

# Project C.A.R.E.: A University's Commitment to African-American Student Retention

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*This article addresses a Southeastern, mid-sized university's attempt to increase cultural diversity and student retention through collaborative efforts between the divisions of Academic and Student Affairs. A model retention program for African-American students is described, and an analysis of the academic performance of program participants is presented.*

State University (SU) has developed a program that involves the combined resources of the Offices for Student Development and Academic Affairs in an intense effort aimed at increasing the academic and social success as well as the retention of its African-American students. While project C.A.R.E. (Committed to African-American Retention in Education) is focused primarily on the first-year experience of African-American students, there are also components of the program which are designed to involve the entire African-American student population at SU. While the problem of steadily declining enrollment of students of all races is of national concern, the goal of this program is to defy the odds and increase successful matriculation of African-American students at SU.

## The Problem

State University, a mid-sized university located in the Southeast, is a regional public institution. The main campus is situated in a valley of the southern Appalachian mountains. The nearest major city is approximately 55 miles away. State University is committed to increasing access to higher education for African-American students. Historically, the university's efforts have been aimed at African-American student recruitment. Several barriers have prohibited the institution from achieving desired enrollment, retention, and

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graduation goals. For example, the county where State University is located has a population of 26,846, with only 1.6% being of African-American descent (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1992). The university campus has a population of approximately 6,400 students, with 3.6% of them being African-American (*Statistical Abstract of Higher Education in North Carolina*, 1991). In addition, the university does not have an adequate number of African-American faculty and staff to establish and foster a culturally diverse atmosphere. There are approximately 320 faculty members, only four of whom are African-American.

Recent enrollment reports indicate several disturbing trends at the institution. First, the number of African-American students entering SU is declining. African-American student enrollment fell almost 35% between 1984 and 1990 (*Statistical Abstract of Higher Education in North Carolina*, 1991). Second, the university is awarding fewer degrees to African-American students. In 1985 there were 79 African-American freshmen who entered SU; fewer than 30 now possess SU bachelor's degrees. Last, in 1988, SU experienced its worst retention rate of African-American freshmen. The retention rates for African-American students between their freshmen and sophomore year fell from 70.2% in 1986 to 54.7% in 1988.

Project C.A.R.E. was designed as a comprehensive, university-wide program to address the following objectives:

1. increase the retention rate of African-American students;
2. increase the number of African-American students attending SU by creating a learning-friendly campus environment;
3. attract additional African-American faculty and staff to SU;
4. improve graduation rates of African-American students;
5. raise overall grade point averages of African-American students;
6. increase the interaction between African-American students and the entire campus milieu; and
7. improve African-American alumni involvement throughout the University community.

One of the proverbs of marketing is that it is easier to keep an old customer than to attract a new one. If the adage holds true for retention, then it should be easier to keep a student enrolled than to attract a new one (Bean, 1990). Thus, as universities across the country seek to increase the overall number of African-American students who matriculate, they must simultaneously seek new and improved ways to create and enhance a retention-conducive environment (Griffin & Ervin, 1990). This is defined as a college environment which includes concerned faculty, staff, and administrators; friendly, caring advisors; and supportive peers. Understanding student diversity and providing information and services tailored to meet the needs of different student groups are fundamental to enrollment issues.

## Project Description

The first year of college can be intimidating for new students. Away from

home - perhaps for the first time - living with hundreds of strangers, students often have trouble adjusting and studying successfully. Through Project C.A.R.E. these students are able to make friends on campus and take part in stimulating activities - retreats, seminars, and other group events. The program's philosophy, "Lift As We Climb," encourages students to inspire and support each other as they work to be their very best.

There is much evidence that minority students who attend rural predominantly white institutions must make an extra effort to excel in addition to overcoming the obstacles of the high school-to-college transition that all students face. Generally, students who are minorities are less likely to complete college successfully (De Los Santos, Montemayor & Solis, 1980; Nora, 1987; Olivas, 1986; Stage, 1990; Tinto, 1987; Tracey & Sedlacek, 1987). It is worth noting that institutional characteristics influence the retention and graduation rates of African-American students. Attrition rates of African-Americans tend to be higher at predominantly white institutions, and grade point averages tend to be lower in comparison to white students' (Reisler, 1988).

