

Using a Non-Traditionally Scheduled Program to Meet a Community Need for African American Male School Teachers

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Abstract

Public schools in America's urban areas report an urgent need for African American male teachers because of the positive impact they have as role models for students; the need in Detroit is especially acute. In response, Marygrove College, in partnership with the Detroit Public Schools, has designed an innovative program called "Marygrove Griots" that prepares mid-career African American men from other professions to become teachers.

The lack of African American male teachers in our nation's public schools has been well documented. "Many studies have explored why few African Americans today pursue careers in teaching, particularly in light of the fact that the teaching profession was once very highly regarded in African American communities" (Wilder 1999). According to Wilder (1999), this resulted in many studies designed to elicit responses from African American students about their perceptions of teachers and careers in teaching. The responses from these studies were an eye-opener to many researchers. Some of the responses showed how discipline problems, low salaries, and limited upward mobility have contributed to the negative image African American students have of the teaching profession. Some cited structural obstacles that African American students confront if they do enroll in teacher education programs. Wilder projects that by the year 2040, students of color will comprise 46 percent of the school population, just at the time teachers of color will have become even more invisible in American classrooms (Holmes Group 1995). Currently, few teacher education programs capture the imagination of African American males enough to motivate them to complete college and make a contribution to the community through teaching. Yet, increased numbers of African American male teachers are critical to the solution of urban education's problems (Holmes Group 1995; Wilder 1999).

Marygrove College's Urban Mission and the Griots Program

Marygrove College is an independent, Catholic, liberal arts college committed to fostering Christian values, to educating students from diverse backgrounds, and to

serving the people of metropolitan Detroit and beyond. The fundamental purpose of Marygrove College is to educate each student toward intellectual and professional competence; toward career flexibility through a grounding in the liberal arts; and toward active compassion and commitment. To this end, Marygrove provides a personalized learning environment, which, through excellent teaching in its undergraduate, graduate, and continuing education programs, sets for its students these goals:

- competence, the ability to understand and participate effectively in the promise of our evolving world;
- compassion, the capacity to care about and respect the worth and dignity of people;
- commitment, the will to act responsibly based upon one's beliefs and to contribute to the building of a more just and humane world.

Marygrove's mission as an urban institution is intimately tied to the City of Detroit—its problems and challenges, as well as its new activity and current optimism. The economic crisis of the 1980s devastated Detroit and the College suffered along with its host city. Unparalleled shifts in the local and regional economy, escalating problems with crime, unemployment, youth violence, and educational malaise in the city's school system further paralyzed Detroit and threatened Marygrove's fragile strength. In November 1993, Dennis Archer was elected mayor, the first change in that office in two decades. Almost immediately, the new mayor began to build coalitions with business, labor, and educational leaders in order to develop a more cohesive metropolitan effort to focus city and suburban efforts on rebuilding Detroit. Suffering for years from extreme negative publicity, as well as from real problems occasioned by social unrest and a drastically shifting economy, Detroit was given up as lost by many. In the last few years, however, the climate has changed significantly.

In keeping with its urban mission and with the help of the city's renaissance, Marygrove College has made a commitment to remedy an educational deficiency that still exists in the Detroit Public School System and in the metropolitan Detroit area: the underrepresentation of African-American males in the teaching ranks of the city schools at all levels. *Marygrove Griots: The African American Male Teachers Initiative at Marygrove College* is designed to increase the number of highly trained African American male teachers working in K–12 urban schools. While the College and its education division seek to increase the presence of male teachers in these settings, *Marygrove Griots* places special emphasis on preparing African American men as teachers who can serve as primary role models for students in an urban school system.

The Griots program reflects Marygrove College's commitment to continuing its long tradition of being a gateway for the community. Marygrove has a strong reputation within the Detroit area for the preparation of urban teachers. Many Marygrove alumni work throughout Detroit's private and public schools. Business, political, and educational leaders in Detroit have enthusiastically endorsed this program. The need for the logical outcome of this program, that is, more African American male teachers at the K–12 level, is well-documented and reaching critical proportions. The Griots program

reinforces Marygrove's urban mission, giving it a new and expanded expression by addressing a critical urban need, especially in Detroit.

