



OPINION Viewpoints

Michael Sorrell: We must prepare them for the business world

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Aristotle once wrote that "education is the best provision for old age." This provision requires not just classroom tutelage, but the type of instruction that leads the pupil to achieve "Renaissance person" status.

It's easy to lose sight of this obligation in the face of the realities and pressures of modern academia. Today's college presidents, especially small-college presidents, must balance a myriad of issues as we seek to create enlightened minds. We must satisfy the expectations of parents, students, faculty and a global marketplace that demands nimble, creative talents with the reality of limited fiscal resources. Therefore, we as college administrators must become more innovative, resourceful and comfortable operating outside of the box. It was a combination of this spirit of innovation and a nod to history that led us to implement a business-casual dress code for the students at Paul Quinn College. Beginning this fall, on Monday through Thursday, from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., every student must adhere to business casual wardrobe rules. No jeans. No T-shirts. No sneakers or flip-flops.

We are charged with the responsibility of preparing our students to assume a leadership role in business, and we can no longer pretend that their attire isn't one aspect of that preparation. In order for our students to seamlessly transition into the corporate landscape, they require lessons in business etiquette and practices. At Paul Quinn, those lessons are now occurring daily.

However, it was not too long ago that this type of requirement would not have been so newsworthy. Historically, our nation's black colleges and universities required their students to dress appropriately when attending classes or other campus functions. I grew up listening to my mother and other family members talk about Dillard University's "expectations for dress."

A review of yearbooks from the not-too-distant past at Howard University, Spelman College and Hampton University, along with our own at Paul Quinn, shows students attending classes in ties and dresses. They looked like the younger version of the leaders they grew up to become.

Yet, somewhere along the path of evolution, we as college administrators began to acquiesce to shifting societal norms and stopped expecting our students to attend class prepared to conduct the business of learning. Instead, we allowed class to be treated as a brief respite between parties and athletic events. In this respect, we have decided to turn back the hands of time.

To assist our students with the transition to business-casual clothing, we asked the Dallas community for help in the form of a "gently used" clothing drive. The response was overwhelming and diverse. Companies such as American Airlines and Gardere, Wynne & Sewell LLP joined Friendship West

Baptist Church, the Dallas County Young Democrats, Attitudes & Attire, Texas Railroad Commission Chairman Michael Williams, community leader Ken Luce, Dallas Cowboy star DeMarcus Ware and radio personality Willis Johnson in making sizeable contributions to our "College Closet." Their kindness and support of our students will not soon be forgotten.

I have heard the criticisms from a small segment of our students and their parents that (1) the students are adults and thus don't need to be told how to dress and (2) how you dress doesn't affect your academic performance.

I respectfully, but wholeheartedly, disagree. First, we are an educational institution. Our job is to educate our students completely. Teaching them business etiquette falls within that job description. Second, as I walk the campus and observe young women walking to class in skirts or when I watch the students in my class debate the finer points of their reading assignments while wearing shirts and ties, I look at the smiles on their faces and I listen to the confidence in their voices. They don't just look different or act different, they are different. This will absolutely translate into greater academic performance.

Welcome to the new Paul Quinn College. We are now in the business of producing enlightened minds that are prepared to lead cities, states, countries and the world. We are the southern gateway to our city – a city that deserves a great, nationally lauded, small liberal arts college. We intend to become that school. The dress code is merely one of the first steps. It's going to be a wonderful journey. We hope that you will join us.

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