The Black Student’s Guide to Graduate and Professional School Success is dedicated to my son, Vernyatta L. Farmer, and all other Black students who seek to embrace their heritage, hoping that they will strive in all aspects to develop their fullest intellectual capacity and that they will be inspired to explore the true heritage of their own people. I hope that they will realize that education is essential if they are to claim their rightful place in this nation and the world. For this reason, Black people have always stressed educational achievement at all levels of the learning continuum, and through perseverance, sacrifice, faith, and struggle they have managed to remove many of the educational barriers that stood in their way. Black students must understand that life is what they make it. Struggling is the real meaning of life; success and failure are in the hands of God. Shun not the struggle because it is God’s gift. Therefore, obtaining a graduate and/or professional degree is a major step that Black students must take in making this claim.

Black students, you must understand that education is the great equalizer that will give you the power to balance the scale of inequality. However, you must also be cognizant of the great achievements of Black people who traveled the road before you and who paved the way for you to obtain an education. Your recognition of the past experiences and contributions of Black people to the nation and the world will strengthen your pride and self-esteem and provide you with the tenacity to achieve even more than they achieved. May you continue the struggle for a graduate education and for the power that knowledge manifests, and may you draw inspiration from the past, a sense of understanding from the present, and hope from the future. Black students, as you witness the beginning of the new millennium, you find yourself part of a proud tradition, walking in the footsteps of your ancestors and blazing a path for those yet to follow. In this sense, the struggle toward equality for Black people in the world reaches backward as it strains forward.

Finally, you must never forget where you came from, what made it possible for you to get to where you are today, and what it will take to get to where you want to be in the future. You must never forget that God, or whatever name you choose to call the Omnipotent, has been and remains the one essential fact that has guided Black people in their struggle for equality in the world. Finally, you must recognize the privilege, seize the opportunity, fulfill the responsibility of learning, and become committed workers in the daunting task of making a new world, contributing to the improvement of Black people and the nation.
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About the Editor and the Contributors
There was a joke circulating around the law school of the University of Chicago when I was a student that went something like this: What happens to the “A” students? They become professors. What happens to the “B” students? They get rich practicing law. What happens to the “C” students? They become politicians. Neither I nor the president of the United States contradict the gist of that joke.

I have been blessed to serve in our nation’s highest legislative body—the U.S. Senate—and to travel to faraway places as an ambassador, but I remain in awe of the scholars who exemplify lifelong learning. Some of those scholars have contributed their observations and experiences in chapters and essays to The Black Student’s Guide to Graduate and Professional School Success. The only issue is whether the advice and guidance they offer will be received and understood by the people for whom it is written.

I hope this book will reach its target audience. Many of its contributors have not only trod the path prospective graduate students are considering, but some of them have also had to carve that path where none before existed. Their observations are too valuable to pass up, and I hope this generation of graduate and professional students will have the wisdom to stop long enough to harvest the wisdom that is offered.

I will not take the time here to tell my own story or to extol the virtues of education to the readers of this foreword. You already appreciate the latter, and the former could not begin to add to the thoughtful, erudite, and insightful guidance that this book provides in its entirety. It is singularly perceptive about a broad range of issues and challenges uniquely faced by men and women of color. It is in that regard a tool to help tap the full capacity of
people who might otherwise be precluded from contributing to the benefit of all society. This guide, in the end, serves the interests of all Americans, because our country is stronger when the talents of all can be brought to bear on civil society.

This guide is therefore a recipe for transformation. If one path is made easier, if one student is inspired, if one life is changed, then *The Black Student’s Guide to Graduate and Professional School Success* will have fulfilled its mission. I have no doubt, however, that this guide will achieve its goal and more and will be a source of hope and renewal for America.