SU must provide additional opportunities for enhanced academic planning and course scheduling, as well as dealing with students' progress toward educational goals. Project C.A.R.E. consists of eleven components that provide an effective means of anticipating student needs and bringing students into contact with appropriate institutional resources. It is imperative that intervention occur before these needs become acute and the tendency to drop out or fail out becomes irreversible.

In *Achieving Educational Excellence*, Astin (1987) states that students have an easier time becoming involved in college life when the environment seems comfortable and familiar. Therefore, all African-American students attending their first year at SU are invited to participate in the program (this includes freshman, transfer, and graduate students).

#### **Fall Retreat**

The first component of Project C.A.R.E. is a fall retreat designed to build a strong sense of community among the University's new African-American undergraduates. This follow-up to summer orientation reviews the basic survival skills necessary to all incoming freshmen. Topics include developing an understanding of university support services, academic standards, academic advising, and extracurricular involvement. Students also have the opportunity to interact informally with African-American faculty, staff, alumni, student leaders, Project C.A.R.E. faculty, and staff mentors. The off-campus retreat is intended to provide a welcoming and nurturing experience for first-year students.

#### **Peer Mentoring Services**

Chickering (1972) states that a student's most important teacher is another student. The concept of peer mentoring is not a new phenomenon. Peer influence has been declared as a powerful force in determining campus values, behaviors, and accepted norms in a college environment (Griffin & Ervin, 1990). Noel, Saluri, and Associates (1985) stated that upperclassmen need to share the

Responsibility for the success and persistence of new students. Thus, the second component of Project C.A.R.E. is a peer mentoring program. SU's BEST (Black Educational Support Team) is composed of sophomores, juniors, and seniors who volunteer their time to assist in providing guidance, support, and friendship to new students attending the university. SU's BEST are trained paraprofessionals who are selected on the basis of academic achievement, leadership ability, and campus involvement. In addition, returning students who are on academic warning or probation, as well as new transfer students, are also assigned a peer mentor.

#### **Mid-Term Grade Monitoring**

Component three, mid-term grade monitoring, is conducted prior to the halfway point of each semester. Students are considered "at risk of failing" if at mid-term they are receiving a grade of "C" or below. Students often fail to seek assistance until it is too late; therefore, the grade monitoring program asks faculty to provide current grades, absences, and comments for both new African-American students and those upperclass students who are on academic warning and probation.

In addition, all African-American students are rewarded at the end of the academic semester if they earn a 3.0 or above grade point average. These students are recognized as "Project C.A.R.E. Academic All-Stars." Students who maintain a cumulative average of 3.0 or above are considered Project C.A.R.E. Ultimate Academic All-Stars."

#### **Seminar Series**

This component is designed to address concerns of SU's entire student body. Sessions are developed to discuss current issues within and outside of the campus community, such as career development, self-esteem, and date/acquaintance rape. In addition, this component provides opportunities for study groups and tutorial services for African-American freshmen.

#### **Faculty/Staff Mentoring Programs**

Comparative statistics have shown that the success rate of African-American students at predominantly white institutions is directly related to the number of African-American faculty and staff (Fleming, 1984). Because SU has a small pool of African-American faculty and staff, students have limited opportunities for interaction with African-American role models. Phase I of component five, Leadership, Evaluation, and Development (L.E.A.D.), allows selected African-American student leaders the opportunity to interact with African-American faculty and staff in small groups in an effort to help cultivate the students' leadership skills.

Phase II of this component is designed to match incoming African-American freshmen with non African-American faculty and staff who serve as formal mentors during the students' first year. It is hoped that these faculty and staff will continue to serve as mentors on an informal basis throughout the students' college experience. The mentoring program, like the seminar series, is designed to help integrate the entire university community into Project C.A.R.E., regardless of race.

### Community Building

The need to belong is an integral part of the college experience. Many students decide to leave an institution because they perceive that they do not fit (Bean, 1990). If students are given an opportunity to work in unity with those students who are similar to them in characteristics, backgrounds, and interests, their chances of survival increase. Component six of Project C.A.R.E. involves community building to develop group cohesiveness and unity among the African-American student population at SU. Formal support groups, both male and female, are designed to focus on the issues pertaining to African-American male and female relationships, both individually and collectively. These sessions are conducted with other university support services, such as the University counseling center, residence life, and career services. Goals of this component are also to provide opportunities for collaborative programming with the African-American student organizations. In addition, students participate in activities during "Project C.A.R.E. Days" by collectively attending special programs, meals, and sporting events.

