

**Feature: Black  
Excellence**

**A Defense of  
African American  
Studies**

**UNC Chapel Hill**

Est. 1986

**THE RMR**

**RODDEY MCMILLAN RECORD**



**October 2023**







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# THE INSPIRATION

Rev. Cynthia Plair-Roddey, a 1967 Winthrop graduate, is a trailblazer for change. She was the first Black student to enroll at Winthrop 10 years after the Supreme Court ended segregation in public schools with their *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Nine of her friends attended Winthrop alongside her. She was accepted to Winthrop College in the summer of 1964, where she earned a Master of Arts in teaching library science after having graduated from John C. Smith—an HBCU—with two bachelor’s degrees.



The Roddey McMillan Record (RMR) is named after both Roddey and Sheila McMillan, which is one of the many honors that the publication has received since its inception. McMillan was the first Black person to sit on the Board of Trustees in 1983. Before coming to Winthrop, she was one of the first Black students to integrate into the University of North Carolina and the first Black Senate attorney with the South Carolina Legislature after she earned her doctorates in law from the University of South Carolina. Both of the magazine’s namesakes have broken glass ceilings for Black women across the country. When the RMR was created by Gail Harris in 1986, she was inspired by these women to establish a safe space for minority students.

The purpose of the RMR is

*“shine a light on the diverse cultures at Winthrop, focusing on the concerns facing the multicultural community on campus.”*

# Category is...

## Pres·tige

noun

Widespread respect and admiration felt for someone or something on the basis of a perception of their achievements or quality.

Origin

Mid 17th century from French, literally 'illusion, glamor'.

JEREMIAH WILLIAMS | STAFF WRITER

“**T**he Talented Tenth”. “The Black Bourgeoisie”. “Our Kind of People”. To others, they are the model minority, a proof of concept for racial integration and evidence for the success of the American Dream. Amongst Black people, though, they are a chosen few. Educated. Independently Wealthy. Accomplished. Excellent. But every so often, there are Black people whose successes and failures seem far greater than their own, as if their choices will decide the destiny of the entire Black race.

Oceans of digital ink have been spilled discussing former president Barack Obama, the Obama family, and how their public image has influenced Black representation and conversation. After all, there is only one president in U.S. history said to have brought about a “post-racial America”, true or not. In 2009, Fox News entertainer Lou Dobbs declared “We are now in a 21st-century post-partisan, post-racial society.” Four years later, the Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court would use a similar argument to invalidate major sections of the Voting Rights Act. In writing for the majority in *Shelby County v. Holder*, Chief Justice John Roberts made the feelings of many of America’s most powerful people clear: “Our country has changed.”

But how can one man’s inauguration single-handedly end racism in America? How,

after three centuries of legalized oppression and state-approved violence against Black people, are they expected to close the wealth and education gaps in just over half-a-century? And why is that a challenge a lot Black people have been willing and ready to accept? The answer: the mysterious magic of Black excellence.

Black excellence, at its heart, is a simple idea. W. E. B. DuBois imagined a class of excellent Black leaders in his “Talented Tenth” essay as “the best of the race” who, if given a proper education and encouraged to put the needs of Black people ahead of themselves, could bring the very liberation that the Emancipation Proclamation had arguably failed to fully deliver. Howard alumni and honorary doctoral scholar, P. Diddy put it best when he posed the deceitfully simple question and answer. “What’s better than one [Black] billionaire? Two.”

Historically Black colleges and the majority Black fraternities and sororities of the National Pan-Hellenic Council or “Divine Nine” have worked for over a century to provide community to its members and form the basis for an educated and politically motivated class. These ideas influence programs like the Call Me Mister education initiative, The Gilman Scholarship Program, and McNair Scholars Program nationwide and on campus to this day.

In light of this and in the shadow cast by the legacy of Black





# Black Excellence

leaders like Barack Obama, Martin Luther King Jr., Dr. Cynthia Roddey, and Attorney Sheila McMillan, we spoke to thirteen Black students, professors, and administrators to reflect on the pains, problems, passions, and powers of Blackness and Black excellence.

There have always been successful and incredibly talented and hardworking Black people. Barack Obama was not the first to be qualified and not even the first to try for the highest executive office in the United States. But historically, Black excellence has had all the markers of success for any other race in the United States, but wrapped in one major caveat: that being Black was something that had to be overcome in order to succeed. Today, what it means to be Black and strive for excellence has many definitions.

“Being Black is both a privilege and a responsibility. Fair or unfair, I feel that being Black, we carry the weight of all other Black people whether we want to or not. The stereotypes, the biases, whether they are fair assessments or not, we carry those things with us consciously or unconsciously,” said Kevin Sheppard, Winthrop’s Title IX coordinator and veteran college administrator of nearly twenty years.

