



ROBERT MORRIS UNIVERSITY CIVIC ACTION PLAN 2017

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Robert Morris University (RMU) affirms its commitment to diversity. The institution is proud of its recent accomplishments in this area but is also aware that it can do more. The university's administrators, faculty and staff believe that promoting diversity will ensure that RMU stays at the forefront of empowering African-American young men. Moreover, we see promoting diversity off campus and in our communities as consistent with one of our core university values: changing lives.

As RMU's Civic Action Plan (CAP) committee completed the plan, it leveraged a key existing program to demonstrate the positive impact that diversity programs can have. The university highlights its ongoing initiative, with the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh, called the Black Male Leadership Development Institute. BMLDI is a year-long cohort program for 9th through 12th grade African-American males with the principal goal of increasing their educational and leadership potential.

Building on the strong commitment to BMLDI and harnessing the efforts of the university's African-American Student Retention Task Force, the university is creating a program of activities associated with Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP). Beginning in the Fall 2017 semester, the university will offer monthly programs dissecting important elements of CRP, which will be delivered to the university's faculty, staff and students, and will welcome current and new external partners to engage with the university.

ROBERT MORRIS UNIVERSITY'S CIVIC ACTION PLAN

VISION/MISSION

Robert Morris University affirms its commitment to diversity. The institution is proud of its recent accomplishments in this area but is also aware that it can do more. The university's administrators, faculty and staff believe that promoting diversity will ensure that RMU stays at the forefront of empowering African-American young men. Moreover, we see promoting diversity off campus and in our communities as consistent with one of our core university values: changing lives.

That statement is critical to the university's Civic Action Plan (CAP) and to many of its broader university initiatives.

RMU envisions several components to its diversity effort and therefore to its CAP:

- continuing and expanding relationships with organizations such as the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh that allow for the campus to play an important role in the maturation of African-American teenage males;
- developing stronger relationships with multiple communities near the campus with the goal of casting off negative stereotypes of underrepresented and some international students;
- informing the RMU and off-campus communities about culturally responsive education efforts.

APPROACH

Educator Lisa Delpit reminds everyone who is called teacher to never forget why we relish that title. In her often-cited work *Will It Help the Sheep? Why Educate?*, Delpit states that "we teachers must take up the cause of those children who are so often dismissed by the system. That means never giving up on them; refusing to accept failure; being their advocates and pushing them and the systems that block their success."

Her words are a powerful reminder that the institution's administrators, faculty and staff recognize and reward diversity. Consider as just one example that the university has taken important steps in recent years to expand the diversity of its undergraduate population. It has a strong relationship with the Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission, which has led to hundreds of Saudi students studying at RMU. During this academic year, almost 400 such students are attending the university; they most often can be found in the engineering, mathematics, business and communications majors. In addition, our School of Engineering, Mathematics and Science has been especially successful in attracting students from multiple African and South Asian nations.

RMU's leaders also know that recruiting students is not enough; these men and women also must graduate. When it comes to African-American men, succeeding in and graduating from college too often is too high a hurdle. These men regularly have heard that they can't handle college or they don't belong in one. This negativity, when carried from one generation to another, creates a mindset in which African-Americans don't see college as the logical next step after high school. Rather, they see college as an unwelcoming place where they are not wanted and where existing barriers will deter them from succeeding. The RMU community knows that negative outlook must be changed.

The university commits itself to changing that outlook. The Civic Action Plan (CAP) pushed RMU to introduce an educational series associated with Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP). Beginning in the Fall 2017 semester, the university will offer a monthly program of presentations, speeches and workshops that will highlight what CRP is and why it is critical for everyone at RMU to be aware of and positively

respond to. The university will invite current and new external partners to assist in creating the educational elements and in presenting them to the on- and off-campus communities.

As the university examined its ability to create and sustain a CAP, the following elements were deemed essential:

1. Leverage a visible current partnership as an example of the university being a positive change agent;
2. Continue to identify organizations throughout the Pittsburgh area determined to eradicate negative stereotypes of African-Americans and people from some foreign nations;
3. Commit itself to meaningful educational and cultural enrichment programs to the faculty, staff and students that could also be shared with local communities.