### Alumni Speakers' Bureau

The Alumni speakers bureau works in conjunction with the Office of Alumni Affairs to provide opportunities to invite African-American alumni as speakers to share their current professional experiences as well as reflections of their experiences at State University.

### Programs for Student-Athletes

The student-athlete program is coordinated in conjunction with the university's Department of Intercollegiate Athletics. Because life for the student-athlete is often focused on classwork and his/her specific sport, various programs and activities are planned to broaden their perspective of college life.

### Freshman Seminar

A special section of the freshman orientation course has been implemented specifically to meet the needs of African-American freshmen. In addition to discussing the topics of career planning, academic policies, university programs, and campus life issues, this course also addresses the African-American student experience at State University. This segment, taught by African-American faculty and staff, allows students the opportunity to openly and candidly discuss various issues such as racism, issues and concerns affecting the African-American community on campus, and in general, the impact of African-Americans on education, and specific programs and activities on the SU campus.

### Leadership Conference

Component ten is the annual Spring Leadership Conference which is open to all African-American students. The emphasis is on leadership development and collaborative programming, as the conference combines the resources of SU's sister institutions also located in the western region of the state. The conference is hosted by each institution on a rotating basis and provides networking and fellowship among the institutions' students and professionals.

### Graduate Student Program

The final component of Project C.A.R.E. is a series of programs and activities

designed to meet the needs of SU's full-time African-American graduate students. Just as upperclass students serve as role models and mentors to freshman students, several full-time graduate students volunteer to become involved with Project C.A.R.E. by serving as role models to all African-American undergraduates. In addition, these students have a support system among themselves to provide encouragement, friendship, and guidance during their enrollment at SU as graduate students. All programs and activities sponsored by Project C.A.R.E. are open to graduate students as well.

These 11 components comprise the basis of Project C.A.R.E. In addition to the leadership provided by the Offices of Student Development and Academic Services, students involved in SU's BEST are integral leaders in the effective operation of this program. Student leadership has been a major source of the success of the program. Only two professional staff are involved in the program's daily operations.

### Results

The first year of Project C.A.R.E. has resulted in great academic and social success for student participants. During the first semester, there was a marked difference between the academic performance of African-American students who chose to be active in the program and those who chose not to participate. All African-American freshmen were invited to participate in the program, and active participants were defined as students who attended the freshmen retreat and/or maintained regular contact with their peer counselors.

Project C.A.R.E. participants achieved an average cumulative semester grade point average (GPA) of 2.39 on a 4.00 scale, compared to an average GPA of 1.78 for non-Project C.A.R.E. (African-American) freshmen. In addition, the average GPA for Project C.A.R.E. freshmen exceeded the average fall semester GPA of all SU freshmen (See Table 1).

**Table I**  
**Mean Cumulative Grade Point Averages for Fall Semester 1991**

Group	Mean	<i>SD</i>
Project C.A.R.E.	2.39	0.81
All SU Freshmen	2.36	0.91
All African-American Freshmen	2.27	0.92
Non-Project C.A.R.E. Freshmen (African-American)	1.78	0.98

A review of the end-of-the-year data for Project C.A.R.E.'s inaugural year indicated the academic performance of the Project C.A.R.E. participants continued to surpass the performance of non-Project C.A.R.E. students. The mean GPAs of Project C.A.R.E. freshmen was higher than the mean GPA of non-

Project C.A.R.E. (African-American) students. Those who chose to become involved had an overall mean GPA of 2.23 for the entire academic year, while non-program freshmen had a mean GPA of 1.55 (See Table 2).

**Table 2**  
**Mean Cumulative Grade Point Averages for the 1991-1992 Academic Year**

Group	Mean	<i>SD</i>
Project C.A.R.E.	2.23	0.85
All SU Freshmen	2.24	0.84
All African-American Freshmen	2.11	0.75
Non-Project C.A.R.E. Freshmen (African-American)	1.55	0.91

In addition to the academic success of the Project C.A.R.E. participants, involvement in extracurricular activities increased significantly as a result of the efforts of the program. For example, 50% of the peer counselors for the second year of Project C.A.R.E. were also participants of the first Project C.A.R.E. class. In addition, Project C.A.R.E. freshmen are advanced in their leadership skills, many serving as resident assistants, executive officers in student organizations, orientation leaders, and active members of the entire university community.

