

ON BEING BLACK



DANIEL WUBAH
FOR LNP | LANCASTERONLINE



SUZETTE WENGER | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Dr. Daniel Wubah, president of Millersville University, gives his inauguration speech April 18, 2019.

Reflecting on life as a Black man and university leader

Looking back at the events and activities held to celebrate Black History Month was an excellent opportunity to reflect on being a Black man in America.

Until I arrived in the United States as a graduate student, my skin color, which represents a physical proxy for my race, was not an issue in my daily life. However, upon enrolling in an academic department where none of the faculty members looked like me, my sense of race was sharply awakened. When my future wife enrolled in the same department as a graduate student the following year, the number of African American students doubled.

As a microbiologist, the first time I felt the impact of being a Black person in America was when I found myself as the only representative of my race in a room of about 100 people at a professional meeting. It felt

lonely but also empowering because I was the odd one out in that room. That is when I decided to look beyond the construct of race and its accompanying stereotypes so that I could strive as hard as possible to survive and thrive in my chosen profession as an academic.

Fast-forward to my first day as an assistant professor in an introductory biology class when a student challenged my role as the instructor because there were no Black professors in the department. This institution was in a major city where about 45% of the people living or working there, including the mayor, were Black.

As you can imagine, I have had other experiences where perceptions about me were derived from how I look before I even said a word. In most cases, having an accent leads to either better acceptance or less

respect, but I always take it in stride because my ethnicity is not the only factor that determines who I am.

Fortunately, my upbringing in Ghana often helps me to overlook any stereotypical opinions others create about me. As my grandson has taught me, because

I wasn't born and didn't grow up in this country, my experiences differ from those of a typical Black man in America. Ultimately, it is a privilege and a blessing to serve as a role model for those who look like me by endeavoring to do well in whatever I do.

King and president

The responsibilities and identities that personify who I am add another layer of complexity. As a tribal

king at Breman Asikuma in the Central Region of Ghana and president of Millersville University, I serve by carrying two communities on my

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● Daniel Wubah became Millersville University's 15th president in July 2018. Twitter: @VillePresident.

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Continued from F1 shoulders simultaneously. More often than not, the two roles are parallel because both require employing similar leadership skills. But there are times when they intersect to create a stress point.

In both roles, I seek daily to be a good listener, exhibit integrity, selflessness and self-awareness, and communicate effectively. Having a competent group of people around me is critical in both roles. For example, my president's cabinet at Millersville University and council of elders in Ghana serve similar purposes for my role as a president and traditional ruler; both entities work for the proper functioning of their communities. Both of my roles require a deep understanding of how to manage resources, both human and fiscal, while making difficult decisions.

My campus community does not expect me to use my personal resources to cover institutional costs. But it is presumed by my people in Ghana that in addition to our communal assets, my personal assets can be used as the primary source of fiscal support for the well-being of the community.

Because disagreements are inherently built into every community, conflict resolution is a skill demanded by both roles. But there are differences.

Tackling family, property and marital disputes occupies most of my time in Ghana, whereas the majority of the disputes that I have to resolve as university president often emanate from a lack of professional communication and clarification of policies

and practices. Presiding over ceremony — whether at university commencements or sitting in state during tribal ceremonies — is common to both roles.

Finally, as a traditional ruler, I serve as the physical representative of our ancestors, but as a president I serve as the face of Millersville University. So the two roles are separate, yet intertwined, and therein lies the daily path on which I walk.

The importance of mentors

To be effective on this journey, I have been fortunate to have mentors to guide me. The word “mentor” is often defined as a wise and trusted counselor or teacher. I have been guided and influenced by mentors at different stages, personally and professionally. I often tell others that I am still being mentored because there are presidents and rulers who have been in their roles longer than I have been in mine. In the Ghanaian tradition, we respect and hold in high regard anyone who is older than us because with age comes wisdom.

Mentorship is built around two concepts: teaching and guiding, which I believe are the two foundational attributes for building good relationships in a community. Hence, I am convinced that mentorship occurs when a person teaches and/or supports another person and uses his or her knowledge, experiences and other assets to guide and help that person. If done right, mentorship leads to vibrant communities because we

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all learn to depend on each other.

My mother and maternal grandfather were my mentors and heroes because of how they raised me. Family members are not often considered mentors, but in my case they set such high bars for me at pivotal stages in my life that they have collectively contributed to who I am now. While I didn't understand or enjoy some of the challenges that I endured while I was growing up, today I have a better appreciation for their rationale.

I have mentors in academia, too, with whom I keep in touch, especially when I have to make difficult decisions or need affirmation about major professional initiatives. Of them, only one — Freeman A. Hrabowski III, president of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County — is Black. This may be due to the dearth of people who look like me in leadership roles, though recent trends indicate that there is a gradual increase in the number of leaders in academia who are people of color.

Back in Ghana, two long-serving traditional rulers in our district

serve as my informal mentors because they know more about our traditional norms and cultural rituals than I do.

Much as I have been mentored, I have made an effort to — and have had the good fortune to — work with bright and motivated students who considered me as their mentor. Among them are 27 physicians, seven professors and research scientists, 11 teachers and nine entrepreneurs who worked in my lab as undergraduate or graduate students.

Inclusion in discourse

When I arrived at Millersville in July 2018, there was only one “I” in our stated core values. At that time, we assumed that diversity and inclusion went together. But after antisemitic graffiti was found on campus that fall semester, we added inclusion to what we call our EPPIC values (the other values are exploration, professionalism, public mission, integrity and compassion). This addition was a major step for our community. I often talk about our values as that North Star in everything we do

across campus, and that North Star has emboldened us to make efforts to be more inclusive than before.

Efforts to be inclusive have been most impactful in our community since we returned to campus during this pandemic. Humans are social beings, so interacting with each other in person is necessary for creating authentic relationships. Despite attempts to create virtual communities during the pandemic, we lost some traction in being inclusive. A sign of the desire for interaction: Attendance at sporting events was higher than in the pre-pandemic period. I assume our community now values inclusion more because of the physical isolation that we experienced in the early portion of the pandemic. Ultimately, I believe we have a greater chance of producing highly creative, educated and engaged citizens if we educate our students on a campus that strives to be diverse and practices inclusion across everything that we do.

As Black History Month comes to a close, it's vital that we remember that our efforts to create a vibrant and inclusive community don't end Feb. 28. We need to put into practice programs that help all students, including students of color. At Millersville, we are working hard to attract, retain and graduate minority students, and to recruit faculty and staff from minority groups.

Inclusion is creating a community on campus, in Lancaster County and across the United States, where different voices are welcomed and respectfully heard and where every individual feels a sense of belonging.