



Diverse Blog

The Academy Speaks

with Dr. James Ewers

Members of the academy offer insight into current events and higher education issues that impact people of color.

Being Black, Male and Educated in Today's World

by Dr. James Ewers, August 21, 2008

There are far too many black males being portrayed as useless citizens in our society. We see pictures of us being sent to jail or being expelled from school. Some of us still turn a blind eye to what is going on around us. The CNN Special, "Black in America" pointed out that African Americans make up 13 percent of the population, yet we commit 49 percent of the homicides. That statistic should send a sobering message to all of us, black and white, who see ourselves as difference-makers. Obviously, we as African Americans have come a long way since the days of segregation. While our gains educationally have been significant, we still have a very long way to go. The achievement gap, according to some, has increased between black children and white children. Some of this achievement gap data is being played out every day. Recently, I went to the public library to check out some books and made a casual observation about who was in the library. While some may disagree, there is more value in some African American homes placed on an Xbox and a Nintendo Wii than getting a library card and using it. It doesn't matter how proficient your child is on either game as the more compelling question is, can they pass the third grade proficiency test? I don't have anything against these games. However they can't be put ahead of education. We can't undo the past yet we can be better forecasters about the future of our young African American boys if we become more proactive. Educating African American boys might arguably be the single greatest priority in our communities. The biggest piece in this educational equation is that education must be viewed as invaluable in our quest for success. It can't be seen as a maybe but should be seen as a must! National statistics show that

young black boys are more likely to be suspended or expelled before completing high school than any other group. There are some factors that have led to this statistic being what it is. First, a dearth of successful African American role models has contributed to young male students not seeing enough of us and they therefore think dreaming big dreams is out of the question. Therefore invariably when you ask a young African American boy what he wants to do, he will give you the name of a sports star or a music star. As a product of the legitimate old school, I knew as much about Dr. King, Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall and Whitney Young as I did Jim Brown, Willie Mays and Jessie Owens. Maybe we need to invest in copies of Jet, Essence and Ebony so that our boys can see successful African American males in business, the military, education, law and medicine. Behavior has also contributed to this dilemma. Fighting and destroying school property only creates a negative opinion about young black males. Simply put, knowing how to comport yourself will put you in a favorable position with the education community. Another factor is the lack of diversity training in many of our school systems. There are teachers who are simply ill-equipped to interact successfully with young black males. It is my thinking that diversity training should be mandated for every school system. Valuing education means talking about it in our homes, then our boys will have an increased chance to become an educated black male. Of course being black, male and educated brings on increased responsibility and opportunity. If you have these three characteristics, you have a chance to be a change agent each day. For those of us who are blessed to have a college degree it means that we must do more. Here are two ways of thinking about being black, male and educated. I believe the vast majority of people will give us the respect that we have earned. I would like to believe that our opinions about matters of the day are valued and valuable. On the other side are those who fear us because of our color, our maleness and our education. We become instant threats to some who are unwilling to accept us because we bring new ideas and inclusion to the process. Maybe in the end that is the dual role for those of us who are black, male and educated; that is, we are both respected and feared. Dr. Ewers is the associate dean for student affairs and director of community partnerships at Miami University Middletown in Ohio. He is the author of Perspectives From Where I Sit: Essays on Education, Parenting and Teen Issues.