*Carol Moseley-Braun*

**A SPECIAL TRIBUTE TO CAROL MOSELEY-BRAUN**

After the death of A. Leon Higginbotham Jr., who was initially asked to write the foreword for *The Black Student’s Guide to Graduate and Professional School Success,* choosing another author was a daunting task. Finally, because of her unwavering commitment to equal justice for all members of our society, Ambassador Carol Moseley-Braun was chosen from among a cadre of esteemed scholars to write the foreword. Ambassador Carol Moseley-Braun, a graduate of the University of Chicago Law School, made political history when she was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1992. She has the distinction of being the first woman from Illinois elected to the Senate, being the sole African American in the Senate from 1992–1998, and being only the second African American to serve in the Senate in this century. She was the first former U.S. senator to hold the post of American Ambassador to New Zealand. Carol Moseley-Braun also has the distinction of being the first woman to serve as a permanent member of the powerful Senate Finance Committee. She fought hard in the Senate on issues of minority rights and education, amassing a solid legislative record. A notable Senate victory came after Ambassador Moseley-Braun made an impassioned speech arguing for the defeat of a patent on the Confederate flag, a symbol of slavery in the pre–American Civil War South. She served on the Judiciary Committee, the Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs Committee, the Small Business Committee, the Aging Committee, and the Bipartisan Commission on Entitlements and Tax Reform.

Throughout her tenure in the Senate, she commanded attention for her legislative leadership in sponsoring progressive bills on education and other issues and for her ability to build successful coalitions in the Senate. Among her legislative initiatives were the innovative Education Infrastructure Act, the Women’s Pension Equity Act, and historic preservation for the Underground Railroad. Senator Moseley-Braun was also a strong voice for requiring the armed services to enact effective procedures to combat racial and sexual discrimination within the military.
Finally, I am especially indebted to Ambassador Moseley-Braun for accepting the invitation to write the foreword for *The Black Student’s Guide to Graduate and Professional School Success*. Ambassador Moseley-Braun’s outstanding scholarship and solid legislative record make her a role model for many students pursuing or desiring to pursue a graduate education.

*Vernon L. Farmer*
A. Leon Higginbotham Jr.

I was greatly saddened by the death of A. Leon Higginbotham Jr., chief judge emeritus of the United States Third-Circuit Court of Appeals, who had been asked just prior to his death to write the foreword for The Black Student's Guide to Graduate and Professional School Success. Although Judge A. Leon Higginbotham Jr. died before he had the opportunity to respond to my request, this is a special tribute to the intensity of his commitment to equality and civil rights. Neil L. Rudenstine, former Harvard University president, said, “He was a powerful presence and voice, a voice that has influenced our legal and judicial world for decades.” A. Leon Higginbotham Jr., an internationally known advocate for human rights, was chosen to write the foreword because of his commitment to equality and civil rights and his uncompromising record of service and advocacy for equal justice.

A. Leon Higginbotham Jr., a graduate of Yale University Law School, was a public service professor of jurisprudence at Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School of Government and a lecturer of law at Harvard Law School. He also taught at the law schools of the University of Michigan, New York University, Stanford University, Yale University, and the University of Pennsylvania. A. Leon Higginbotham Jr., both as a judge and as a prolific writer, defended civil rights with great passion and eloquence. His scholarly works consist of a multivolume series of books on race and American law considered by many scholars an American classic. The series includes In the Matter of Color: Race and the American Legal Process and Shades of Freedom. The first volume, In the Matter of Color, is a definitive history of slavery, race, and constitutional law, which received several national and international awards. The second volume, Shades of Freedom,
provides a history of the African American struggle for racial equality in America. Judge Higginbotham’s scholarly works also include Race, Values, and the Early American Legal Process and African Americans and the Living Constitution, which he coedited with John Hope Franklin and Genna Rae McNeil. In addition to these books, he published numerous research articles and legal papers. Prior to his death, he was writing the third and fourth books in the multivolume series, a book titled Race and the American and South African Legal Process, and an autobiography. Finally, the legacy of A. Leon Higginbotham Jr., one of America’s most prominent and influential judges, should inspire Black students not only to achieve academic excellence but also to become human rights advocates for all members of society for generations to come.