“I think learning a range of histories, learning different strategies to connect, and developing empathy with other folks has turned being Black into a privilege,” says Dr. Marvin McAllister, an associate professor with the Department of Theatre and Dance.

For Dr. Ashley Garrick, a professor of the Social Work Department and alumni of Winthrop, being Black is a very positive force. “Being Black is a super power. There’s so much that we endure, so much that we come from historically, so much we still have to push through... the fact that we still exist and we still can move forward is a super power.”

But there were those who found just being Black to be a struggle, at times.

For Carrie Vaughn, a junior political science student, McNair Scholar, and Academic Success Center tutor, being Black is awkward at times. “In an academic space, being a Black academic

is seen as something rare. But when I’m home, it’s like ‘No, you were supposed to do that, your parents raised you for this.’”

Dr. Adolphus Belk, Jr, a professor of the Political Science Department and co-editor of Dr. Lakeyta Bonnette-Bailey’s “For the Culture: Hip-Hop and the Fight for Social Justice” agreed, but added, “There are conflicting feelings that flow from very different individual or collective experiences. It can be joyful, prideful, exhilarating, infuriating. The awe that comes with watching the improbable happen like the election of Barack Obama. But on the other side, there are the murders of people who have become hashtags and martyrs in this confrontation with state violence.”

But while the definitions of Blackness and excellence are varied for everyone, multiple people cited a responsibility, though not always a pressure, to excel.

Dr. Kavin Ming, a professor of literacy and chair of the Department of Pedagogy and Curriculum, pointed to a more internal source of motivation. “I would say that I meet my definition of excellence because I have a deep commitment to do well, and it drives the way in which I approach all that I do. Just doing okay or doing enough has never been acceptable for me. I would not say that I must succeed above others, but I always strive to reach the top of my current context, and that is why I got my doctoral degree. To me, it was not enough to stop at the Master’s level, because there was one more level to achieve beyond the Master’s. I just had to keep going.”

Dr. Lauren Coffey, a licensed attorney, associate professor of Sport Management and Program Director of Sport and Fitness Administration, said, “My maiden name is McCoy. And we’d always say, ‘McCoy’s don’t dance in the endzone.’”

“Once we achieve something, we push to do something else and sometimes that mentality can make it hard to realize your own wins but I’m getting better at it,” she said.

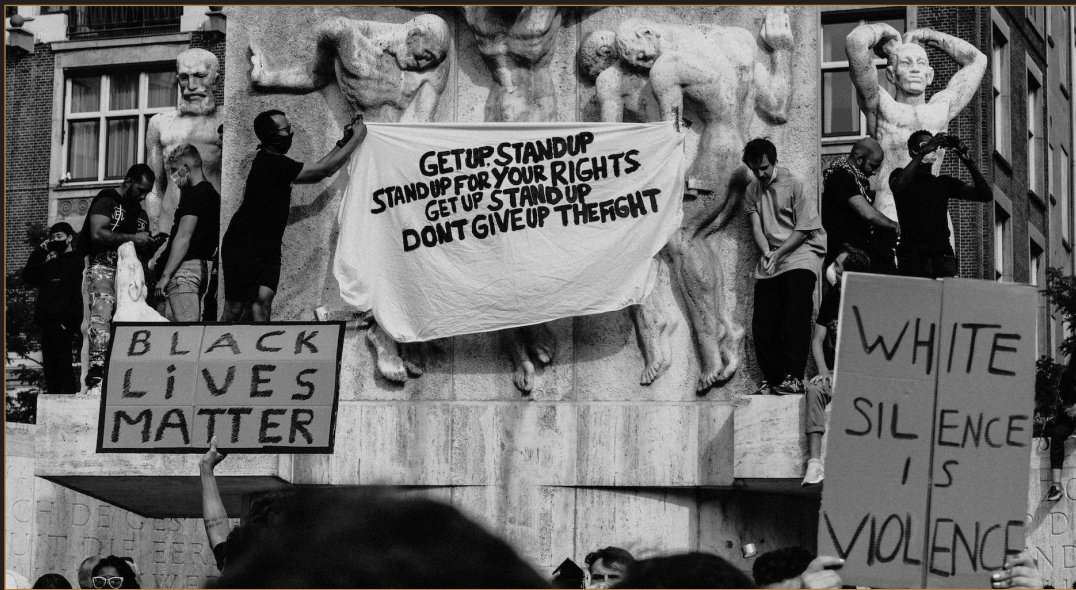
Rachel Griffith, student body vice president and senior mass communication and social work double major, had a similar reason. “There are

some days where life is really hitting and everyone’s watching, and I just want to stay in the back. But at the end of the day, that’s not really something I ever really wanted: to be a person who didn’t make an effect.”

