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Alumni Profile

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Turner shares the lessons learned

When Rick Turner '63 entered Linfield, he was one of only seven African-American students. He knew he had entered a world far different from his urban hometown, Hartford, Conn. He knew acquaintances back home were saying he'd soon return in defeat. He was determined to prove them wrong.

Turner came on a basketball scholarship, thanks to his high school coach's friendship with Paul Durham '36, then Linfield athletic director. Curtis Manns '62, who had graduated from Weaver High a year ahead of Turner, had come to play football.

Turner calls Linfield "a saving grace." He had to overcome academic deficiencies and loneliness. He was 17 years old and 3,000 miles from familiar faces.

"In retrospect, I'm really thankful for the opportunity to go to Linfield," says Turner. "I know it made me a better person. These were the most important four years of my life because I learned how to endure. It made me a stronger person."

Turner may not have found many African Americans at Linfield, but he did find a caring, supportive environment. "The people at Linfield were helpful, they were nurturing, they respected me, and I respected them. I don't think I could have survived if the environment wasn't warm and conducive for me at that time."

Turner did return to Connecticut, but not in defeat. After receiving his B.A. in sociology from Linfield, he earned a master's degree in social work from the University of Connecticut. He returned to the West Coast, completing a Ph.D. in higher education administration/public policy at Stanford.

Many scholars base articles and books on their doctoral dissertations; Turner has built a successful career on his. It is titled "The Academic Achievement and Retention of Black Students at White Institutions."

Since 1988, Turner has served as dean of African-American Affairs at the University of Virginia. Among his celebrated accomplishments, one stands out: the University's African-American graduation rate has steadily grown on his watch to 87 percent, among the highest in the nation for public institutions. He also teaches a class, "Sociology of the African-American Community."

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Rick Turner, dean of the Office of African-American Affairs, kicked off Black History Month with his inaugural State of African-American Affairs address at the University of Virginia last year.

Turner can empathize with the students he counsels. He knows life can be tough, but he makes it clear that he has high expectations. He would like to see Virginia's African-American enrollment climb to 14- to 15 percent; it has held steady at about 9 percent since 2000. But, he says, "When you get a critical mass, which we have at the University of Virginia, it's much easier – when students can see other students that look like them, and see them succeeding."

More than 40 years since his Linfield days, Turner stays in touch with his mentor, Durham, and his sophomore roommate, Barry Tucker '71. Tucker, who took a military detour before finishing college, is Linfield's director of Multicultural Programs.

Tucker said he considers Turner a mentor and hero. He often brought his roommate home to Seattle, Wash., on holidays when Turner couldn't make it to Connecticut. He describes Turner as "extremely dedicated, extremely professional. He challenges all students, especially African-American students, to strive for excellence."

– Beth Rogers Thompson