As part of this special tribute to A. Leon Higginbotham Jr., Hilary Hurd, editor of Black Issues in Higher Education, granted me permission to reprint Ronald Waters’ article entitled “Judge Higginbotham’s Legal Legacy” in The Black Student’s Guide to Graduate and Professional School Success.

Vernon L. Farmer
The passing of Judge A. Leon Higginbotham Jr., one of the most distinguished African American jurists of this century, has left a gaping void in the leadership of our community that will be difficult to fill. I say this because, even though as a lawyer and judge he dealt with many civil matters, nevertheless, the deep intensity of his commitment to social justice and its expression in his pursuit of equal rights for Blacks was nothing short of legendary.

Indeed, at the time Thurgood Marshall resigned from the Supreme Court on June 27, 1991, there was considerable hope that someone in the Thurgood Marshall tradition would be chosen to fill that vacancy someone whose legal qualifications were outstanding, whose record of service to the cause of equal justice was deep, and whose views were in the sync with the Black community. Thus, Leon Higginbotham’s name was prominently tossed up, along with others who also held the values of the civil rights movement close.

Higginbotham was a natural to be considered for the Court and not only because he was a graduate of Yale law. From the time he was named to the federal bench in 1964 at the age of 36, to 1989 when he was elevated to Chief Judge of the Court of Appeals, he had put together an outstanding record of achievement.

So, it was with utter shock and dismay that one witnessed the cruel spectacle of the elevation of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court by the right wing conservative element of the Republican Party. With this appointment, the Thurgood Marshall tradition of commitment to civil rights was broken. A Black lawyer who acts as a proxy to the White conservative movement was installed and a voice for the majority of the Black community on the highest court of the land was vitiated. This was a step that has profoundly wounded Black America.
One of the promises of our participation in the political system through the civil rights movement was that our view would be fairly reflected in the political system through men and women who respected that tradition and that legacy. The respect for this legacy is due because it was purchased at the price of personal and collective insult and injury that was meted out solely because of race. Leon Higginbotham was of the generation that experienced such insults directly. He often spoke of the difficulties that he faced while an undergraduate at Purdue University, as a student at Yale law, trying to get a job as a lawyer, in the practice of law—in short, at every step of his development. The experienced men and women of his generation fueled their strong determination to end racism by joining the collective efforts by a variety of groups fighting it.

While Leon Higginbotham Jr. was insulated from direct involvement in the Civil Rights Movement during most of the 60s and 70s as a sitting federal judge, he nonetheless mentored some of the most accomplished civil rights lawyers today.

He went to great lengths to try to call Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas to historical accountability. One of his most cited works is his “Open letter to Judge Clarence Thomas from a Federal Judicial Colleague.” In this legal memorandum framed as letter, he attempted to remind Justice Thomas of his legal legacy. Thus, he wrote: “While much has been said about your admirable determination to overcome terrible obstacles, it is also important to remember how you arrived where you are now, because you didn’t get there by yourself.”

So I as many other Americans, Black and White are saddened by the fact that this Titan of the law and champion of the oppressed will no longer be among us. His passing depletes the ranks of those who are uncompromising in their use of the law to oppose racist practices in society. And it does not appear that the avocation of civil rights law is as attractive to the younger generation. As such, the ranks of civil rights law advocates are not receiving the replenishment that is needed to continue to fight against both old and modern racism. There needs to be a fitting memorial to Judge A. Leon Higginbotham Jr. that would insure that the ranks of those trained and committed to civil rights law will continue to grow.

In this, the need for civil rights lawyers is not merely an American avocation related to Blacks. Almost anywhere in the world one travels as an African American, he or she is aware that the world respects the monumental struggle that we have waged for human rights. We should build on this legacy—both domestically and, increasingly, as a part of the global community where the need for human rights is urgent and critical. I believe that this would help to continue to move his community forward—even in his absence.