But for some, like Armon Robinson, a junior political science student and member of the NAACP Executive Committee, the responsibility to succeed has more to do with honoring those who have supported him along the way and are coming behind him. “It’s been a journey and it’s been a journey I could not have walked alone. It’s not even just their expectations, it’s that I feel a responsibility to make the world better for them. I want to pass down a world that they can be safe in and that they can be proud of.”

Therein lies the strange and magical property of Black excellence: its ability to inspire and demoralize, to be exhausting and empowering. Black excellence pushes the boundaries and follows the sun, shining light on possibilities that now seem so in reach but were once the desperate, hopeful dreams only two generations ago. Black excellence is “faking it until you make it”, manifesting the illusory, imagining the unimaginable until it becomes real. Barack Obama did not accomplish leading the U.S. into a post-racial society and never even said he was going to. Yet, who better to bring about an impossible America than a man who’s skin color once made him an “impossible” choice for the presidency?

For hundreds of years, Black people have been the coal of this country. Burned as fuel of its industries, broken down by those who had kept them underfoot, and undervalued by those who relied on them. But Black excellence is alchemy: making triumph out of struggle, and the weight of unfair assumptions and unconscious biases into a burden one can be proud to bear. Black excellence is liberation and bondage, linking them in celebration of their resilience and fear of each other’s failures. Far greater than turning lead to gold, the magic of Black excellence has turned Black adversity into Black power.



## Defending African American Studies

SERA CROOKES | SOCIAL MEDIA MANAGER

Fields of study that provide students with a wide range of political and sociological perspectives to examine the world have become increasingly controversial. The value of fields that embrace the diversity of political and social traditions, including Women’s and Gender Studies, Sociology, African American Studies, and Queer Studies, among others, have been debated and debased by politicians throughout the United States.

South Carolina State Representative Ralph Norman headed a letter in June 2021 to South Carolina public universities strongly condemning Critical Race Theory (CRT), stating that CRT is a “bigoted, dangerous philosophy that seeks to assign both an identity and blame to someone based not on their beliefs or actions, but instead on the color of their skin.” The NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund has a very different perspective, instead defining CRT as “an academic and legal framework that denotes that

systemic racism is part of American society – from education and housing to employment and healthcare. Critical Race Theory recognizes that racism is more than the result of individual bias and prejudice. It is embedded in laws, policies, and institutions that uphold and reproduce racial inequalities.”

In August, just 48 hours before the start of the academic year, the Arkansas Department of Education announced that Advanced Placement (AP) African American studies would no longer count towards requirements for graduation for high school students across the state. The Arkansas department planned to investigate the course for “indoctrination.” Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders said, “We cannot perpetuate a lie to our students, and push this propaganda leftist agenda, teaching our kids to hate America, and hate one another.”

For a so-called “propaganda leftist agenda,” African American Studies has a lengthy and celebrated history in the United States, with the first African

American Studies program beginning in 1968, well before modern conceptions of leftism. However, the history of African American contributions to political science, sociology, literature, and the fabric of American history spans centuries.

Michael Lipscomb, a professor in the Department of Political Science and director of the Honors Program at Winthrop University, teaches African American Political Thought, a cross-listed course in the Political Science and African American Studies departments. In response to questions about the inclusion of African American perspectives, Lipscomb said, “Well, so you can’t talk about American government without talking about African Americans, the way in which the Constitution reflects a compromise about slavery, and we fought a civil war about slavery, how race relations were a predominant issue throughout the 20th and into the 21st centuries. You’re simply not talking about reality if you don’t include consideration of those events and



# “I don’t think people who want to remove African American Studies from higher education are going to be successful in suppressing African American thinking and African American cultural contribution”

-Michael Lipscomb

those realities.”

American conservatives have argued that teaching CRT or African American Studies reproduces and perpetuates cycles of racism and victimization and creates a “white guilt” in response to the atrocities of slavery and institutional racism. In response to these kinds of arguments, Lipscomb stated, “We certainly don’t teach African American Studies or African American political thought in a way that divides folks – we try to talk about how the circumstances of African American folks and their responses to that create opportunities for overcoming... we certainly don’t take an approach that infantilizes the Black vote... We’re trying to cultivate autonomy for everyone, including African American students, and the white students who also take this class, right?”

The restriction or removal of African American studies at either the K-12 or collegiate levels of education would deprive students of a critical space where they can think about how we have ended up here as Americans. Many fear that courses examining and uplifting Black histories will continue to be suppressed and removed from educational curriculums; however, there is still hope. Lipscomb said, “I don’t think people who want to remove African American Studies from higher education are going to be successful in suppressing African American thinking and African American cultural contribution... It’s going to be very hard to block out the production and the reproduction of African American ways of thought...

I think it would be a loss not to have a space for the African American tradition in the context of higher education.”