The Griots program develops mid-career African American males, who are ending or changing their current career path, into K–12 teachers prepared to meet the educational challenges in Detroit's public schools. This certification program is built on the historic strength of the College as a premier teacher preparation institution. Throughout its 90-year history, the College has served the community by educating those who educate others. Marygrove College believes the Griots program will improve the quality of life in the Detroit community, as well as help the College to implement its urban mission. Additionally, this program can serve as a model to be replicated by other urban higher education institutions.

Program Structure

The Griots program uses a weekend cohort model based on the traditional teacher education program. The five-semester, twenty-four month program offers teacher certification and a Master of Education degree. Prerequisites include admission to the Graduate School, an acceptable grade point average, and passing marks on the Michigan Test for Teacher Certification (MTTC) Basic Skills Tests. The weekend cohort model enables men to go to their regular jobs Monday through Friday, and then study and bond with their male cohorts during concentrated Friday evening and Saturday morning and afternoon classes. Griots are assigned mentors who are practicing teachers from area school districts such as Detroit and Highland Park, and from Charter and Catholic schools. The program also offers on-the-job, paid student teaching positions in Detroit's public schools. A key feature of the program and the partnership between Marygrove College and the Detroit Public Schools is the guarantee that the graduates of this unique program will be offered regular teaching positions in the school system.

The curriculum includes, for example, method courses in the various discipline areas, classroom management, technology in the classroom, education of the exceptional learner, adolescent psychology, developmental psychology, educational research, and courses on teaching writing and speaking in elementary and secondary classrooms.

More than 90 percent of the children in the Detroit Public Schools are African American. Fewer than ten percent of the certified teachers working for the school district are African American males, and many of these men are serving as administrators rather than classroom teachers. In an environment where many youngsters do not have appropriate male role models in their homes or their neighborhoods, the presence of men in the classroom becomes an important stabilizing force for the community. This program recognizes that these teachers are more than communicators of information – they are carriers of the culture, exemplars of values, and creators of the future. At the same time that the program supports the community, it offers African American career-changing men the opportunity to learn in a personalized environment that is geared toward equipping them with skills needed to address real community needs.

Why a Cohort?

Many hands are better than one, as the saying goes. Marygrove believes cohort participants will benefit from socializing as a group around the common task of preparing for a career change to teaching. The process enables these men to experience the sense of community that they long for so deeply but have failed to achieve in their other career efforts. The cohort seems to balance their lives as individuals and their desire to connect in some deeper way to others and to make a difference in the lives of students by becoming teachers and role models. The cohort model has challenged the Griots to rethink their lives and careers in terms of connections and relationships with others—experiences we typically associate with nurturing and mentoring. We observe that the cohort design has had the following effects on students in the program:

- strong bond among group members;
- mutual respect for one another;
- opportunity to unite for a common goal;
- strong commitment to tasks both in and out of the classroom;
- opportunity for students to understand themselves and to develop caring selves as future teachers.

The Griots tell many stories of how they have supported each other in the program and helped each other cope with the many competing challenges in life. It is not unusual for classmates to go to the home of a student who missed a class to make sure they stay with the program and do not fall behind. The group also tends to study together outside class, and to continue to meet even after completing the program.

Characteristics of These Career-Changing Learners or Educators

With ages ranging from 24 to 65 years old, the African American men in the program come from all walks of life. They are professionals from the not-for-profit and corporate worlds (for example, bankers, lawyers, dentists), as well as blue-collar workers. Students are recruited by advertisement and word of mouth from those that have gone through the program. The selection process includes a rigorous screening mechanism that involves reviewing undergraduate transcript(s) to determine if the applicant's bachelor degree is in a field that is certifiable by Marygrove College. Applicants are also encouraged to schedule an interview with the Griots program director. Minimal admission requirements include the possession of a Bachelor's degree in a certifiable major or minor and a 2.7 (on a 4.0 scale) cumulative undergraduate grade point average.

The program admitted 117 men during its first three years of operation. Eighty-four of these men, or approximately 72 percent, graduated from the first and second cohorts. We anticipate 24 students will graduate from the third cohort in Winter 2002, resulting in a 92 percent graduation rate for the first three years of the program. In the fourth cohort, beginning Fall 2001, we expect to enroll about 38 men out of the 140 applicants. The men entering the Griots program desire to give back to their respective communities, and they see this program as the avenue by which they can make such a contribution. Consequently, their commitment to completing the program is very high, resulting in equally high retention and program completion rates. The one or two

students, per cohort, who drop out, tend to leave due to family responsibilities, financial, and/or other work related responsibilities.