Dr. Ronald Walters
Professor of Political Science, University of Maryland
Reprinted from Black Issues in Higher Education 15(23), 120, January 7, 1999
Acknowledgments

I have had a long-standing commitment and interest in increasing opportunities for Black students to obtain a graduate education. Therefore, it was with enthusiasm that I undertook the task of editing The Black Student’s Guide to Graduate and Professional School Success. I am greatly indebted to many individuals for their advice, encouragement, and support during the various phases of this research project. A very special debt of gratitude is owed to the sixty-two distinguished scholars, including sixty Blacks, one Native American, and one White American, who wrote chapters and essays for this book. I also owe a great deal of gratitude to the twenty-seven Black students who wrote essays about their personal trials and triumphs in pursuit of their graduate and professional degrees. It is truly the stories that these students describe in their essays that help bring this book to life.

A special thanks is extended to Greenwood Press and Lynn Taylor, Jane Garry, and Marcia Goldstein, for giving me the opportunity to publish the third Black Student’s Guide for Greenwood. I am particularly indebted to them for their sustaining support, editorial suggestions, and overall assistance with the manuscript throughout its various stages. I am deeply indebted to Ernesta P. Pendleton and Robby Lindsay for their editorial comments and advice, for without their input this book most certainly would have stagnated at some point. My deep appreciation and thanks are extended to Evelyn Shepherd-Wynn, who worked tirelessly during the three-year span of this research project. Her intelligence, good judgment, and editorial expertise helped to improve the final manuscript considerably. A very special note of appreciation is extended to Octavia Daniels, Angela Morris, and Xanthe Seals, student research assistants, for helping to carry out some
of the research and logistical tasks essential in preparing the final manuscript for publication.

I would like to acknowledge with gratitude the editors of the first two Black Student’s Guides published by Greenwood Press: William J. Ekeler, editor of *The Black Student’s Guide to High School Success*, and Ruby D. Higgins, Clidie B. Cook, William J. Ekeler, R. McLaran Sawyer, and Keith W. Prichard, editors of *The Black Student’s Guide to College Success*. Their scholarly work served as a catalyst for *The Black Student’s Guide to Graduate and Professional School Success*. Finally, I would like to acknowledge with gratitude all of the Black scholars who came before me and who inspired me to publish this book.
Introduction

This book is the product of the editor’s commitment to increasing opportunities for Blacks in graduate education. *The Black Student’s Guide to Graduate and Professional School Success* is an informative book designed and written specifically for Black students to help them structure graduate and professional careers. The book provides background information critical to helping Black students make informed decisions about graduate education. In addition, the book guides them through the process of preparing for standardized tests; negotiating admission; finding a faculty mentor; choosing the right field of study; selecting the best curriculum; obtaining teaching, administrative, and research assistantships and internships; adjusting to the campus environment; adjusting to technology; engaging in research and publishing; developing a global identity; maintaining Black pride and self-esteem; interacting with other racial and ethnic groups; and focusing on the overall importance of graduate education. The book draws Black students’ attention to the advantages and benefits as well as to the problems and roadblocks they may encounter enroute to a graduate and/or professional degree.

In laying the foundation for writing *The Black Student’s Guide to Graduate and Professional School Success*, the editor and his research team examined hundreds of issues of Black publications, including *The Black Collegian, Black Enterprise, Black Excellence, Black Issues in Higher Education, Crisis, Ebony, Jet*, and the *Journal of Black Higher Education*, to identify Black authors from different types of higher education institutions and from varied professions and regions in the nation to make the book a nationally oriented publication. Evidence of exemplary research and publication, teaching and other creative work, community and public service,
and career field contribution were the criteria used to identify the authors. The authors selected are viewed by the editor as role models that Black students can emulate in their pursuit of a graduate education. Therefore, in reading the chapters in this book, Black students should look for authors who have succeeded in achieving educational and career goals similar to their own and with whom they can personally identify. All of the contributing authors in this book have been successful, and so can Black students!

