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General College Dean David Taylor reflects on his career and the meaning of success

For David Taylor, success isn’t always—or even usually—a simple construct. “I tend to look at achievement and success a little differently,” says the 16-year University of Minnesota General College dean. “One needs not to have graduated in order to be successful. The successful part was that you attempted, you pushed yourself. Life circumstances many times don’t afford you the opportunity of finishing a course of action within a prescribed period of time. If you don’t graduate in four years, it doesn’t mean you’re a failure. Failure is giving up on it altogether, it’s saying you have to defer for the time-being because of family, getting married, having to support family and relatives, or having an illness. That is not a failure to proceed, that’s just life intervening. Once you take care of business, you can always get back on track.”

The U of M regents, and President Robert Bruininks, however, who recently voted to abolish the General College, have another view. “I think people are embarrassed by those who haven’t achieved in classic terms,” says Taylor, referring to the high number of GC students who do not graduate within four years—an argument that critics frequently used to justify closing the school.

“Institutional success is predicated on student success. So somehow, if the student doesn’t proceed then there’s something wrong with the institution. Now, there’s some logic to that. The university has had problems getting students through in five, six years generally—it’s not just students in the GC. And we’ve addressed those sorts of things. But to adopt a model that only says that you are successful if you complete your course of study in four years with a 3.0 GPA defies reality.
“So that’s where we differed. I’m more apt to provide more time and more trial and error than the current model seems to suggest.”

Although he advocates for this more open definition of success, Taylor’s time at the helm of GC, as well as scholarly work documenting Black life in Minnesota, can only be seen as a resounding success — which is why he will be sorely missed by many when he leaves on August 1 to assume the post of provost and senior vice president for academic affairs at Morehouse College in Atlanta.

“My decision to leave this position really had nothing and everything to do with this decision that was made [by the regents and Bruininks],” says Taylor. “I had decided two years ago that I was going to leave, but at that time, I recognized that my officers were beginning to retire, and beginning to cycle out and look for new opportunities. So I had to do several strategic hires, bring those folks in, acclimate them to the college community, and then allow them to begin to select people to work under them.

Then at that point, I could feel confident that the structure was sound. All we would need to do then was to bring in another dean. So all these things had to be orchestrated.

“Well, I got to phase one and two. That was hiring in the new people, acclimating them to the community, getting the organization moving. The second phase for us was a strategic planning process which we initiated and we were engaged in when the university stepped in.

“And the third part would have been, okay, we have people in place, we’ve got the program moving towards the future, all we have to do now is bring in another person who resonates and can bring some other skills to bear. We never made it to the third phase. So the opportunity to go to Morehouse was fortuitous, if not divine.”

Indeed. Taylor becomes quite animated when he describes his duties at the renowned school. “I will be provost and senior vice president for academic affairs. Now, the provost is usually the chief academic officer of the college, so the title senior vice president as opposed to president, suggests that I’m at a level and responsibility amongst the vice presidents. Now, there are other vice presidents — for finance, for student development, for research — and they constitute the president’s cabinet. So I’m a member of his cabinet.

“I also carry the title chief operating officer for the college. That says that in the absence of the president, I am the authority in charge.

“So, it’s quite a promotion. And usually, having done that sort of thing, you either spring to presidencies or you leap out of the academy. And Morehouse being what it is, and its unique history and reputation — not only amongst the Historically Black Colleges and Universities, but among private liberal arts colleges in the United States — it’s really significant. We would liken it to the Black Harvard.

“My responsibilities are to make sure that the curriculum works and create what we call ‘Morehouse Men.’ And that the faculty are cared for and nurtured, and urged on to scholarship and excellence in teaching, to assist the president in finding resources to support the enterprise.

“Morehouse is presently engaged in a capital campaign. They are seeking to raise $105 million, of which I think they have $100 million in
pledges already, with a year yet to go with the campaign. So I will be assisting the president in going out to potential donors and representing the college. Or attending those meetings where he can’t be visible and present, to represent the college.”

This is a very different set of tasks than Taylor assumed when he accepted the deanship at the GC. He says, “I was asked to come in, to take a program that had at one time a very good national presence, and to reorganize, revitalize, and make it a star program—not only in terms of what we’re able to do for students, but also in the realm of developmental education, becoming nationally known for the research on effective teaching, effective pedagogy, effective programs, and engage students who never would have conceived of themselves as being college students.

Or who were very bright students but had never been focused and challenged when it’s appropriate.

“And so I saw myself as another cog in a wheel here. My job was to make sure that the college experienced continuity. So for 16 years, I made it possible for at least 10,000 students to cycle through this place, and be able to experience something of what we would hope them to become.

“We’ve helped young scholars become professional administrators and teachers, to move the discussion of developmental education nationally to another plateau, and just to be the caretaker. That was my responsibility — the caretaker/developer. And we were doing it.

