

[ANNUAL EQUITY UPDATE REPORT]

A Focus on Retention: Polk State Looks to Recruit, Encourage Students of Color

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WINTER HAVEN | Polk State College is having trouble recruiting and keeping students of color, particularly black men.

A report that examines students of color enrollment at Florida state colleges shows that the head count at Polk State rose almost 6 percent between 2011 and 2014 (6,283 minority students in 2011-12; 6,609 in 2012-13; 6,834 in 2013-14) with the biggest growth among Hispanic students. However, black student enrollment is flat at 3,100 students and the percentage of black male students completing their associate in arts degrees fell by 13 percent.

The Annual Equity Update Report also shows that between fall 2013 and fall 2014, retention of first-time-in-college black students fell from 52 percent to 42 percent. In fall 2013, the college had a combined 299 part-time and full-time first time in college students. By fall 2014, only 142 remained, according to the report. The retention rate specifically for first-time-in-college black males attending part time is 24.5 percent.

Polk State President Eileen Holden said the college is taking the report seriously and has already begun work to increase retention of minority students. For black men specifically, Holden said, it's going to take her staff holding more recruiting events at places where black men gather, especially at churches. The key to making sure these efforts work, Holden said, is for successful black men to serve as de facto recruiters for other black men.

Holden said the equity report is somewhat misleading because it accounts only for students who finished their associate's degree in two or three years. Many Polk State students take longer than that, she said, because they are working adults with families and they take only two classes per semester.

"Our students are 26 years old, on average. They have lives," Holden said. "The lay person without the history of that could look at (this report) and make an assumption that we're somehow falling short on our commitment to students. So we look at the report, we take it seriously, but we also know its limitations."

Polk County residents who are well connected to the black community say enrollment in college is a more complex struggle than just Polk State not hosting enough open houses. To fully understand the issue, they say, it takes looking at how few blacks work in Polk County higher education, how poorly high school guidance counselors in Polk County prepare black students and how few potential black students come from educated families.

There's also a psychological barrier that black men must overcome first, one community leader said.

Deric Feacher, Winter Haven's city manager and longtime Polk County resident, said

there are several black men in the county who have the intellect to graduate from college but have a fear of enrolling and not being able to finish. Part of that fear, Feacher said, started when these students were in grade school and they didn't see enough black men as teachers, academic advisers or principals. Because those men were absent, today's black men don't see examples of how education leads to success, Feacher said.

"We have created a society where African-American male students are athletes and they play football, basketball or baseball," he said. "But they need to see the doctors, the lawyers, academics and the business owners."

THE PROBLEM

Top administrators at Polk State say there are several reasons it's difficult to get and keep black male students.

Kenneth Ross, the college's vice president for academic affairs, said only 60 percent of Polk County's black high school students graduated this past school year, compared with more than 70 percent of white students. Among those 60 percent, only 19 percent are going to college.

If black students don't go straight to college after high school, it's even tougher to bring them to higher education from the world of work, Holden said.

The college president said she has met and heard stories of dozens of potential black male students who graduated from high school, began working menial jobs in the county and are satisfied with a modest paycheck. She said too many of those men aren't brave enough yet to walk through the doors at Polk State and ask for help enrolling. Therefore, Holden said, the college has to do a better job at going to places where black men feel comfortable.

"We know that there are African-American males on this campus right now who are not enrolled," Holden said. "They hang out, they talk to kids and they live in the area."

James Arnold sees those men all the time.

Arnold is part of a national organization called Brother 2 Brother that's geared toward recruiting more students of color. As a member of Polk State's chapter, Arnold has had conversations with black students currently enrolled and those who aren't.

He said there's a third problem preventing Polk State from grabbing more blacks: There's a perception among the county's black population that, if you get your degree, you'll have to move to Hillsborough or Orange counties to get higher pay.

"A lot of these students are family structured and they don't want to just uproot their family and move," Arnold said. They would rather just stay here and work their way through the ranks."

When Arnold asks black males why they haven't enrolled in college, "a lot of them say they really don't have time."

"Some say that they're working and their jobs won't allow them to attend and then some don't even know what FAFSA is," Arnold said, making reference to the federal student aid application that all students use to apply for grants and scholarships for college tuition.

Arnold said some black male students who started college then dropped out in the first semester left because "they just feel that academically some type of realization

hit them that they're not college ready" in terms of study habits, time management and other areas.