The Black publications identified above were examined to develop a number of themes and titles for chapters and essays to be included in this book. In addition, the editor and his research team participated in several National Black Graduate Students’ Conferences to solicit input from members regarding the relationship of the themes and titles to the main theme of the book. As a result of the examination of the Black publications and the dialogue with Black graduate students, authors were selected to write chapters and essays addressing the themes and titles of the book. In addition, the authors who wrote chapters for this book were asked to help identify outstanding Black students to write essays describing their experiences in graduate and professional school. All of the authors were given considerable latitude in expressing their own ideas and thoughts. They were asked to be straightforward in sharing their experiences and in offering their advice to Black students. More specifically, they were asked to write from an intellectual and analytical perspective, drawing upon their experiential base of knowledge in easy and understandable language and providing advice and information to Black students on how to prepare for and succeed in graduate and professional school.

The Black Student’s Guide to Graduate and Professional School Success is organized into three major parts. In Part I, “How to Become a Successful Student in Graduate and Professional School,” twenty Black scholars and one White scholar wrote chapters about how to prepare for and succeed in graduate and professional school. In Part II, “How I Succeeded in Graduate and Professional School and in My Career Field,” thirty-nine Black scholars and one Native American from varied professions wrote essays to share experiences that led to their graduate and professional career success.

In Part III, “How Contemporary Students in Graduate and Professional School Are Succeeding,” twenty-seven outstanding Black graduate and professional students wrote essays of an autobiographical nature describing their accomplishments. These student essays personify much of the advice and information provided in the chapters and essays in Parts I and II and humanize, personalize, and reinforce the main theme of the book by giving credit where credit is due. In cases where parents, teachers, counselors, coaches, religious and community leaders, or other significant individuals were especially helpful, the students were encouraged to note their contributions. In these essays, Black graduate students recount their problems, their solutions, and their successes.
It is no doubt that in the past, many Black students have been successful in graduate and professional school without being exposed to much of the information in this book. Perhaps, though, many of the problems and roadblocks they may have encountered could have been avoided or minimized had they been able to draw upon the experiences and advice of the authors in *The Black Student’s Guide to Graduate and Professional School Success*. Meanwhile, Black students who were not successful in the past may have benefited from it, too.

Finally, the editor strongly recommends that Black students in undergraduate, graduate, and professional school as well as those in other educational levels read this book seriously. It is conceivable that you may wish to read Parts II or III or both before reading Part I because these parts are more inspirational while Part I is more action oriented. Parts II and III should certainly inspire and encourage you to consider a graduate or professional degree. In reading Parts II and III, you will find that the essays written by the authors are so structured that they can be used as road maps describing various routes on your journey to a graduate education. You will undoubtedly discover one or more essays that you can choose to help guide you toward a graduate or professional degree. You will also find that some of the essays as well as chapters will be more beneficial to you than others. Although you may initially choose to read the book in parts, it would be extremely wise to read it in its entirety to become familiar with the process required for entry and success in graduate and professional school as described in Part I. Reading the entire book will help you develop the right questions and arrive at the right answers required to make informed decisions about graduate education. Read them all; make note of what you find to be appropriate and helpful and use it. It is my hope that the chapters and essays in this book will inspire and encourage you to strive for excellence.

In addition to identifying various road maps to follow, you will notice that many of the authors had help along the way and are quite generous in acknowledging the help they received from others during their graduate education. In these chapters and essays, the authors are now attempting to extend a helping hand to you. While reading this book, keep in mind the positive strides that Black students have made in graduate education over the past decades. Read the book not only for the important information it offers but also for the inspiration it provides. Remember, success cannot be achieved without struggle. Therefore, I challenge you to make the sacrifices and the tough decisions necessary to be successful. Finally, *The Black Student’s Guide to Graduate and Professional School Success* will help you make intelligent choices in structuring your graduate education. But above all, as you read the chapters and essays, remember, if they could do it, so can you!

