

Black student excellence springs from historic inequalities

UNM offers resources to help students succeed

By Mary Beth King © August 07, 2020

Categories: [Front Page \(/categories/front-page?c=26410\)](/categories/front-page?c=26410)
[College of Arts & Sciences \(/schools/arts?c=20151\)](/schools/arts?c=20151) [Latest News \(/categories/latest-news?c=20230\)](/categories/latest-news?c=20230) [Student Success \(/news?c=20261\)](/news?c=20261)
[Africana Studies \(/schools/arts/africana-studies?c=20263\)](/schools/arts/africana-studies?c=20263) [Division of Equity & Inclusion \(/news?c=20269\)](/news?c=20269)
[Fraternities and Sororities \(/news?c=22018\)](/news?c=22018) [African American](#)

Student Services (/news?c=23488) Equity & Inclusion (/news?c=27606)

From the moment the first African slaves were brought to the shores of Virginia and sold to the colonists there in 1619, the battle for education for African-Americans has been hard-fought and often cruel. As the groundbreaking New York Times 1619 (<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/1619-america-slavery.html>) series points out, “In the history of the United States, Black Americans were the only group for whom it was ever illegal to learn to read or write. And so when emancipation finally came, schools and colleges were some of the first institutions that the freed people clamored to build. Black Americans believed that education meant liberation... [Today’s graduates] represent nothing less than their ancestors’ wildest dreams.”

After the Civil War, African-Americans could attend school, under-resourced as they were, with few teachers or books, packed classrooms, and lack of funding. The struggle since then has been a vicious one: segregated schools, the Civil Rights movement that brought about integrated schools, not enough Black teachers who understand the challenges experienced by Black students, materials that focus on European-American white male history, lack of curriculum that embraces the African-American experience, disproportionate school discipline sanctions, and various societal disparities. There has been progress since those first Reconstruction Era schools but many of the challenges remain. The dangerous and visceral experience of systemic racism in society persists.

The concept of the pursuit of excellence by Black students is powerful throughout the nation, as well as on the campus of The University of New Mexico.

Brandi Stone, the director of UNM African American Student Services (<https://afro.unm.edu/>) (AASS) and Special Advisor to the President on African American Affairs, echoed the 1619 Project, noting, “It is one of our ancestor’s wildest dreams. Education is knowledge and power and liberation. It is a privilege that comes with a responsibility to give back, do better, and protect and expand our spaces.”

Originally from Edgewood, N.M., Stone earned her bachelor’s and master’s degrees at UNM. “I came to UNM because of the lottery scholarship and stayed at UNM because of the opportunities I was provided.”

Stone started as a work-study student in African American Student Services as an undergrad and was asked to stay on as a professional intern while going to grad school, an opportunity that allowed her to “flourish and find my passion in student affairs.”

“Black excellence is both a mindset and a continuous action to progress our community through various approaches, education being one of them.”

Brandi Stone, director of the UNM African American Student Services



Brandi Stone, director of African American Student Services

“Black excellence is both a mindset and a continuous action to progress our community through various approaches, education being one of them,” Stone continued. “So given this lens, Black scholars pursuing excellence for me means that we have scholars who are flourishing into their authentic, unapologetic selves while also learning and developing new ways to push our community forward.”

“To not pursue excellence means to be complacent with being average, and for Black civilians in the United States, being ordinary could be problematic when trying to make advancement in all aspects,” mused Miles Blakemore, a UNM senior from Albuquerque, majoring in Public Communication and Africana Studies. “To pursue excellence, you can create the most opportunities not only for yourself, but you can lay down the foundation of a legacy for others to follow.”

“Black scholars must uphold a legacy of past Black scholars that came before them and create avenues of new opportunities for future Black scholars coming to higher education for not only better life for themselves, but to dismantle all stereotypical rhetoric and actions associated with being a Black person in the United States.”

Miles Blakemore, UNM student



Blakemore is actively involved in the Black Student Union (<https://afro.unm.edu/black-student-alliance/black-student-union.html>) and Black Student Alliance and is a member of the Tau Sigma Chapter (<http://unmtsalphas.weebly.com/chapter.html>) of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. (<https://afro.unm.edu/black-greeks/alpha-phi-alpha-fraternity.html>) He hopes to use his degree as an avenue to become a broadcaster and journalist.