### Discussion and Recommendations

African-American students at predominantly white institutions face the difficult challenge of pursuing a college education in an environment primarily structured to meet the needs of white students (Fleming, 1984; Hughes, 1987; Sedlacek & Brooks, 1976). There is evidence that identification with an institution is a more important correlate of retention for African-Americans than for other students (Astin, 1975, 1982). Project C.A.R.E. assists African-American students with this identification process.

In the report of the Commission on Minority Participation in Education and American Life (*One Third of a Nation*, 1987), it is estimated that between the years 1985 and 2000, minority workers will comprise one-third of the net additions to the U.S. labor force. By the turn of the century, 21.8 million of the 140.4 million people in the labor force will be non-white. By the year 2000, one-third of the nation's children will be children of color, soon afterward they will be one-third of the nation's adults. They are, in a real sense, the new America.

By taking action now in America's colleges and universities, minority citizens can be made more visible physically in every realm - in schools, in colleges and universities, in government, in the work place - and less visible statistically, as the conditions in which they live resemble more closely the conditions enjoyed by the majority (Eaton, 1987).

Even though there is no proof of a cause and effect relationship, it is evident

that the students who were active participants of Project C.A.R.E. have had greater success academically and socially in their current college experience than their counterparts who chose not to participate.

Project C.A.R.E. is an intense effort by State University to encourage and support its African-American students. It is the responsibility of each institution to provide programs and opportunities such as Project C.A.R.E. to meet the needs of its minority student populations. This program is adaptable for any minority student group. The goals of the program are simple but intense. In order to reach these goals, State University and other institutions of higher learning must continue to adopt the following principles described by Eaton (1987):

1. Leadership from the board of trustees and the president is essential to deep and lasting change on campus. Without their symbolic and practical support, little enduring process will occur.

2. The second requirement for success is an integrated approach to change reflecting a vision of the future. A vigorous effort to change a campus requires more than a special program initiated here, a minority staff person there. Minority participation must be high on everyone's agenda, integral to the mission and the workings of the institution. Pluralism requires energy and purpose.

3. The third principle involves institutional change. If this nation's campuses are to become truly reflective of the pluralism of American life, then institutions must examine their assumptions, structures, and priorities. It is not enough to welcome minority individuals. The culture of majority institutions must also change so that all members of the community contribute and honor each other's differences. As it stands, African-Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans and Native Americans bear the entire burden of adapting to the majority culture on campus. On a truly pluralistic campus, the burden and the rewards are equally shared.

To address the unique needs of a non-monolithic student population, institutions of higher learning must commit to becoming pluralistic learning communities (P. Williams, 1990).

### Summary

The goal of "s project is to provide a mechanism which will help African-American students excel both in and outside the classroom. It is also an effort to develop a national model that encourages African-American students in particular and students of color in general to attend universities that are located in rural communities and are predominantly white.

The success of Project C.A.R.E. will continue to be evaluated by the academic success and improved retention rates of the students involved in the program. In addition, students, faculty, and staff participants will continue to be surveyed for their impressions of the success of the program. A few of the most telling factors in the success of the project will include the level of involvement in out-

of-classroom activities, and improved retention and graduation rates. This will take time and patience. However, the ongoing success of the project can also be measured one student at a time in accordance with his or her own levels of improvement from an academic and social standpoint.

Finally, efforts must be made to address the needs of students who choose not to participate in the program.

In the face of such diversity, the work ahead is to create a truly diverse campus environment, one which frees all students to succeed academically and to develop to their full potential regardless of the dominant culture of the institution. The members of the mainstream culture must accept more of the burden for breaking the barriers which stand in the way of achieving this full potential. This long process can start with majority individuals becoming involved in and considering other cultures as equally valid and enriching as the dominant culture (Manning & Stage, 1988).

Students, faculty, staff, alumni, and friends of State University consider themselves a family - a family rich in culture, dedicated to progress, and committed to leadership - overall a community of scholars. As members of this family, they are equally responsible for assisting in the nurturing of other family members (J. Williams, in press). Despite the cultural differences, State University is truly committed to African-American Retention in Education.

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