In a nation where Black voices and scholars continue to break barriers and rise above challenges put before them, it will be difficult to silence a long-standing tradition that is highly valued and critical to our understanding of our national identity. Although the push to suppress African American Studies may temporarily deny students a space to debate, investigate, and critically understand their positioning, it is unlikely that they will successfully re-write history and erase centuries of slavery, discrimination, and systemic racism that continue to define our society today. It is even more unlikely that they will be able to erase the successes, victories, and triumphs of Black Americans from our history books or our classrooms.

The debate about the continuation of African American Studies echoes the debate between W. E. B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington, who held vastly different views on how African Americans should be educated and their priorities following Reconstruction. The argument boils down to whether a critical examination and analysis of our current situation through African American Studies is helpful and helps create intelligent, empowered, and capable individuals or continues to perpetuate harmful beliefs and a sense of inferiority for Black people. It is undeniable that African American Studies, in higher education and K-12

schools, helps create a connection to an aspect of our culture and our history that cannot be easily removed from its context. The contributions of African American scholars, political activists, workers, and thinkers have shaped our country into what it is today.

“[African American Studies] provides a critical space for learning about a part of our history that is central to who all of us are. Even up until today, right? Learning about the history of the reality of African American folk puts us in a position to best understand where we are at today... It also gives credence to the aspirations of African American students, who often find it inherently interesting, and it helps them understand ways that they can affirm who they are in terms of their own family and social and community histories.”

The perspective of African Americans remains an essential part of how we should examine our current situation and our current understanding of our identity as a nation. African American Studies encompasses a wealth of perspectives that represent many facets of the Black community in the United States and tells the stories that often went untold in the darker parts of our history. To best understand and navigate the path forward, we must uplift and empower voices that differ from our own, especially when the people behind those voices have labored and toiled to provide the foundation upon which our nation has grown and prospered



Photo Credit: UNC Chapel Hill

# Gun Violence and UNC-Chapel Hill

RAQUEL SIMON | MANAGING EDITOR

On August 28, 2023, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill experienced a tragic gun violence incident leading to the death of a faculty member. This shooting marks yet another addition to the nation's gun violence crisis this year. This sparked conversations around not only gun violence and active shooters but both of these situations on college campuses.

The campus went on lockdown after active-shooter alerts went out to faculty and students and the police conducted a three-and-a-half-hour manhunt. Videos and images of students attempting to escape classroom buildings by jumping out of the windows circulated the internet as the campus waited in fear. Being a part of the gun violence statistics hit many students and faculty as the reality of the crisis became impossible to ignore.

At around 5 o'clock on the evening of August 28, the campus-wide all-clear alert was given, as the suspect was officially apprehended. Graduate student Tallei Qi was charged with first-degree murder and possessing a gun on educational property after allegedly shooting UNC professor Zijie Yan inside the Caudill Science Lab. Professor Yan was killed in the incident.

Throughout the ordeal, UNC students

allege that the campus was given unclear information about what happened and when. The UNC Police Chief, Brian James, said Qi was in custody at 2:41 p.m. However, the campus was later alerted that the suspect was still at large at 3:43 p.m.

Like Winthrop University and other schools across the country, UNC-Chapel Hill has adopted the FBI and Department of Homeland Security-endorsed "Run, Hide, Fight." response plan as the safety strategy against active aggressors.

Winthrop Police Chief Charles Yearata wants students to know their officers are trained and that the campus community will be notified immediately. "WU alert is obviously our emergency alerting system; it includes multiple different components." Alerts will be given through emergency yellow boxes that you see around buildings, computers connected to Winthrop's network, Vizio boards, calls, texts, emails, and the LiveSafe app.

"The whole point of the info is to provide immediate information that [students] need to immediately have known. We don't do WU alerts for minor things... We don't want anybody to become numb to the initiation of the WU Alert," Yearata said.

Questions about ethical protocol surrounding active shooters in places of higher education have also arisen, with UNC faculty and students being told to "resume normal activities" after the deadly shooting. In addition to the incident on August 28, the UNC Chapel Hill community experienced another gun violence threat on September 13, where a gunman sent the campus into lockdown. No one was injured in the incident, but many students shared feelings of anxiety and re-traumatization.

"At Winthrop, Our protocol for alerts is 10 minutes or less... that's what we've aired on the side of caution. We didn't pick that number randomly. That's the number that a lot of universities have decided that this will be their time frame... we want people to know that response is going to be immediate," says Chief Yearata.

Although it's unfortunate, Yearata urges students to keep things like this in mind. "Half the battle is preparing for the battle and knowing what your options are."

"Everybody on this campus should be signed up for WU Alerts. That is the fastest way that you will know what is going on. Take care of yourself first and escape if you can. Call us if you witness something," Yearata said.



# THE STAFF

## 2023-2024

Special Thanks to friends of the publication, Ainsley McCarthy and Lily Hayes, without whom this issue would not be possible.



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