“The pursuit of excellence is essential to me, as it helps and motivates me to keep moving forward,” Blakemore continued. “These values have been instilled in me since I was a child by my mother, Maura, and father, Stacey. Although I’ve had great tools to help me throughout his pursuit, my tools were

enhanced when I began attending the University of New Mexico, and getting involved with multiple Black leaders and organizations around campus.”

“Something my step-mom told me is that I will have to work two times harder than the average person because I am a woman and I am a woman of color. It is a through line for every young person of color. It drives me daily.”

Amber Trujillo-McClure, Ed.D. candidate

Like Blakemore, Amber Trujillo-McClure had the value to pursue excellence instilled in her since she was young. Trujillo-McClure had dreams of being a cosmetologist but “that was completely out of the question.”

“Being raised by academics of color during the Seventies and Eighties framed my personal academic journey. My earliest memories were of waiting for my parents, then grad students, on the children’s floor of the UNM library. They were a biracial, Black and Hispanic couple raising a biracial, Hispanic and white child just a few short years after the Loving Decision [the Civil Rights decision that allowed interracial marriages].”

“Literally everything we were about as a family was framed by academia. There was no room for activities outside of higher education. It was the singular North Star that guided my childhood. Academic achievement was framed as the only way to rise above poverty, socio-economic challenges, and racial inequality,” recalled Trujillo-McClure, whose father and stepmother got their master’s degrees in counseling at UNM and had long careers as professors. Her biological mother has a master’s degree in nursing. “There are statistics showing the black women hold the most advanced degrees. This mirrors the voice of so many matriarchs of color... Something my step-mom told me is that I will have to work two times harder than the average person because I am a woman and I am a woman of color. It is a through-line for every young person of color. It drives me daily.”

“When we embrace Black student excellence we all benefit from the rich experiences and knowledge of the African diaspora for generations to come.”

Rodney Bowe, director, UNM Men of Color Initiative

“The African diaspora and other people of color have faced historical and contemporary systemic barriers in our society. Blacks continually rise above the challenges to impact the bar by setting trends and continually creating and innovating. Black student excellence is perpetuated by faculty, staff, and students that look like them bringing their collective experiences to promote, teach, and support Black excellence. Black student excellence not only transforms the Black community but tremendously influences the world in so many positive ways,” observed Rodney Bowe, director of the UNM Men of Color Initiative (<https://menofcolor.unm.edu/who-we-are.html>) at the Division for Equity and Inclusion (<https://diverse.unm.edu/>).

Students, faculty, and administrators at UNM strive to make a place and provide resources for Black students to not only graduate, but to excel.

“What I think makes Black excellence at UNM a different experience is that Black students are the ‘minority of the minority,’ Stone observed. “The experience for them matriculating at our institution presents a unique set of challenges and opportunities and we want to emphasize that cultivating Black excellence at UNM is truly a community-oriented approach. Collectively, we want to make sure that they know their voice matters, their intellect is needed, and all they are doing to pursue their degree and advance knowledge is worth it and that our community as well as the larger Albuquerque Black community is rooting for them.”

There are many programs and resources to help Black students in their pursuit of excellence.

Fifty years ago, a Black studies program was started at UNM in a time when Black studies programs were rare. Students were clamoring for something more than programs built around white, European-descended men and it was a volatile period on campuses at UNM and across the country. The Black Student Union at UNM played a key role in pushing UNM to create space for Black intellectuals on campus. At this time Black Studies and African American Student Services existed as one unit, Stone noted.

Charles Becknell (<http://news.unm.edu/news/first-africana-studies-director-rises-from-segregation-to-become-educator-author-activist-pastor>) was selected to start the program because he had a master’s degree and had studied Black history – taught by a white professor – at Columbia University. Starting the UNM program was a mighty challenge. There was no academic blueprint for a Black studies program and resources were limited. Due to a dearth of professionals available with Black studies backgrounds in 1969, Becknell also became a teacher, counselor, advisor, and ombudsman.

