

What Black High School Grads Need to Hear

Written by Ivory A. Toldson, Ph.D.
Thursday, 23 May 2013 07:14 -

Show Me the Numbers: Graduation speakers often opt for tough love. Here's what they should say instead.



During a graduation speech this month at Martin Luther King Jr. Academic Magnet High School in Nashville, Tenn., Michelle Obama told students, "When something doesn't go your way, you've just got to adjust. You've got to dig deep and work like crazy, and that's when you'll find out what you're really made of during those hard times. But you can only do that if you're willing to put yourself in a position where you might fail, and that's why so often failure is the key to success."

She used several examples of people -- including her husband, President Barack Obama, and Oprah Winfrey -- to illustrate that triumph is a natural byproduct of adversity.

According to the U.S. census, about 2.6 million black boys and girls attend high schools across the United States. If current trends continue, a little more than 80 percent of the males and 84 percent of the females will complete high school or obtain a GED diploma.

Although the vast majority of black children complete high school, most (pdf) do not complete college. Many first-generation college students have fewer financial, family and community resources to persist through the more challenging aspects of college, such as dealing with financial obligations, meeting academic requirements and finding opportunities for postbaccalaureate life.

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High school graduation speakers meet students at a critical juncture. Many black high school students have persisted through an environment that often felt unwelcoming. Studies show that black students are more likely to attend schools in a high-security environment and less likely to perceive care and respect from their teachers. In addition, most black high school graduates have had to adapt to a racially biased curriculum that undermines their culture's contribution to any field.

Within this context, graduation speakers have a unique opportunity to impart wisdom and inspire postsecondary success among black students by reaffirming black culture and helping black students create a personal narrative of success. Unfortunately, many graduation speakers use the opportunity to denigrate and dispirit black students through a mind-numbing recital of poorly sourced statistics, which imply that, for example, black students have a better chance of going to prison than to college and have a corrupt value system that attributes being smart to "acting white."

These types of speeches elicit a range of emotions from students, ranging from boredom to unease. Students who internalize such messages often conclude that the only path to success is to distance themselves from their peers, community and even their culture.

For this graduation edition of Show Me the Numbers, I offer suggestions to graduation speakers and others, including teachers and parents, who have the attentive ear of one, or more, of our nations' black high school graduates.

Black Graduates Need to Understand Their Greatness

Recently I asked a group of teachers and school administrators if their black students would be more inclined to revere Gen. Andrew Jackson or Gen. Garson. Most of them had not heard of Garson. Garson was a free black man who was the commander of a British outpost known as the "Negro Fort" on Prospect Bluff in Spanish Florida in 1814. After the War of 1812, British troops left the fort to Garson and a militia of about 400 black militiamen.

From the outpost, Garson provided refuge to Africans who had escaped from plantations in Georgia, Alabama and South Carolina. Eventually the militia organized attacks on plantations to rescue other Africans held in slavery. After much angst among Southern plantation owners,

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Jackson illegally sent troops into Spanish-occupied Florida to attack the fort, killing at least 200 free black men, including Garson, by firing squad.

One must acknowledge the humanity of black and Native people to understand that the battle between Garson and Jackson, along with the ensuing Seminole Wars, was a civil war, not unlike the War Between the States. This is only one among hundreds of lessons omitted from black students' curricula. True U.S. history involves black people making a material contribution to the development of this nation as well as to the liberation of black people, often through armed resistance and social diplomacy.

Contrarily, black students are constantly confronted with a cultural mythology in education that embraces historical figures who were complicit in victimizing their ancestors, against a faded backdrop of black victims, bystanders and a few isolated black protagonists. One of my students for life -- a gifted conscious hip-hop artist from Oklahoma named Marcel P. Black -- once told me that he left home to attend college at Southern University before he learned of his home state's legacy of "Black Wall Street."

He firmly believed that if he and his peers had learned their history in school, more of them would have aspired for greatness. Graduation speakers have the ability to help black students realize their prominence by revealing rich information about their legacy. If we want black students to be serious about education, we need to be serious about educating them about who they are.

Black Graduates Need Help Defining Themselves for Themselves

During in-service training for staff members at an inner-city high school, I asked participants to describe the neighborhoods of their students. I heard phrases like "crime-ridden," "broken homes" and "drug-infested." I then asked if anyone had grown up in neighborhoods that were similar to their students'.

After several raised their hands, I asked, "How did you grow up in such a neighborhood and still become successful?" This question spurred a more meaningful dialogue about inner-city neighborhoods that considered community assets, hope and resilience, against a more measured examination of community challenges.

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Black graduates are keenly aware of the problems facing the black community. They are less clear about how to capitalize on the unique opportunities for character building, leadership and civic engagement that germinate in imperfect living situations.

This concept is very difficult for many to grasp who have grown up without struggle. For example, after I told a group of school administrators in a large metro area that they have to impart success within the context of their students' environment, one participant suggested that I was promoting lower standards for black students. She assumed that a "standard" that is unique to the black community is, in essence, "lower." To the contrary, the standard I was suggesting is much higher.

Western culture imposes a value on avoiding problem behaviors and disconnecting from undesirable circumstances. This is reflected in the rather guileless advice we give to teenagers to "stay away from the wrong crowd" -- a near-impossible objective for children in densely populated communities.

Few black students from tough environments will define success in terms of isolating themselves from their peers to prepare themselves for a distant agenda. A standard of success for most black youths would be to influence their peers rather than avoid them, and work to better their communities rather than disconnect. From this view, assessing their success through standardized tests is impossible.

The standards of success for many black students are learning with purpose, applying knowledge to the real world, creative problem solving and verbal acumen. Therefore, when a black student asks, "What does this have to do with me?" when confronted with a difficult subject in school, he or she genuinely needs an accurate response. Graduation speakers can help black students redefine their personal and cultural standards of success so that education can become less passive and abstract and more affirming and relevant.

Black Graduates Need to See Us for Who We Really Are

I recently had the honor of sharing a panel with Raymond Lucas, an executive at a

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youth-development nonprofit, and president of 100 Black Men of Maryland. I was humbled when he told the audience that my research had influenced him to revise his speeches to black students. He said that he abandoned the trite statistics and chose to focus on what had motivated him to beat the odds. This strategy helped him develop a deeper connection with his listeners.

I also use this strategy. Last February I delivered a keynote address entitled, "You Have the Right to Remain Educated" for the Wisconsin Association of Black Men at the University of Wisconsin. About 20 black male teenagers from Urban Prep Academies traveled from Chicago to participate in the program.

After my speech, a senior at Urban Prep enthusiastically embraced me and said, "I go to church every Sunday, and I've never felt like this ... You woke up something in me, and I'm ready to be heard!" I was humbled to receive such accolades from the teenager, and elated that my words had inspired him to tell his own story.

In many ways, we are selected to be graduation speakers for all the wrong reasons. Our material success gives people the illusion that our lives are, and always have been, perfect. To the contrary, most of us who have achieved success have endured many uncertain, disorderly and painful periods. However, as quantum scientists suggest, chaos is the natural order of life, from which all things perfect spring forth. From that perspective, the mission of a graduation speaker is not to impose order on imperfect lives but to clarify the very essence of success.

As Michelle Obama said, "Often, failure is the key to success." I was designated a "slow learner" in the fourth grade. I graduated from a public high school in Baton Rouge, La., that was marred by drugs and violence during a significant portion of my high school years. I consistently scored within the 20th percentile or less on every standardized test I took, including the ACT and the GRE. So I proclaim "happy graduation" to the Class of 2013, from a man who is successful not despite the blemishes of his past but because of them.

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