Further complicating that issue, Arnold said, few black male students are willing to go to a college official and admit they're struggling in a class.

Arnold said he thinks these are barriers that black men can overcome and eventually gain a college degree. He has ideas that will help and so does Polk State.

A SOLUTION?

Polk State has plans to help increase black enrollment and retention. Some of those plans, officials say, already have started.

In the fall, the college called more than 300 students who dropped out but were 12 credits or fewer from graduating — some of whom were students of color. The calls, which the college is labeling the Finish Your Flight program, resulted in 17 students committing to return to college.

Holden said the college has also started another effort where there's a celebration specifically for students who are the first in their family to go to college. Recognizing those students, some of whom are racial minorities, helps those students feel connected and more likely to stay and finish, Holden said.

Once Polk State has celebrated those first-time-in-college students, college staff must continue to encourage those students with periodic phone calls and invitations to campus if they need help.

Finish Your Flight and the celebration for first-time-in-college students are strategies for all students, not just students of color, Holden said. But to grab black men specifically, college officials said they must go where these students often hang out.

One of those places is church, Holden said. The college will host a recruitment event later this month at True Holiness Tabernacle Church of God in Winter Haven. Holden said she thinks more events like those will help.

"The pastors are very connected with their students throughout the churches and we're going to take this countywide," Holden said.

Arnold said he agrees with Holden that local churches hold the key to getting more black men in college. He said pastors need to create programs that provoke those students to go back to college.

Feacher, the city manager, added another potential solution. He said Holden should gather a list of prominent, successful black professionals in the county, get them to join Arnold's Brother 2 Brother group and have those professionals call students who are struggling in classes.

"Those men can say, 'If you need someone to mentor you through that final semester, we're here to help you'," Feacher said.

As much as the college can do to help, Holden said she thinks a huge part will come from the work Arnold can do at Brother 2 Brother. There's power behind one black man coaxing another to enroll in college, she said.

"They can talk to each other in a way that our open house can't talk to them," Holden said.

A NATIONAL PROBLEM

Polk State's equity report isn't all doom and gloom.

The report shows an uptick in Hispanic student enrollment and an increase in students who identify as other.

The number of students of color completing associate degrees overall is skyrocketing, particularly among Hispanics and black women.

But college officials said it's important to concentrate on retaining students of color because they represent 41 percent of Polk State's student population.

Polk County isn't the only locale struggling to keep black students. People who study and work on this issue say it's a state and national problem as well.

Timothy Beard, the incoming president at Pasco- Hernando State College, said Florida in general has a problem retaining black men. Many of these students come from single-parent households where the parent hasn't gone to college, so "they don't quite understand the formula it takes to complete college."

Too many black men see college as an entry way to professional sports, Beard said, so they go to play ball and not to focus on academics. Families need to change black men's focus on college to academics and not sports, Beard said.

"Florida is a very athletics-focused state. A lot of our males are interested in going to the NBA or the NFL," he said. "Unless that is changed, we won't make much of a difference."

Nationally, 1 million black men are in college, according to a 2015 report from the Schott Foundation for Public Education. The Schott report, citing data from a 2011 study from the American Council on Education, said only 16 percent of black men have a college degree.

Tyrone Bledsoe is the founder of the Student African American Brotherhood, a national group that seeks to pull more blacks into college.

Bledsoe said black men struggle in college and often drop out because they haven't had much experience setting and accomplishing long-term goals. For the ones who do enroll, Bledsoe said, these students find themselves at predominantly white colleges that have few black student groups and even fewer black male professors.

Bledsoe mentioned Georgia Highlands College as one school that's really making progress. The Rome, Ga., public college has increased the number of black male graduates and number of black male honors students. Georgia Highlands has improved, Bledsoe said, because the staff develops personal relationships with those students with the mindset of "we don't lose them once they get to this space."

There's a national push among private and nonprofit groups to increase the number of college-educated people in America. The Lumina Foundation, for example, has set a 2025 goal to have 60 percent of the country with a college degree or certificate.

Helping black men graduate from college helps the nation increase that number, Bledsoe said. Even if a person doesn't care about more college graduates, Bledsoe said, he often tells people how graduating more black men can improve their personal lives.

"Sometimes, you have to be that real with people," he said. "The more we help these brothers, that's one less brother breaking into your house and one less brother robbing you at the red light."

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