Africana Studies (<https://africanastudies.unm.edu/>), as it is now called, “uses a critical Africana philosophy and worldview to investigate African descended peoples’ experiences from the perspective of their interests, aspirations, possibilities and envisioned destinies.” The UNM program founded by Becknell is now helmed by the founder’s son, Charles Becknell Jr.

In the 1980s, AASS became a separate student services unit with a focus on enhancing the Black student experience through various cultural programs and services. Today, AASS continues to provide many services for Black students, as well as a channel to other resources around campus.

“Our vision in African American Student Services is to cultivate Black excellence. Our approach to this work means that we are intentional about creating spaces and centering Blackness and all of its intersectionality in all of our work such as educational discourse, leadership development, holistic health and wellness practices, and community engagement. Everything the AASS promotes is through the lens of Black excellence,” Stone said.

“Cultivating Black excellence in scholars means giving them the tools and foundation to make a difference and an impact in our community. More importantly, allowing them to do so in their

AASS services include...

own ways based on their field of study, interests, talents, and skillsets. It looks different for all but it benefits us as a whole,” she added.

“Most definitely UNM helps me pursue my excellence,” Blakemore said. “The African American Student Services and the Africana Studies program have been vital in helping me. Brandi Stone has always been there for me since I arrived on campus and continues to be an advocate for my success, as does the director of Africana Studies, Charles Becknell. As far as professors, the two that stand out to me to inspire me to pursue excellence are Finnie Coleman (<http://news.unm.edu/news/meaning-behind-the-movement-black-lives-matter>) and Jamal Martin (<http://news.unm.edu/news/transformational-education-as-the-key-to-dismantling-racism>). Both professors have provided me with the tools to achieve excellence and continue to help guide me to get to my goals.”

- A supportive space that allows for students to study, congregate, and create community as they participate in academic, cultural, and social programs;
- Academic advising (<https://afro.unm.edu/services/index.html>) and financial aid assistance;
- Advocacy and liaison (<https://afro.unm.edu/services/advocacy-and-liaison.html>) to other student centers and academic departments;
- Employment (<https://afro.unm.edu/services/employment.html>) scholarship, work-study, and internship opportunities, and;
- Tutoring (<https://afro.unm.edu/services/tutoring.html>)

MOCI, led by Bowe, focuses on educational success and the well-being of men of color. MOCI is driven by students organizing together with campus and community partners to increase access and success for men of color in education.

“Men of Color Initiative does this by understanding the barriers – as well as the successes – and providing tools and resources for students to understand who they are and who they can be as they strive to be the best they can be in their educational and social endeavors. Additionally, and most importantly, by connecting students and collaborating with other individuals, offices, and departments on campus such as African American Student Services,” Bowe said.

Blakemore noted that to be a black scholar on any college campus isn't easy, and at times the pressure to do well can be overwhelming. “Even with this, the pursuit of excellence in Black scholars is essential... Black scholars must uphold a legacy of past Black scholars that came before them and create avenues of new opportunities for future Black scholars coming to higher education for not only better life for themselves, but to dismantle all stereotypical rhetoric and actions associated with being a Black person in the United States.”

“When we embrace Black student excellence we all benefit from the rich experiences and knowledge of the African diaspora for generations to come. We are able to tackle the concerns of our society from a broader and more diverse perspective,” Bowe observed.

“Black Excellence is you and it is me and it is us existing in these spaces; and we are all here to support you, root for you, and help you accomplish your goals,” Stone concluded.

Author's note...

My profound gratitude to Brandi Stone, Rodney Bowe, Miles Blakemore, Amber Trujillo-McClure, Dr. Charles Becknell Sr., and Dr. Charles Becknell Jr. for their insights and perspectives and sharing their stories.