Thus, RMU envisions three key components to its diversity effort and therefore to its CAP:

- continuing and expanding relationships with organizations such as the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh that allow for the campus to play an important role in the maturation of African-American teenage males;
- developing stronger relationships with multiple communities near the campus with the goal of casting off negative stereotypes of underrepresented and some international students;
- informing the RMU and off-campus communities about culturally responsive education efforts.

The CAP committee consisted of the Director of the university's Center for Innovative Teaching and Directed Engaged Learning (director of the CAP committee), the university's Provost and Senior Vice-President of Academic Affairs, the university's Vice Provost for Academic Affairs, and the university's Vice President for Student Life.

University faculty and staff from various offices provided data, as needed.

The university's CAP committee has shared with the university's senior administrators its belief that the CAP aligns with elements of Campus Compact's 30th Anniversary Statement. We see especially strong agreement with these parts of that statement:

-We empower our students, faculty, staff and community partners to co-create mutually respectful partnerships in pursuit of a just, equitable, and sustainable future for communities beyond the campus--nearby and around the world. RMU's CAP committee contends that working with area nonprofits, such as the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh, to make young African-American men aspire to get into and graduate from college aligns with the "pursuit of a just, equitable, and sustainable future" for these men and for the communities in which they live. This is true whether these young men attend RMU or another college or university.

-We embrace our responsibilities as place based institutions, contributing to the health and strength of our communities--economically, socially, environmentally, educationally and politically. RMU's CAP committee contends that the university's commitment to foster positive public perceptions of disenfranchised and some international groups will make the Pittsburgh region a better place for all.

-We harness the capacity of our institutions--through research, teaching, partnerships, and institutional practice--to challenge the prevailing social and economic inequalities that threaten our democratic future. RMU's CAP committee contends that instituting a CRP program will lead to more positive interactions between the university's faculty and its growing international and African-American cohorts. Similarly, more positive interactions between local communities and these students will be possible.

As the CAP develops in future years, its committee knows it can rely upon multiple on-campus units to assist in meeting its responsibilities. These units include:

- the Black Male Leadership Development Institute (BMLDI);
- an African-American Student Retention Task Force (AASRTF);
- the Center for Global Engagement;
- the Women's Leadership and Mentorship Program;
- the Office of Multicultural Student Services
- the university's Student Support and Community Outreach Programs, which coordinates the BMLDI on campus and hosts regular meetings and events for the university's African-American male population;
- and active African-American faculty who advise, teach and mentor all students.

These people and programs demonstrate the university's determination to

- be an agent of positive change in Pittsburgh and throughout southwestern Pennsylvania;
- empower the university community to work in on and off campus projects that improve lives;
- and offer examples of success to communities thirsty for positive role models.

OUTCOMES

In *Will It Help the Sheep? Why Educate?*, Lisa Delpit reminds us that it is always important to remember who is and who isn't present when an important conversation, no matter the topic, is had. "When a marginalized group is not present, an important perspective is missing," she writes, "and efforts should be made to get that perspective added." A terrible reality continues in America: the too-often missing perspective of African-American college graduates.

To do its part in ensuring that more African-American perspectives are heard, the RMU CAP supports the ongoing efforts of BMLDI as it embraces its call to make young African-American men proud of themselves and of their history, and to shepherd these teenagers to and through college. The program has had more than 600 participants since its inception. Four graduates of the program currently attend RMU; another five students did in the past. The CAP committee recognizes that as RMU commits itself ever more deeply to promoting positive images about African-Americans that more BMLDI graduates might attend RMU. While we believe that would be a wonderful academic choice for these young men, we note that the institution does not support BMLDI for that purpose; rather, we do so because it strengthens African-American communities and instills pride in the young men who partake in the program.

