The History of Minority Services and Programs at 10th Anniversary

Out of a desire to address the concerns of African American students at the University of Georgia, representatives from the Presidential Minority Advisory Committee: Maurice Daniels, Bryndis Roberts, Louise Tomlinson, Norman Harris, Kathryn Davis and staff member Vanessa Williams Smith and two representatives from the Black Affairs Council; Charlita Stephens Walker and Benjamin Roundtree met with then President Charles Knapp to establish the African American Cultural Center. However, with the aid and support of Dr. Dwight Douglas, then Vice-President of Student Affairs, the Department of Minority Services and Programs was formed with as one of its main goals to open the African American Cultural Center.

The mission statement: to enhance the University’s environment by promoting student leadership and academic achievement, to celebrate the contribution and heritage of UGA’s diverse population and to encourage the full participation of African Americans, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, Native Americans, Faculty, Staff and students in campus life, demonstrated the commitment it would have to the University of Georgia and the community.

Minority Services and Programs (MSP) operated in September, 1989 under the direction of Assistant Director, Vanessa Williams Smith until an appropriate director could be found. After careful search, Dr. Leslie K. Bates, who served as the Associate Dean of Students at East Michigan University, was chosen as the first director of MSP. With Vanessa Williams Smith as his second in command, Dr. Bates embarked on the establishment of not only the MSP as a viable department at the University of Georgia (UGA), but also the structuring and designing of the African American Cultural Center. It was the dream of the Director to not only embrace the African American community of students at UGA, but to
have all minorities welcomed and embraced in the MSP department. As director, he was also charged with providing training, advising education and development of minority student organizational leaders, and coordination of minority student retention programs. For anyone else, this may have been a “full plate”; however, Dr. Bates used his skills of persuasion to obtain adequate funding to fully staff his office with personnel that were well-qualified for their positions and those who shared the vision of the new department. In an effort to put into practice his mission to be inclusive of all minorities, Dr. Bates hired several minorities to work in the department at all levels.

It goes without saying that the first few years were not completely smooth sailing, but from the very beginning, Minority Services and Programs would be a force to reckon with on the campus. The student groups of Black Affairs Council (BAC), Pamoja (dance troop) and The Black Theatrical Ensemble (BTE) were independent organizations at the University until the formation of the MSP department. These groups would now fall under its advisement. Another group established at that time, The African American Choral Ensemble, was not put under the MSP umbrella, but was moved to the Music School. Realizing that retention of minority students would be a major factor in the life of the department, a peer education mentoring organization was formed. Black Educational Support Team (B.E.S.T.) would work with students, particularly incoming freshmen to help them adjust to college life. The following organizations were formed and functioned under MSP:

- **Black Affairs Council**, (BAC) and advocacy organization seeking to address concerns and meet the needs of the African American student population.
- **Black Theatrical Ensemble** (BTE) to provide cultural enrichment and an opportunity for African American writers, directors, and actors to get experience in theatre.
- **Pamoja**, to provide expression through the art of dance and interpretation.
- **Black Educational Support Team**, (B.E.S.T) peer mentoring support with a concentration of first year students.
- **The Asian American Student Association** (AASA) established in 1991 to address the needs and concerns of students of Asian American decent.
- **The Hispanic Student Association**, to provide cultural enrichment and an awareness of the contributions of Spanish Americans and to provide a forum to voice their concerns and successes at UGA.
Dr. Bates created the Leadership Development, Educating students about UGA, Academic Success, and Diversity programming. L.E.A.D. which would become the very heart of the philosophy of MSP. Under Leadership Development students would be given the opportunity to sharpen the skills needed to be positive leaders. Educating students about UGA would result in the creation of the “Cross Cultures News Magazine.” Academic Success would entail the sponsoring and co-sponsoring of activities such as ProAct, which provided computerized access to students concerning careers, networking, scholarships, and graduate school. Also the formation of the “Rising Junior” program. This forum was designed to prepare students for upper division challenges. Diversity would highlight the history of the various groups on campus. Programs such as Multi-Racial UGA, Black History quarter and the Hispanic Coordinator, a position within the department of MSP, would aid in the shared communication of all persons of color.

