How Diversity Spent Its Summer Vacation

A photographic look at college inclusion programs around the country

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When Lee Gill arrived at the University of Akron in 2008, he found a campus that had a myriad of diversity practices and programs, but no one was working together.

“There were outstanding programs on campus, but they needed to be focused toward a strategic mission,” he says. “It became a matter of how do you bring all these programs together. It’s not enough to say I have a [Martin Luther] King Day or peer advisers. How do you focus everything we do and create a diversity component with outcomes and measures?”

Gill brings more than 25 years of private and public sector experience, having worked with corporate executives, attorneys, hospital administrators, and college presidents.

“Diversity is a lot of hard work,” he says. “I can’t do this by myself. Everybody has to be on board and understand there’s a bottom-line benefit to diversity.”

As Akron’s associate vice president for inclusion and equity as well as chief diversity officer, Gill made his first priority expanding the representation of UA’s Diversity Council by soliciting support of deans from each of the university’s 12 colleges.

“You can’t micromanage diversity. You have to be at the grassroots level,” says Gill. “It’s discussing what the problems are and trying to move each of the colleges forward.”

Gill also saw the need to build partnerships within the greater Akron community and sought help from some of the city’s top leaders.

“You’re not in a vacuum,” Gill says. “You realize you have to work with city partners. It bodes well for us to have high-profile individuals in the community who want to improve education in our community to be sitting on our diversity council.”

Among local leaders invited to serve on UA’s Diversity Council is Fred Wright, president and CEO of the Akron Urban League.

“It’s important to have people from the external community involved when you’re trying to promote diversity within your institution,” says Wright,
who serves on UA’s Diversity Council with the mayor and the superintendent of Akron’s public schools. “Lee Gill makes a conscious effort to make sure the University of Akron has sound diversity practices, and he’s willing to be transparent in what he does.”

Even the White House has taken notice of Gill’s work. President Obama’s recently launched initiative, “My Brother’s Keeper,” is modeled after UA’s Black Male Summit, a symposium that Gill helped establish in 2008 to address retention and graduation of African American males in college.

This year’s summit, held in April, drew 1,400 attendees from 13 states. David Johns, executive director of the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans, was the keynote speaker.

The success of the Black Male Summit has led the Ohio Latino Commission to choose UA as the site of a similar Latino Summit scheduled for next year.

“We established the Black Male Summit because we knew as an institution we had to make that commitment,” says Gill, a graduate of the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and Illinois Institute of Technology’s Kent College of Law in Chicago.

While the university has made a college education more accessible to students of color in recent years, ensuring that they graduate is a bigger challenge.

The work of Gill and others is starting to pay off. Graduation rates among African American males at UA have increased since the university began focusing on black male success under Gill’s direction.

Behind the numbers are success stories like Darnell Davis Jr.

A third-year political science major, Davis comes from an environment in the greater Pittsburgh area where the college prospects for young black males are slim. After graduating high school, Davis enrolled in another public university in Pennsylvania, but due to what he felt were “a lack of resources,” he dropped out within two months.

His fortunes changed, however, after he visited a cousin who was then a student at UA and found a lively campus with a plethora of opportunities for young black men.

Davis was most impressed with the university’s African American Male Learning Community, a cohort of African American male students who take classes together and participate in on-campus and off-campus activities.

“I knew this was the place for me,” says Davis who aspires to follow the same path as Gill and become a chief diversity officer at a university. “The Learning Community gave me a family of support. We were all facing the same struggles as African American males trying to receive a degree, and we all support each other still to this day as upperclassmen.”

The university has made bold moves toward achieving Gill’s vision and has amassed an impressive list of accomplishments:

- received the INSIGHT into Diversity Higher Education Excellence in Diversity (HEED) Award in 2012, 2013, and 2014
- ranked in the top 25 among diversity councils nationally by the National Association of Diversity Councils
- established its annual Black Male Summit, which has gained national recognition as the premier conference focused on the success of black males
- opened the university’s first Women’s Resource Center, which last year was expanded to include a Multicultural Center that brings international and domestic students together for meaningful learning experiences
- established a Student Success Center, which serves as a one-stop shop where students can receive peer mentoring, tutoring, and advising in an effort to increase their prospects for graduation
- in 2010, was awarded $425,000 for three years to establish the African American Male Learning Community to focus on improving retention and graduation rates

While Gill takes pride in all that has been accomplished at UA when it comes to diversity, his greatest reward has been in witnessing the profound impact his work has had in the lives of students of color, particularly young African American men.

“To see where they begin — these are young men that come from good homes, but most are first-generation college students,” he says. “Four years later, when you get that letter from the University of Chicago and they’ve finished law school and later from the Illinois bar, that’s a great feeling. That’s what is so endearing and positive about this work.”

Tannette Johnson-Elie is a contributing writer for INSIGHT Into Diversity. For more information on the HEED Award visit www.insightintodiversity.com.

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- Darnell Davis Jr., political science major at UA