As the CAP broadens conversations with underrepresented communities in Pittsburgh, it will do so on the promise of equal partnership. The CAP committee welcomes the creation of a Community Advisory Board, a group of men and women from community business, educational, historical, religious and other organizations. Invitations will be sent out in the coming months with the goal of having the board in place by the commencement of the 2017-18 academic year.

The university provost has confirmed his office will support the Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) program that also will begin with the Fall 2017 semester; the CAP committee applauds this commitment to allocating vital resources to enhance the success of this important initiative.

This nine-month academic and co-curricular program that will be delivered to the university's faculty, staff and students; and that will welcome current and new external partners to engage with the university. The program aims to

- highlight important cultural misunderstandings that can lead to conflict between faculty and their African-American or international students;

- offer an assessment of African-American and international students' experiences at the university and in their surrounding communities;
- unite academic and community experts in leading workshops that demonstrate how to foster better relationships between town and gown;
- establish a battery of undergraduate courses that offer a contemporary and historical look at the African-American experience in Pittsburgh;
- and suggest curricular, co-curricular, and off-campus initiatives that will empower Blacks to persist to graduation.

IMPLEMENTATION

Beginning at the president's office and filtering down to the newest staff member, the RMU community recognizes significant work must be done to meet the goals and to establish the programs mentioned above. Yes, it will take hard work to make it happen, but it is incumbent upon everyone to ensure that the university's CAP succeeds.

Similarly, it is critical that the university maintain its critical association with BMLDI. This program offers multiple positive messages that African-American teenage males must hear.

These initiatives will command university resources. The CAP committee applauds the university president for the strong support he has provided the African-American Student Retention Task Force (AASRTF) during the academic year. This body has met multiple times, as it examines how the university can ensure that more of its African-American students who begin their academic careers at RMU stay at the institution through to graduation and have a positive educational, cultural and social experience.

The RMU CAP committee understands that additional resources for potential CAP-related efforts are incumbent upon evaluating other university needs and making responsible choices. It also understands that the new strategic plan, once agreed upon and implemented, will influence how the CAP might expand in the future.

However, some firm plans can be made, and they are highlighted below:

April 2017: Advocate, along with the AASRTF, for more courses consistent with Africana Studies and for the creation of an Africana Studies minor.

April 2017: Take first steps in creating the Community Advisory Board.

May 2017: Complete the first grant application that will be sent to a Pittsburgh-area foundation in hopes of obtaining external funds to assist in executing the CAP's goals and plans.

August 2017: Collect data from BMLDI about the 2017-18 cohort; these data will include number of participants, their hometowns and their potential academic interests.

September 2017: Hold first advisory board meeting.

September 2017: Collect data from the Office of Student Life identifying the total 2017-18 freshman class and the number of African-Americans who are part of it.

October 2017: Begin rollout of programs associated with Culturally Responsive Pedagogy. (Events would be held monthly during the academic year.)

Fall 2017: Continue supporting the work of the AASRTF, including guaranteeing that the data that it gathers are shared with the entire university community.

Additional dates and the events associated with the CAP are anticipated but cannot be scheduled at this time.

COMMUNICATION

The RMU CAP committee insists that the university has a positive story to share about the RMU-BMLDI-Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh partnership. That effort is noble: model positive behavior to African-American teenage males and make them understand the importance of getting into college.

The young men from that program who opt to attend RMU will find a similar positive program geared to ensuring they remain at the institution all the way to graduation. The Student Support and Community Outreach Programs office includes what many universities would call their Black Male Initiative program, a coordinated series of formal and informal meetings in which African-American men can share their positive or negative experiences about college. Derrick Brooms' book *Being Black, Being Male on Campus* was provided to members of the AASRTF. It has provided important anecdotal and research-based evidence about such programs.

RMU's CAP committee also recognizes the need to engage more deeply with area communities in which economic opportunity, social mobility, voter participation, civic pride and college graduation rates are low; the residents of these communities must know that opportunities such as BMLDI and Black Male Initiative exist, and these and similar initiatives are powerful forces for young Black men seeking to prosper in college.