*Vernon L. Farmer*
PART I

HOW TO BECOME A SUCCESSFUL STUDENT IN GRADUATE AND PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL
Making Sure You Have the “Right Stuff”
to Be Successful in Graduate
and Professional School

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TIME AND PLACE
A discussion takes place in my office with an undergraduate who is contemplating graduate study. If there is one overriding reason for you to consider graduate or professional study, it is because you have an inquisitive mind and love to learn. You might ask yourself, Why do I want a graduate degree? What can I do with it that I can’t do without it? What will it do for me? Is it the earning power that I am seeking? A certain lifestyle? Options for a variety of jobs? Is it that I want to be a role model for other Black students? Do I just want to delay commitment to a career? Am I considering it because my favorite faculty adviser thinks I should? Should I go for a master’s degree or a Ph.D.? For an M.D. or an MBA? Do I have what it takes to succeed—in other words, do I have the right stuff?

Tom Wolfe’s book *The Right Stuff* is about American heroism. It is said that Wolfe began writing it at a time when it was unfashionable to contemplate heroism. He was writing about test pilots in America’s manned space program. These were men who lived fast lives with dangerous machines. Wolfe had the reader to understand that these men and their wives were brave beyond compare. Some Black students would contend that at the beginning of the twenty-first century it is unfashionable for them to contemplate graduate study. After all, the economy is good; people are making big
money without a graduate degree. Those who are skilled in the use of computers are in demand, and to get a job in that area, one does not need a graduate degree. Besides, affirmative action programs are under attack, multi-cultural scholarship is repudiated, and the need for ethnic studies departments is heavily criticized. So, why should I even think about it?

Consider this: making big money and just getting a job are the wrong reasons for considering graduate study. So is the status of affirmative action. The question has to do with achieving admission to graduate study. It is not about whether one should attend graduate school. And ethnic studies constitute only one academic area of study. It is more about curriculum and pedagogical issues, and not whether to attend. So if you have an inquisitive mind and love to learn, then you are ready to consider whether you have the right stuff to succeed.

A graduate student is distinguished from a professional student. Graduate students are enrolled in graduate degree programs in pursuit of master’s or research doctoral degrees that will prepare them for careers in academe, business and industry, or government service. Professional students on the other hand are typically enrolled in degree programs preparing them for practice in fields such as medicine, dentistry, and law. The nature of the programs determines the milieu in which the student matriculates. Yet the demands are sufficiently similar that a discussion of the right stuff can apply to both kinds of study. Both are tough, demanding, and mind-stretching. You never imagined that there would be so much to learn; you never knew that so many people had created vast amounts of knowledge that you are required to learn before you can go further than they went. Course work is intense, concepts are more complex than those presented in your undergraduate education, you have a shorter time for learning, and it seems that you must use every waking hour in this singular pursuit. When I use the term graduate study, I will be referring to both academic and professional programs.

Let’s consider what’s involved in the right stuff—what qualities are required?

ABILITY

Check out your college grade point average. Do you meet the minimum required for the graduate programs that interest you? You should also examine your entire college transcript. Both pieces of information will help you to determine whether you have prepared yourself for the intellectual rigor required for graduate study. They will show not only that you have the intelligence but also that you are focused and goal-oriented—that you can survive some pretty turbulent years.

Notice that I did not specify looking at your grade point average alone. Student performance can vary over the college years depending on a variety
of factors. Sometimes the early years are ones of floundering, when there is little interest in a specific course of study. This can change once you select a major and become intensely interested in a field. A situation such as this can be reflected in an overall GPA that is lower than required for graduate study. Examining the grades in your major might reveal a different commentary on your ability. Such a scenario will require some explaining once you apply for admission, but it is important for you to understand this.

Your scores on entrance tests also indicate ability. In the admission process, there is considerable variability in the weight given to scores on tests such as the Graduate Record Examination (GRE). They are the great bugaboo, with much of the research on tests suggesting that Black students—as a cohort—consistently score lower than other students do. This need not be the case, for the great responsibility is on you the student to invest your intelligence—your time and energy—in your studies. You have to produce. If you want to go to graduate school, learn all you can and take advantage of all the resources available to do so. If such tests are required by your intended department, make sure that you learn all you can about the test and prepare well, including taking advantage of coaching opportunities provided by the test makers themselves. (For example, see the GRE Web site: http://www.gre.org.)

