

Script for Opening Day Spring 2018

Julian West, January 11, 2018

African American Initiatives:

Good Morning, for those of you I haven't met, my name is Julian West; I am the Educational Advisor for African American Initiatives, and also the coordinator for the African American Mentor Program here at Bakersfield College. First, let me say that I am honored to have the opportunity to serve high need students at this institution, because I understand the impact education can have on these students. Education is the great equalizer. You can give someone more money but that doesn't make them wealthy. What will improve their lives more than anything is how much access they have to education.

And education isn't just learning how to read, write and compute: it's also about learning who you are. The more you learn about yourself the more enlightened you become, and the more enlightened you become, the more likely you are to have a complete sense of self and live up to your full potential. For me, working with students from historically disadvantaged populations is a great joy, the more challenging the circumstance the more interesting.

One of the biggest challenges that I have taken on is helping African American males engage in their educational journey. This means going beyond just assisting them in obtaining a college degree, this engagement can drastically shift the trajectory of student's lives, it can literally save lives. I want to draw your attention to the two young men in the presentation holding up student ID cards, James and Carmelo. This was their very first day at BC, their first time at any college. They each grew up in a neighborhood rife with poverty and gang activity on the East

Side of Bakersfield, not too far from Niles and Mt Vernon. For those who are unfamiliar with street politics, for any black male growing up in this area, it is highly suggested that they become gang affiliated, or they will be significantly more vulnerable to victimization without representation.

Needless to say, these two young men had a very high chance of ending up dead or in jail.

When first meeting with James and Carmelo, I noticed they were taken back by how much we invested in them, how much time we were willing to spend to ensure they connected with all of the services and supports they needed. I could tell that they were almost intimidated, unsure of what our true intentions were but also afraid to disappoint. But at the end of that day, they left with Hope; they left as BC students who had a plan of how they could change their life around.

Strategy of Excellence:

The African American Initiatives completion team was formed on the basis of promoting equity in education, and any strategy going forward will have that in mind. Through the lens of equity, our focus has shifted from not just equal access to attend school, but really focusing on outcomes and results. The only way to achieve these outcomes and results at BC is by having a commitment to combine equity with academic excellence.

Too often we are accustomed to think that excellence and equity are conflicting goals, too often, in this country, we are conditioned to think of excellence in a community college as something that would only focus on high achieving students, who perhaps test into college level

Math and English, or graduate high school at the top of their class. Many of the African-American students that I deal with do not meet these traditional standards of excellence. However, our goal is to assist these students in finding their excellence. In attempting to transform this disparity our equitable strategy does not lower the bar for excellence, but instead raises it. We have noticed that when we raise the bar for our students, they will raise the bar for themselves.

That is why we are encouraging our students to enroll in 15 units per semester and 30 units per year. That is why we are pushing students to complete college level Math and English in their first year. Working with students from urban populations we need to presume that they need us to set high expectations that they often didn't get in K-12, or even at home. We need to set high expectations along with providing a high level of support. Because that support we provide is going to come in handy when they face failures.

Because yes, if you presume that some students will fail classes when pushed to their limit, you're assertions are probably accurate. But the thing is when our students fail, we can't see failure as a loss, failure is simply a part of the journey to their success. It is only natural for students to fail, nature fails all the time, flowers don't always bloom, but eventually if we plant enough seeds, we end up with a garden. It is only unnatural to accept failure as a final destination. We want to look at failure instead as an opportunity to step into success, for some students failure is the means to the very destiny of their success.

Shifting to Higher Expectations:

In this graph we can clearly see the efforts of high expectations beginning to pay dividends. When we look at first time African American students at BC across the last three academic years we see that the percent of these students who complete college level English and the percent of who complete both college level English and Math has continued to raise significantly year by year. This trend is happening even as the number of first time African American students increases each year, and even as the number of these students enrolling at BC full-time also increases.

So it would appear as if we are on the right track. And our numbers resemble the numbers of many other schools who have pushed their students to achieve more academically. Who have embodied the notion that students can, and will rise to the occasion of meeting certain momentum points on their way to graduation.

Real talk:

Too truly be effective in accomplishing equitable transformation we need to address issues beyond what we see in the classroom, because the scholastic results or lack thereof, are rooted in issues students face outside of the classroom. We address these issues every other week in our AAMP meetings during a component we call, "Real Talk". Real talk is the facilitation of honest conversations. Sometimes that involves unpacking very complex issues such as masculinity. What does it really mean to be a man? Better yet what does it really mean to be a Black man?

We break down hegemonic masculine identities, examining how society perpetuates them and how we internalize them. Sometimes we focus on somewhat more simplistic matters such as

sexually transmitted diseases or study skills for success. No matter the topic however, real talk is not meant to be just students sitting and receiving information. In order for Real Talk to truly have substance it must include students questioning and probing topics. Our goal is to engage students to demonstrate a real depth in their thinking. Essentially, what we are doing is taking issues that are relevant to their lives and asking them to think critically about them.

This not only helps them with their ability to present themselves in an oral argument, but also helps them build a greater awareness of who they are. We aim to show students that they can be involved in not just learning knowledge, but also in producing knowledge. Many students have the impression that in order to be a scholar you can't also be cool or you can't also be Black. Many students believe that they would have to give up what makes them who they are in order to be a good student. So we use who they are to facilitate scholarly transformation. We utilize the culture and treat it as an asset, as a resource that they can use to add to conversations.

In Closing, if you want to make an impact on students, love and persistence are the tools to lead them with, whereas equity and excellence are the tools to stimulate transformation. Let's all leave an indelible mark on our students and help each of them live their truest and most compelling life. Thank You (: