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EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

## TRUTH IN LOVE

### Literacy, Learning, and Leadership: *How African American Males Study, Graduate from Predominantly White Institutions of Higher Education*

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and A'Darius S. Porter  
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One summer afternoon when I was 15 years-old, my grandmother Shirley Mae Brown Baker put a book in front of me and asked a simple but profound question, “Would you risk your life to read this book?” With a huge whimsical smile and a hint of agitation and arrogance in my voice I replied without hesitation, “Naw, I wouldn’t do that. That’s dumb!”

If you’re an OG,<sup>[1]</sup> you know what happened next. And if you’re an IG, you don’t have a clue. Her hands had the dexterity of Frederic Chopin and the strength of George Foreman. Most Black folks in Erie and family and friends from Laurel, Mississippi called her “Ms. Shurl.” Her grandchildren lovingly called her “Gram.” For decades, Gram played piano for Second Baptist Church and for any other church congregation that needed a pianist. She was a self-taught musician, with an eighth-grade education. Shirley Mae was not allowed to complete her high school education.

Anti-literacy laws – regulations that made it illegal for Black people to learn to read and write or for anyone to provide literacy education – were established primarily to preserve the institution of slavery. Slave owners were afraid that education would lead to ideations of liberation. From 1740 to 1834, anti-literacy

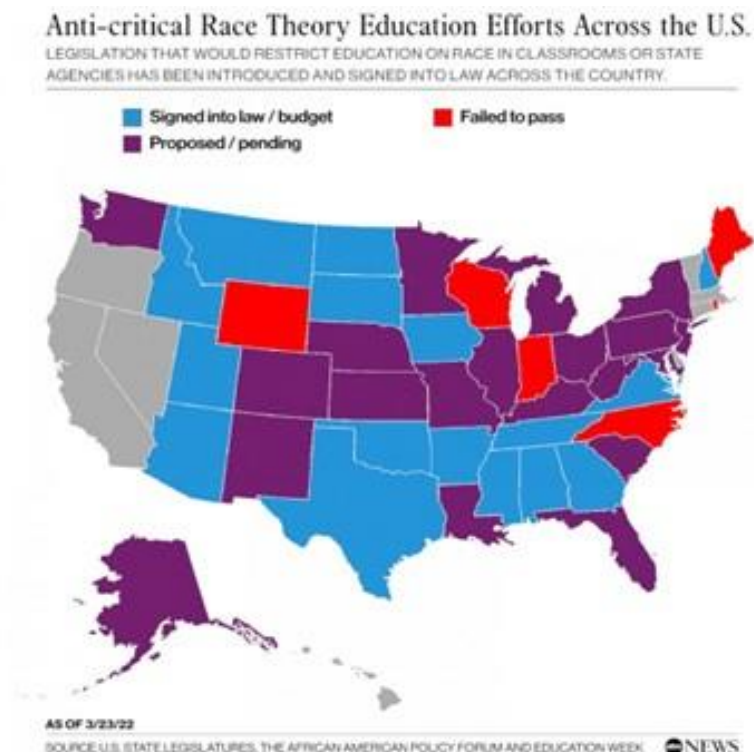
legislation was passed in most southern states. Here is an example of an anti-literacy law, enacted in Georgia in 1829:

And be it further enacted, That if any slave, negro, or free person of colour, or any white person, shall teach any other slave, negro, or free person of colour, to read or write either written or printed characters, the said free person of colour or slave shall be punished by fine and whipping, or fine or whipping at the discretion of the court; and if a white person so offending, he, she, or they shall be punished with a fine, not exceeding five hundred dollars, and imprisonment in the common jail at the discretion of the court before whom said offender is tried.

Constitutional legislation such as *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896)<sup>[2]</sup> ruled that separate public facilities did not discriminate unlawfully (Separate, But Equal Doctrine). Jim Crow laws sanctioned the enforcement of limited or no education for black people in America. With the passage of the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954) decision, which prohibited the segregation of public schools based on race, as well as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, some believed the barriers of discrimination had been destroyed. However, racism is resolute and resilient.

[1] Urban Dictionary. OG is slang for “Original Gangster, Original, or Old School. IG is short for “I guess” or Instagram, depending on the context.

[2] Justia, U.S. Supreme Court. *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896). [Here](#)



In today's ecosystems of cancellation, cultism, and censorship, there are numerous co-conspirators who are aligned with the ideology of anti-literacy laws. Currently, 70% of America (35 of the 50 states) have passed laws or introduced legislation to ban or restrict Critical Race Theory (CRT), race-based education, and ban books, speech, and curricula that contain content determined to be offensive and unsuitable. Recently, the U.S. Supreme Court repealed affirmative action with new legislation that prohibits any public or private university or college that receives federal funding from utilizing race as part of their holistic admission criteria.[3] Former Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas[4] asserted, "Restriction of free thought and free speech is the most dangerous of all subversions. It is the one un-American act that could most easily defeat us."

For African Americans, the historic and contemporary challenges to become literate in the U.S. have been daunting. Recognizing that literacy is a path to liberation, many educators and social and political activists, both black and white, dedicated their lives, some even lost their lives, to building education facilities, training teachers, and opposing oppressive and racist policies. This is why Gram nearly knocked my head off.

"Boy, you don't know your history! You do not have the right to say no to any opportunity to read and to learn. The cost was too high, and many paid the price. And so will you!" Humbled by her words, I recognized the pain in my head is now a persistent ache in my heart. Professor Gram, with a Ph.D. from the "University of Hard-Knocks," gave me an important and necessary lesson in Black history that summer afternoon.

Though many of the anti-literacy laws were repealed, Black students across the nation were still not wanted or welcomed in most white schools. Structural racism segregated most religious and education institutions and created multiple barriers for educating and training Black students. The *Brown v. Board of Education* decision was believed to have eliminated or mitigated the impact of racial discrimination and other barriers against Black people. It declared racially segregated schools to be unconstitutional and inherently unequal. This legal suasion did little to soften the hardened hearts of segregationists.

[3] *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College*, Certiorari to the United States Court of Appeals for the First Circuit. 20 – 1199 (June 29, 2023). [Here](#)

[4] Associate Justice of the Supreme Court, William O. Douglas (served on the Supreme Court from 1939-1975), appointed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, is regarded as one of the most progressive and liberal justices to serve on the U.S. Supreme Court. Part of his talk to the Authors Guild upon receiving the Lauterbach Award in New York, December 3, 1951.



In reality, the Brown decision infuriated many white Americans, particularly Southern whites. Defiant white segregationists developed strategies of massive resistance that included physical, economical, legal intimidation tactics, all designed to demoralize and derail civil right efforts. In 1957, the refusal of Little Rock Central High School administrators to admit Black students

to the all-white high school, the hostilities and aggression demonstrated by members of the white community, and Gov. Orval Faubus' decision to activate the Arkansas National Guard to deny entry of nine Black students to the high school all foreshadowed the problems of integrated education systems.

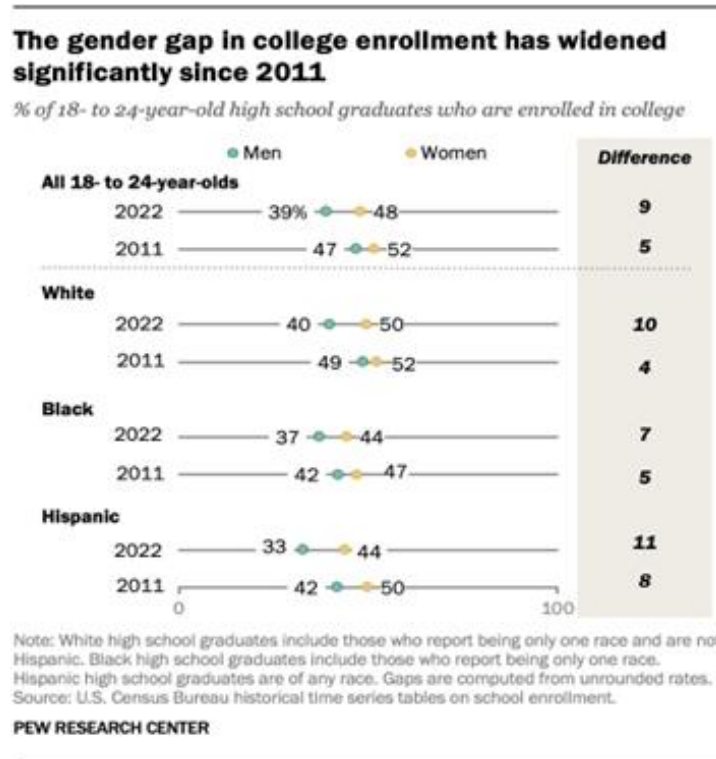
In April 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education reported that even with innovative educational policies designed to narrow the achievement gap between Black and white students, educational disparities and inequities persist for Black students and other students of color. The public education systems were failing to provide quality education to students of color. Black students who graduated high school and were academically eligible to attend college found few opportunities in institutions of higher education (IHEs). Most IHEs restricted admission by enforcing race-based enrollment criteria. Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) were founded to provide undergraduate and graduate level education for Black students. HBCUs presented students of African descent an environment that was safe and supportive, displayed student acceptance, a sense of belonging, and nurtured community altruism. HBCUs also believed in the right of Black students to be educated, established standards of excellence in academic achievement, and provided the impulsion for each student to exceed those standards.

With the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, greater utilization of the education benefits of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (GI Bill of Rights), and the increased recruitment and enrollment of Black male student athletes, predominantly white institutions (PWI) faced numerous retention and graduation challenges regarding Black students. Black students reported experiencing individual and institutional [5]

Dr. A'Darius Porter, a recent graduate of Gannon University's Organizational Learning and Leadership Doctoral Program also credits his grandmother Shirley Gales and his Auntie Tonia Kyles for providing the necessary "tough love" that fueled his faith, tenacity, and perseverance to complete his doctoral journey.

Dr. Porter’s dissertation<sup>[6]</sup> focuses on the challenges of Black males on predominantly white institutions and identified factors associated with their successful matriculation and graduation. Given the decreased number of students attending colleges and universities and specifically Black males (see the Pew Research Center<sup>[7]</sup> table below), his work becomes a relevant resource for local PWIs to utilize.

- [5] Haywood, J. L., & Payne, T. B. (2017). Meritocracy or Hypocrisy: Microaggressive Perceptions of Black Athletes at Predominately White Institutions. *Race, Gender & Class*, 24(3-4), 132-144. [Here](#)
- [6] Porter, A. S. (2023). Navigating Success: Factors Influencing the Matriculation and Graduation of Black Male Students Attending Predominantly White Institutions in Higher Education. Unpublished Dissertation. Erie, PA: Gannon University.
- [7] Fry, R. (December 18, 2023). Fewer young men are in college, especially at 4-year schools. *Pew Research Center*. Washington, DC. [Here](#)



Results of Dr. Porter’s study suggest that when Black male students (1) recognize their situation (identify the environment protective and risk factors), (2) receive institutional support, (3) are involved on campus with culturally relevant activities, and (4) understand and positively embrace their student identity as being Black attending a predominantly white institution, there is a greater probability of success. Moreover, participants in his study reported how the integration of one’s “blackness and maleness” into predominantly white spaces posed significant challenges to existing symbols of white standards. Black male

students having a sense of wariness of the ecology was vital to their successful matriculation.

For additional information regarding his dissertation, Dr. Porter can be reached at Gannon University: A'Darius Porter, Ph.D. Director, Residence Life; Director, Auxiliary Services and Conferencing. Gannon University, Erie, PA 16501. (814) 871-7291 or [porter016@gannon.edu](mailto:porter016@gannon.edu)

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Parris J. Baker is an Associate Professor at Gannon University, where he is the Social Work, Mortuary Science and Gerontology Program Director. An alumnus of Gannon, Baker received his graduate degree from Case Western Reserve University, Jack, Joseph, & Morton Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences and his doctorate from the University of Pittsburgh, School of Social Work. Presently, Baker serves as the Senior Pastor of Believers International Worship Center, Inc. He is married and has five children.



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A'Darius Porter, PhD, is a lifelong learner from Atlanta, Georgia. Dr. Porter earned an associate degree from John Wood Community College, followed by Bachelor's, Master's, and Doctoral degrees from Gannon University. Currently, he serves dual roles at Gannon University as the Director of Residence Life and Director of Auxiliary Services and Conferencing. Dr.

Porter's research interest includes Black male studies in America and the historic and societal impact of education and judicial policy have on academic achievement. His dissertation is entitled: Navigating Success: Factors Influencing the Matriculation and Graduation of Black Male Students Attending Predominantly White Institutions in Higher Education.

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