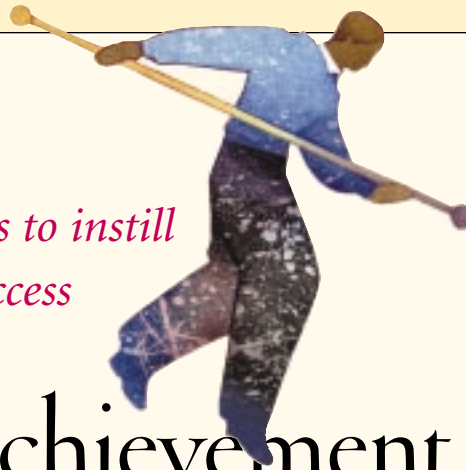


New scholar identity institute aims to instill characteristics for lifelong success



Spanning the Achievement Gap

Two Vanderbilt faculty members are leading the university into the forefront of institutions working to ameliorate the academic problems of African American and other minority students in the nation's K-12 schools—the so-called “achievement gap.” Donna Y. Ford is Betts Professor of Education and Human Development and a member of the Department of Special Education. Gilman Whiting is senior lecturer in African American and Diaspora Studies. He also lectures in Peabody's human and organizational development program.

Ford and Whiting have created the Vanderbilt University Achievement Gap Project, a multi-faceted effort aimed both at raising consciousness and at offering solutions to the disparity in academic achievement between minority students and their white peers.

They kicked off the effort in July with a two week Summer Scholar

Identity Institute. One hundred black male students from the 100 Kings program, established by the 100 Black Men of Middle Tennessee, were invited to spend their mornings on the Vanderbilt campus where they participated in a series of activities and talks intended to help them conceive of themselves as scholars—fully capable of success not only in school but in life. The students all attend Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools.

Ford and Whiting met in the fall of 2005 at Vanderbilt's Bishop Joseph Johnson Black Cultural Center. Whiting's background was very similar to the young African American males that are the primary focus of the achievement gap project. He moved frequently as a child in Rhode Island, struggled in school, and would not have thought himself likely to end up in an academic career. He went to college on an athletic scholarship (track) and subsequently

became an Army officer before pursuing graduate study at Purdue University.

Ford's academic research has focused not on the academically disadvantaged but instead on students who are gifted and talented. Ford focused on gender differences in achievement for her dissertation and wrote her first book with her son and other black males in mind. She has been studying and working with gifted black students who underachieve on a formal basis since 1990.



Gilman Whiting and Donna Y. Ford

Both share a strong social conscience and a deep concern for the academic plight of minority students. Data shows they have good reason to be concerned. Since the mid-1980s, test results for blacks and Latinos, while improved, have largely failed to narrow the gulf with the scores of their white peers. In the 2003 National Assessment of Educational Progress, 39 percent of 4th grade white students scored at

or above the proficient level in reading. For blacks, this number was only 12 percent; for Latinos, it was 14 percent. In math, the numbers were 42 percent, 10 percent, and 15 percent, respectively. These gaps continue in high school.

Nationally, No Child Left Behind seeks to close this gap by requiring that states disaggregate data and demonstrate progress by racial subgroups. However, many scholars, teachers, and administrators doubt that testing and accountability are sufficient in themselves pull up the scores of blacks and Latinos.

Whiting describes how complex the problem really is: “The data show that in schools, the poorest groups get less funding. But lowest SES whites still get more funding than lowest SES blacks. We're really talking about multiple gaps: the expectation gap, the opportunity gap, the funding gap, the health gap. We need a comprehensive solution.” He

adds that in predominantly black schools teachers tend to be the least well prepared and the lowest credentialed. They have less experience and lower on-the-job attendance. Ford adds that both the funding gap and teacher quality gap contribute to the bigger issue of the achievement gap.

