffer from socially induced misery” (p. 46). Such a vision may begin with a student’s basic comprehension of how this misery has affected her own cultural community, touches other communities, and needs informed leadership to bring about its demise. Gates and West called for African Diaspora studies programs to create institutionalized public service programs that provide internship opportunities for college sophomores and juniors to work with organizations such as the NAACP, the National Urban League, the Children’s Defense Fund, and so on. Such programs directly connect one’s academic and career pursuits with an understanding of how one can use one’s talents in a life of public service. These

programs would serve to educate students more deeply on the social issues affecting their community.

As Cornel West recounts in *Race Matters*, Malcolm X observed that you can’t stick a knife in a man’s back nine inches, pull it out six inches, and then state that you’re making progress. Most important, institutionalized culturally based civic service programs encourage college students to recognize that although their individual lives may have been spared by the partial pulling out of the knife, the remainder of their cultural community may be mortally wounded. Leaders must be encouraged to realize the inextricable ties of their destiny to the destiny of

their cultural community. And we, as higher education professionals, must model a spirit of education that goes beyond the standard (that is indeed higher). We must push our students past the current individualistic social state and move them to embrace true and active citizenship. To do this, we must, as Martin Luther King Jr. stated in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, “refuse to accept the ‘isness’ of man’s present nature making him

morally incapable of reaching up to the ‘oughtness’ that forever confronts him” (p. 110). We must recognize and encourage the potential of civic leadership in our students, regardless of the current materialistic values they may espouse. I commend the call to action made by the great scholars of Harvard. The question is, Who within our higher education cohort will answer?

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