“And there’s nothing to suggest in the decision that the regents have come to, or the administration, that we haven’t done that. Politically, we are not what they wanted, in whatever the new vision of the university is going to be.

“So I can accept that. I’m an employee; I work at the discretion of the president and the board. But in accepting it, doesn’t mean I have to agree with it, and that’s where we parted.

“I had a similar but different vision for the work here.

“I believe that the university can be and ought to be a flagship institution. It ought to be world-class in terms of the research and the development of knowledge, and the dissemination of knowledge. But I also think that this could be done well within the context of where we find ourselves, specifically geographically — an urban institution, in an urban setting, dealing with urban issues, in the sense of civic engagement.

“I also think it can be done with an eye towards excellence and diversity, access and diversity, social equity and achievement. Now, it just depends on who you invite, and what your intention is in inviting them here and how far you can take them. And there was nothing in the [strategic] plan that suggests to me that we couldn’t be all these things and still provide a minimum amount of access to those who have been disenfranchised.

“But those students bring a certain amount of risk as well as opportunity. If you claim the successful ones, you also have to claim those that have been less than successful — relative to how you define success.’’

It all comes back to definitions of success, again. And Taylor sees the University of Minnesota’s struggle to get a hold of what it views as “successful” to only intensify in the coming years.
“Although I disagree with the decision to close the GC, as I’ve indicated to my staff, a vote is simply a vote,” he says. “Issues still remain. And they’re [the regents and president] going to have to wrestle creatively around the issue of access and opportunity — particularly for students of color, and students of lower socio-economic background.

“No matter how we want to position ourselves as an institution of learning, the ultimate good that comes from these institutions is what you can do for the least. And so I would hope that in their wisdom, the regents who have affirmed the plan understand that issues of access and equity will remain, and I would hope, not come back to bite them on the bottom.

“I’m not against the [strategic] plan per se; I’m concerned about elements of the plan.”

Still, even though this might not be the ideal ending Taylor would have imagined for his career at the U, he says he has grown incredibly from the experience. “In terms of my professional life here, it’s been challenging — more challenging than I ever thought, and rewarding, more rewarding than I could ever imagine.

“Because when I’m out in the community and people come up to me and recognize me, and say, ‘Had it not been for your administration, had it not been for the college being there, I could not have done these sorts of things.’ That happens all the time.

“I was at dinner last night, and the person who was the co-owner of the restaurant came over to the table after seeing me come in, and said, ‘You don’t know me, but my name is so-and-so, and I just wanted to tell you that I didn’t complete my degree, but I’ve got this business going here and I wouldn’t have had this opportunity had I not gone to GC and engaged myself in the small business classes. And I’ll get back in school, but I just needed to tell you that you’ve done great things for a lot of people.’”

Taylor’s research on Minnesota’s Black communities has also made his time here memorable, as well as impacted many lives. “As a historian, I wanted to provide for those students who are coming along, and provide for the people who are living here a sense of their collective history,” he says.

“I was able to do that, both in terms of the books I’ve written, the publications I’ve put out, the exhibit at the History Center that was up for five years, and thousands of people were exposed to that, the TPT three-hour documentary on Black pioneers in Minnesota — all of those things were based in part, if not wholly, on my research.

“Being able to engage in forums and discussions and be on TV, radio programs — all with the intent of having people understand that they come from and are engaged in a place that has produced and continues to produce people of quality, who not only influence what goes on in the Twin Cities, just not reactors on the stage of life, but were proactive — but nationally as well. So, if children understand that, perhaps they’ll have a different image of themselves and the community in which they grow up.

“The thing that is left to be done is getting this material into the school curriculum on a consistent and regular basis, so all children can appreciate the rich cultural context that the Twin Cities represents. And
Black people are just one of a myriad of groups that make us a culturally rich place.

“So, that’s in place, and hopefully, some younger scholars might even question my work, and go back through it, take it to another level. I don’t want my legacy to be that he was the Black historian, as opposed to he created a way for all of us to be historians in own right, capture some of this and own it.”

Taylor insists that he is not leaving the state for good; in fact, he and his family will have a condo or apartment here to return to during the many visits they plan to make. He would also like to state for the record that he is not angry about the decision to close General College.

“I am disappointed, but I’m not bitter. I am disappointed, but I’m not angry. I’m not resentful. All of those things aren’t emotions that I own. I did what was hired to do. I did it with a type of panache that we would expect professionals to do,” he says.

“I’ve made hundreds of friends, influenced hundreds of others, I’ve had a good life. And for a little Black boy born on the upper reaches of the Mississippi, who wasn’t even supposed to go to college probably, to end up at a predominantly Black institution as the chief operating officer — hey, it doesn’t get better than that.”

Shannon Gibney welcomes reader responses to sgibney@spokesman-recorder.com.