FINANCIAL RESOURCES

Graduate study is expensive. Depending on the field, you can matriculate on either a part-time or a full-time basis. Those who elect to study part-time tend to do so because of limited financial resources or related obligations. Thus they hold full-time jobs and spread the time for earning the degree over a comparatively longer period of time.

Large numbers of students prefer to study full-time where tuition, fees, books, and materials are only one part of the demands on resources. Housing and travel become added ingredients. If there are family members who depend on you, they must be considered also. Just as graduate study requires money, however, money is available. You should begin to plan early. Apply to the university and academic department that you contemplate attending, and inquire into a select number of financial aid resources outside the university.

Financing for graduate education can take many forms, and it is different from financial aid for undergraduate study. Whereas undergraduate support is based primarily on need, graduate aid is most often based on academic merit. Here again your performance in undergraduate school is significant. Remember that a fine academic record can help you to secure funds for further study.

Financial support for graduate study varies with the degree you pursue and your field of study. Substantially more funding is available for doctoral
study than for master’s degrees, some fields—such as the sciences—have more funds available than do the humanities and education, for example. The type of support also varies, including assistantships, grants, and fellowships. Some students value a grant or fellowship much more highly than an assistantship because the former suggests that you are not obligated to do any work. In my view, the best of all worlds would include a combination of these types of support. Because assistantships oblige students to interact with professors and other students, they go a long way toward preventing isolation and creating the kinds of networks that are invaluable in graduate study. Take advantage of the opportunity to work in your department. Even if you receive a fellowship, being a research assistant or a teaching assistant puts you in contact with professors and other students. It helps you to become an integral part of the graduate environment. A teaching or graduate assistantship is very helpful because either one helps to socialize you—if you are interested in becoming a college professor—to various aspects of the job.

Have you chosen your field of study? The certainty with which you apply for a field—along with the grade point average mentioned above—is also considered in the award of financial support.

YOUR PROSPECTIVE DEPARTMENT

The administration of graduate study is decentralized. For one contemplating admission, in reality this means that you apply to an academic department that interests you rather than to the university. Graduate departments vary in specialties and emphases. For example, a department of psychology at one university could offer a degree in counseling psychology, whereas a department at another would not. One department could be strong in experimental psychology while weak in clinical. It is important to be able to match your interests with the strengths of a given department so that upon application you can make a strong case for admission based not only on the department’s strengths but upon your preparation and interests as well.

Search for departments and universities where the presence of Black students is valued. A diverse faculty is one sign, although such diversity might not be present in your department. Faculty mentoring is another sign to look for. A caring attitude among faculty over and beyond advice on courses to take lets students know that they will be regarded as developing professionals, not just as vessels for the receipt and production of knowledge. Examine notices on the bulletin board about such things as departmental activities for students, content of courses, student organizations, field trips, and visiting lecturers. All of this will give you an idea about the environment that Black students will find at the institution. So do your homework; just as the department is examining your credentials, you should be examining the environment.
YOUR BACCALAUREATE INSTITUTION

Another aspect of right stuff belongs to the institution that conferred your bachelor’s degree. It should be accredited and should possess a strong record of preparation of students in your major. Professors at your institution should be known—at least by reputation—to colleagues in the department to which you are applying.

Most graduate institutions are pretty large. If you are graduating from a small college, consider your ability to be comfortable in a much larger, perhaps less personal environment. If you are graduating from a single-sex institution—women’s college or men’s college—consider your ability to be comfortable in a heterogeneous setting. Visit graduate institutions and talk with other graduate students who attended similar undergraduate institutions about their transition.

