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## Making a career of student success

Omar Brown-El knows the challenges facing underrepresented students firsthand when it comes to getting into college, succeeding in the classroom and earning a degree. He grew up as an academically and economically challenged student in his hometown of Flint.

However, he turned those initial disadvantages into advantages for others and has dedicated his professional career to helping incoming students at Oakland University level the playing field and thrive on campus.

It was the fall of 1991 when Brown-El arrived at Oakland's campus. He immediately immersed himself in a wide range of campus activities. His experience culminated in being voted into a prominent leadership role on campus. He was president of the Association of Black Students for two years.



*Omar Brown-El, senior director of the Center for Multicultural Initiatives, has made it his career ambition to help others succeed academically and in life.*

It was as a student leader, Brown-El first began to ignite change. He was part of a movement to develop a space on campus for underrepresented students to then OU president Sandra Packard. She, in turn, called upon Brown-El to be a student representative to help interview candidates who would run the newly established Office of Minority Equity, now called the Center for Multicultural Initiatives (CMI). Brown-El and the others on the committee chose Glenn McIntosh, who has since advanced in his career to the position of vice president for student affairs and Chief Diversity Officer. After leaving Oakland for a short time following his graduation, Brown-El's career has come full circle and as the senior director of CMI, it is Brown-El who now runs the department that he helped establish.

"My message to current high school students and those accepted as future OU students is that you have a place here at Oakland," Brown-El said. "If you choose to come to Oakland, you come knowing there are solid resources in place here to make sure your needs will be met, you will find an accepting culture where you fit in and you will begin a life-altering college journey."

Oakland University's CMI now boasts 25 years of statistical data to back up Brown-El's commitment to students. And, the needle continues to move in the right direction.

Oakland underrepresented students reached all-time highs in both time to complete a degree and for first year academic progress in the Fall 2017 semester. Just last year, Oakland recorded the smallest retention gap between white and black students in school history. All showing that the support services implemented at OU are making a difference.

Prospective students, their parents and high school guidance counselors may wonder what group did best in most recent 6-year graduation rates at Oakland University. Was it men? Was it women? Was it Merit Scholars? Was it those who lived on campus or those who commuted? No. It was the underrepresented students participating in the Oakland University Trustee Academic Success Program (OUTAS) ran by Brown-El. Students participating in OUTAS graduated at a 78 percent rate, one that was 13 percent higher than any other group that is tracked on campus.

"We have some outstanding programming like OUTAS, our nationally recognized program, now in its 24<sup>th</sup> year, setting the standard for academic excellence and leadership development to help underrepresented students acclimate to the demands presented by college life," said Brown-El.

OUTAS participants, for example, even carry an average grade point average higher than the overall student body. And, the program provides eligible entering freshmen with merit-based renewable four-year scholarships to keep students on the path of financial sustainability as well.

The program differs from many other student retention programs because it focuses on providing scholarships and support networks for adjusting to campus life.

"With our Collectively Oakland Retains Everyone, or CORE program that began in 2011, we are putting an emphasis on helping first year students achieve their academic best through advising, tutoring, mentoring, workshops and counseling," added Brown-El. "Students who participate in CORE live on campus their first year, stay into their sophomore year and beyond and make progress towards earning a degree."

Statistically, if a student has success in the first year of college, they are much more likely to continue the path to a degree.

"We also work closely with Oakland's Pre-College and Project Upward Bound programs since those programs often make the first connection with elementary, middle school and high school students who are thinking about college," Brown-El added. "We combine our efforts to make sure any student who wants to attend college, can begin finding resources to turn it from a dream into a reality."

Brown-El has helped carve out a path for hundreds of underrepresented minority students to follow their dreams. His life's work is helping students graduate from Oakland, advance to graduate school or begin fulfilling careers. But, if you ask Brown-El about his incredible impact on so many people over a higher education career now spanning 15 years, his response might be something as simple as, "Not bad for a young man from Flint."

and demands inclusion for every single student on the campus.



A new group of CMI first year students arrive on campus each fall.



Omar Brown-El explains to the new CMI students what will be expected of them to succeed academically.





There is also time for fun, team-building activities during the CMI's CORE program.



Brown-El and his CMI team see graduation and life success as the goal for every student.  
(Note: Four program photos above provided by Nicole Lucio, assistant director for CMI)