Ford says the summer institute has increased her empathy for the teachers who work in these schools. Describing her own initial discomfort in teaching to the young black teens and pre-teens participating, she says, "We're two black professionals, and even our awareness is being challenged. Is it culture, age, development, economics? What makes it challenging for us?" She too emphasizes the many dimensions of the problem, which include not only schools but culture, family life, social systems, and psychology, including issues of attitudes and self-identity.

As ammunition, Ford and Whiting cite Paul Barton's 2003 report, *Parsing the Information Gap*, published by the Policy Information Center of the Educational Testing Service. Barton identified 14 correlates of achievement in which measurable differences among subgroups existed. In schools, for instance, correlates included the rigor of the curriculum, the quality of teacher preparation, the level of teacher experience and their attendance on the job, class size, and the availability of technology-assisted instruction.

Outside the classroom, correlates included birth weight, exposure to lead, hunger and nutrition, reading to children, amount of television watching, parent availability, student mobility, and parent participation. Simply to glance at the list is to realize the number of academic disciplines that would need to be involved in any comprehensive attempt to address the achievement gap.

But Ford and Whiting are persuaded the effort must be undertaken, and they believe Vanderbilt is in a position to

play a leadership role. "We have the intellect, we have the resources. The question is: do we have the will? Will we make it a priority?" says Ford. She stresses that the project is an ongoing commitment. She and Whiting have designed a program that is collaborative, cross-disciplinary, and comprehensive. Building on the Scholar Identity Institute, which is supported by Vanderbilt's Office of the Provost in addition to 100 Black Men of Middle Tennessee, the two hope to expand on the relationship with Nashville

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schools and to establish a similar relationship with schools in Memphis.

They are also planning a lecture series, a yearlong seminar at Vanderbilt's

Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities, and (with

sponsorship from the Learning Sciences Institute) a lecture from a visiting scholar. Future initiatives may include a national symposium, a summer institute for educators sponsored by the Peabody Professional Institutes, academic courses, and the establishment of a Web-based information clearinghouse. Ideally, for Ford and Whiting, the culmination of these activities will be a dedicated center that brings together theory, practice, and outreach efforts around the topic.

Perhaps it is indicative of the uphill nature of the battle that by day eight of the institute, the number of students coming each day had begun to drop off. Whiting was undeterred. "I knew at the outset that if we reached even a dozen, that would be a huge success. Five would be great. But if we can succeed with even one, we have still succeeded."

Young, Male, and Black: What It Takes to Get Ahead

In designing Vanderbilt's Summer Scholar Identity Institute, Gilman Whiting and Donna Ford sought to create a program that was less about subject matter content and more about developing success-oriented attitudes and behaviors. The resulting curriculum was built around showcasing and instilling nine characteristics that Whiting and Ford believe give young, black men an optimal chance of success. These nine characteristics are:

- Self-efficacy
- Willingness to make sacrifices to achieve one's goals
- An internal locus of control
- Aspirations and long-term goals
- Self-awareness of one's strengths and weaknesses
- The need for achievement being greater than the need for affiliation
- Academic self-confidence
- Racial identity and pride
- Masculinity

The activities of the institute are built around describing, discussing, and nurturing these characteristics in the attendees. Guest speakers from within and outside the Vanderbilt community model desirable traits.

Whiting acknowledges that occasionally he has to be confrontational. "These kids have been brainwashed," he says, referring to the widely held idea among black males that applying oneself to success in school is "acting white." "Things like getting As and Bs or speaking standard English are considered acting white. We have to start by dismantling that concept."

Toward that end, simple acts can have powerful symbolic repercussions. Whiting and Ford demand, for instance, that the institute's scholars-in-training sit at the front of the lecture hall where the institute is being held. "When they choose to sit at the back of the classroom, it creates an unnecessary barrier to their own success. Fifty years ago, a generation of activists marched in the summer heat wearing dark suits and ties to earn them the right to sit at the front. I want them to remember that," he asserts.