The Changing Role for Faculty Members

Faculty in the education unit and throughout the entire college have had to rearrange their teaching schedules to accommodate the weekend format of this innovative program. Disciplinary faculty members (for example, English, History, Economics, Political Science, and Math) are central to and actively involved in the program. For example, these faculty have been involved with students in the field, working with student teachers and in-service trainers. The role of faculty members includes the following:

- Faculty in the program design interdisciplinary explorations, since real-life problems rarely fall into neat, discipline-specific categories. Faculty work together with other faculty to help students connect their work in different courses.
- Faculty guide students in their explorations, encouraging them to ask difficult questions, moving around the classroom to keep the students engaged, conferencing with them about their efforts, and helping them explore teaching careers related to the skills they are learning.
- In addition to providing a variety of tools, media, and resources to enhance learning, faculty also develop assessments of student progress that contribute to the learning process (Fleming, Olenn, Schoenstein and Eineder 1997).
- Discipline specialists supervise student teachers.
- Faculty members oversee and support programs and the people in them by means of supervising teachers, training, and curriculum development.

In addition, there has been a heavy reliance on K-12 specialists who have presented seminars to these career-changing men. Retired principals from the public schools have also been hired to serve as mentors.

Impact of the Program on Marygrove College

The impact of the Griots program on the College has been significant. Simply by their presence, men on a campus dominated by a traditional female student body, the Griots are highly noticeable. Their presence has challenged faculty and the administration to think more clearly about the pedagogy associated with adult learning. The Griots have been a model of cooperative learning; they clearly demonstrate mutual support, collaboration, and community building. The publicity generated by the program and the individual students have had a generally positive effect on the College as a whole. The success of the program has spawned a sister program, SAGE, which uses the same model for all other adult career-changers entering the teaching profession.

Impact of the Program on the Detroit Public Schools

The teacher initiative program developed by the partnership between the Detroit Public Schools and Marygrove College has started to make a difference in most of the public schools throughout the Detroit metropolitan area. Testimonies from principals who

have been associated with the Griots provide the evidence. The result has been a dramatic increase in the number of schools now demanding these men.

The young black students, both male and female, who have needed this type of mentor are now seeing these men not only as role models, but also in many instances, as father figures. For a number of these students, the Griots are regarded as compassionate and caring men on whom they can depend. In the classrooms where Griots are placed, school administrators report a marked decrease in disciplinary and related behavioral problems. Griots are now nurturing these public school students and at the same time instilling in them an appreciation for teaching as a noble profession. Thus, we hope that more black youth will select teaching as a career.

Challenges of the Partnership Relationship

Partnerships have their ups and downs. One of the major challenges is for everyone involved to understand and appreciate the role and contributions of each partner to the program. Another challenge is the time required to learn the culture, values, and operating principles of each partner. Initially, the partners saw the communication process as a major concern. There is often a lack of understanding of the role and function of the Griots in the different schools—an apparent disconnect between what the producers (Marygrove) are producing and what the consumers (public schools) want. As the program expands, certain questions are emerging: To what extent should various participants in the program have a conceptual understanding of the purpose, goals, objectives, and modes of operation? Another problem is Marygrove's perceived inability to meet certain student needs or to provide some services, which are generally assumed to be within the scope of the College's province and capabilities. Challenges also lie in Marygrove's uncertainty regarding the contributions that can be expected from the public schools, given the school system's recent financial difficulties.

Future Plans and Changes

A prominent development in the Griots program in the past few years has been an unprecedented growth in the number of individuals interested in enrolling in the program. This growth has led to a modification of the program as it was originally conceptualized. These changes include the addition of an on-line curriculum, an expansion in the number of courses, and extending the program from 20 to 24 months, beginning Fall 2001, to give students more time to complete the Masters degree.

By all accounts the Griots program is a success. The opportunity to provide African American male role models for K-12 students, and the fact that African American men, who would ordinarily not be interested in teaching, are being drawn to the field, keeps the partners focused and committed to the program. While challenges persist, we continue to work at strengthening our partnership, knowing that the ultimate beneficiaries are the men who are joining the teaching profession and the students they have committed themselves to serve.

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