Racism: An Educational Series (previous stories)

- The complicated history of environmental racism (<http://news.unm.edu/news/the-complicated-history-of-environmental-racism>) - Aug. 4
- Recognizing anti-blackness in media and other institutions (<http://news.unm.edu/news/recognizing-anti-blackness-in-media-and-other-institutions>) - July 31
- Transformative education as the key to dismantling racism (<http://news.unm.edu/news/transformative-education-as-the-key-to-dismantling-racism>) - July 24
- Addressing new forms of racism Part II: Preventing Microaggressions (<http://news.unm.edu/news/addressing-new-forms-of-racism-part-ii-preventing-microaggressions>) - July 21
- Addressing new forms of racism Part I: Defining Microaggressions (<http://news.unm.edu/news/addressing-new-forms-of-racism-part-i-defining-microaggressions>) - July 17
- Identifying, understanding and combatting complex inequality (<http://news.unm.edu/news/identifying-understanding-and-combatting-complex-inequality>) - July 10
- Conversation with the Becknells: Careers, Racism and Black Lives Matter (<http://news.unm.edu/news/conversation-with-the-becknells-careers-racism-and-black-lives-matter>) - July 3
- Meaning Behind the Movement: Black Lives Matter (<http://news.unm.edu/news/meaning-behind-the-movement-black-lives-matter>) - June 26
- Learning from the Past: A Brief Historical Background (<http://news.unm.edu/news/learning-from-the-past-a-brief-historical-background>) - June 19

Tags: **Men of Color Initiative** (</news?t=Men+of+Color+Initiative>) **Racism: An Educational Series** (</news?t=Racism:+An+Educational+Series>) **African American Affairs** (</news?t=African+American+Affairs>) **Black student excellence** ([#BlackLivesMatter">/news?t=Black+student+excellence](/news?t=Black+student+excellence)) **#BlackLivesMatter** ([#BlackLivesMatter](/news?t=#BlackLivesMatter)) **Blackness** (</news?t=Blackness>)

Media Contact**Mary Beth King**

(505) 277-5754

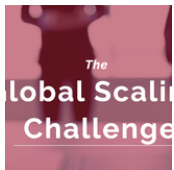
mbuk2005@unm.edu (mailto:mbuk2005@unm.edu)

Related News



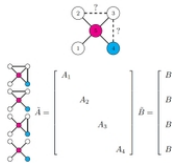
UNM plans outdoor commencement at University Stadium (</news/unm-plans-outdoor-commencement-at-university-stadium>)

(</news/unm-plans-outdoor-commencement-at-university-stadium>)



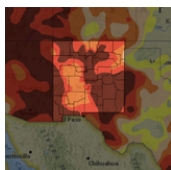
UNM Anderson School of Management hosts inaugural Global Scaling Challenge (</news/unm-anderson-school-of-management-hosts-inaugural-global-scaling-challenge>)

(</news/unm-anderson-school-of-management-hosts-inaugural-global-scaling-challenge>)



More control, less energy: UNM engineers develop a new theoretical strategy (</news/more-control-less-energy-unm-engineers-develop-a-new-theoretical-strategy>)

(</news/more-control-less-energy-unm-engineers-develop-a-new-theoretical-strategy>)



UNM teams up with international researchers to study snowmelt (/news/unm-teams-up-with-international-researchers-to-study-snowmelt)

(/news/unm-teams-up-with-international-researchers-to-study-snowmelt)

✓ **APPLY** Now ([//www.unm.edu/apply](http://www.unm.edu/apply))

📅 **Visit** UNM (<http://admissions.unm.edu/Pages/visit-us.html>)

🎁 **Give** to UNM (<http://unmfund.org>)

(<http://www.unm.edu>)

© The University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, NM 87131, (505) 277-0111
New Mexico's Flagship University

 (<https://www.facebook.com/universityofnewmexico>)  (<http://instagram.com/uofnm>)

 (<https://twitter.com/unm>)  (<http://uofnm.tumblr.com>)  (<http://www.youtube.com/user/unmlive>)

more at social.unm.edu (<http://social.unm.edu>)

Website Comments (<mailto:unmnews@unm.edu>) Accessibility (<http://www.unm.edu/accessibility.html>)

Legal (<http://www.unm.edu/legal.html>) Contact UNM (<http://www.unm.edu/contactunm.html>)

New Mexico Higher Education Dashboard (<http://nmhedss2.state.nm.us/Dashboard/index.aspx?ID=21>)