Minority Services and Programs would be the voice on many issues confronting minority students. In 1991, for example, Dr. Norman Harris resigned his position as the Director of African American Studies. MSP’s voice echoed the sentiment felt by the students and professional staff at the apparent disinterest on the part of the UGA Administration to support this type of academic programming for students of color. After many debates, the History Department hired Dr. John Morrow as its Director. Dr. Morrow was the first to hold such a high position in the 190 years of the university’s existence. MSP was also instrumental in the establishment of the Black History Quarter. This event would be an extension of the annual Black History Month celebration from just a month to encompass and entire quarter. Activities and events included a Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Service, Student March and the visitation from many noteworthy professors and speakers. All of the organizations under MSP were thriving and creating various programs and events to support the department’s mission and vision. Another noteworthy accomplishment of MSP would be the reactivation of the academic honor society Abeneefoo Kuo (ABK). ABK would recognize the very talented amongst the minority students at the
university. To be eligible for ABK, a student must have a 3.0 grade point average and have spent at least two semesters at UGA. While Dr. Bates and Vanessa Smith diligently worked with students, they were also involved with one of their main objectives, the design and establishment of the African American Cultural Center.

The African American Cultural Center was opened in January, 1995 with Mrs. Kimberly Johnson-Thomas as its first Coordinator. During its early years, the African American Cultural Center (Cultural Center) sponsored many programs and events. The mission of the Cultural Center is to create an environment of cultural growth, sensitivity and appreciation of African American history and contributions of the African Diaspora. The Cultural Center hosed the African American Diaspora Lecture Series, Liberation Lecture Series, Artist in Residence Program, Pamoja Dance Company, Black Theatrical Ensemble and other exhibits from local, national, and international artists.

**Dedicated, Determined, and a New Director**

In 1998, Dr Leslie K. Bates resigned from his position as Director of MSP. His was a legacy of hardwork and untiring efforts to improve life for students of color at the University. With many of his goals met, Dr. Bates left the University of Georgia to further his career as the Dean of Students at Florida Atlantic University. Also in that same year, Ms. Joi Bostic resigns her position as the Coordinator of the Cultural Center to spend time with her family.

Once again, Vanessa Williams Smith becomes the Acting Director of MSP while these two very important positions are filled. The director of MSP would be Dr. Sherwood Thompson who had served as the Director of Minority Affairs at the University of Kansas and Kimberly Roberts would become the Coordinator of the Cultural Center.

Dr. Thompson has already begun to develop new programs and initiatives to continue the mission and
purpose of the Minority Services and Programs Department. One initiative is the Research Center on Ethnic Minorities in Higher Education. This center will conduct research and search for ways to maintain educational access for minority students at the University of Georgia. The research activities of this Center will assist the Office of Minority Services and Programs in addressing contemporary issues of concern to ethnic minority members of the campus and community. Funds to support this Center are being sought and participation from Alumni and the community will be greatly appreciated. With one year of success already behind him, Dr Thompson will embark on the new millennium full of vision for MSP, Cultural Center, Student body, Faculty and Staff, and continue to provide exceptional service for all minorities and the UGA community. In the spring of 2001 Dr. Sherwood Thompson left the University of Georgia.

The history of Minority Services and Programs and the African American Cultural Center is representative of the many persons who have contributed to it. Many of these have since gone from the University to pursue brilliant careers and professions. Some of those persons are:

- Thomas Glanton, Educator
- Courtney Penn, Administrator
- Dr. Janice Taylor, Director of Retention at the University of Akron
- Adrian Patrick, Esq.
- Dendroll Graham, Marketing
- Amyra Shaheed, National Account Manager with Phillip Morris
- Jocelyn Waters-Brannon, Community Education Coordinator, Charleston, SC
- Monya Ruffin, Doctoral Student
- Artis Stevens, Housing Authority in Atlanta
- Gerry Williams, Esq.

The bricks of progress that have been laid over the past ten years is by no means intended to represent an exhaustive history of the voices that have worked hard to bring them to this juncture. Indeed it represents the legacy of those who will continue to build the bridge for others to cross over and obtain their Rites of Passage. The bridge is still being laid, brick by brick for the next generation to embrace,
scale and cross. MSP and AACC will always serve as the mortar to help hold the bricks together.