DELAYING GRADUATE STUDY

Consider whether you have had experience working in your chosen field of study. This might work both for and against you. In some fields—such as education—experience as a teacher goes a long way in solidifying in your own mind that this is an appropriate field for you. In one of the sciences—such as chemistry—a job could work against you if in the intervening years you have failed to keep up with developments in your field. Although there might be good reasons for delaying entry into graduate study, consider what it will take for you to get back into the habit of being a student. After all, being a student will likely reduce your income, and you might then have dependents that you did not have as a college student. Also, your mind might be reluctant to buckle down and study.

REFERENCES

Whether we like it or not, the individuals you have asked—as well as some whom you may not have asked—to support your application for graduate study play a crucial role in your acceptance. These include former professors, supervisors of your fieldwork or internships—persons who can speak about your performance as it relates to your chosen field; they can cite examples of your work with them—they have firsthand knowledge. They should be individuals who are willing to make a prediction about your success in the future. Letters from your minister, neighbors, and the like won’t cut it.

YOUR AREA OF STUDY

A variety of experiences can assist you in deciding what your field of study should be. These include course work, internships and fieldwork, and
discussions with professors, persons working in the field, and students already enrolled in graduate study. The more certain you are about the area of study, the more convincing you can be in your application for admission.

YOUR HEALTH

Do you have the stamina needed to take the long nights and missed meals, to satisfy faculty expectations at the same time you are trying to satisfy family expectations?

When you get beyond the right stuff discussed above—ability, financial resources, references, and certainty—you should ask yourself whether you have courage enough to stay the course and to be self-directed. Are you focused? Do you know how to organize your life and be goal-oriented? Do you have the ability to delay gratification—to put off those extra activities that are just fun to do or interesting? They can be as varied as attending all of the season’s football games or chairing a committee in your Greek-letter organization. The dropout rate is pretty high and is often attributed to the lack of the stuff listed above. What I am suggesting is that graduate study involves stress of the kind that you might not have experienced before. Be sure that you listen to you body and take care of yourself. That includes rest and relaxation, exercise, and proper nutrition. Most students master these demands and graduate as stronger individuals. However, if you ever suspect that you are having emotional problems, seek help immediately from campus medical and counseling services.

WOMEN STUDENTS

Although the number of women enrolling in graduate school is increasing, their numbers compared with those of men make them a minority. There are some fields, however, where the number of men and women is about equal and some in which there are more women. Pressures faced by women graduate students are a subset of those faced by all graduate students. Besides the possibility of being in a minority, some women question their fit. Some feel as if they don’t belong. They question their competence and doubt their ability to do independent work. Some report problems finding mentors. For some, having to balance the demands of family, work, and school adds to the ordinary stresses of graduate study. Where advisers are concerned, women sometimes feel more comfortable with women faculty members than with men. If you are a woman, it is certainly important to have women to whom you can turn. When considering a prospective graduate department, especially one in a traditionally male field, determine whether there are women present on the faculty to serve as advisers, mentors, and role models.
BEING A BLACK STUDENT

Let me turn to a discussion about being a Black student studying for a graduate degree. This is another subset of more general consideration of the right stuff and in some respects parallels my earlier comments about gender. Black students do not constitute a homogeneous group, and whatever I say must be understood in that context. To talk about being a Black student seems to assume that individual identity and group identity are the same. You cannot be identified by a single characteristic. You are a member of multiple groups at the same time. Your blackness will be important depending upon the setting. It will also become salient depending upon, for example, whether you are the only Black student in your department. Graduate study is a demanding undertaking, regardless of race. Yet a Black student will have to deal with the emotional impact of being different. Let's face it. Most institutions granting graduate degrees are predominantly white, and most graduate academic departments are smaller than undergraduate departments you are leaving. Being in the minority may not be new to you, which means that you know how to deal with it. For some others, it will come as a new struggle that must be addressed.

Remembering that racism is practically a hallmark of American society, faculty members and students bring with them the biases that permeate their societies. Even well-meaning individuals offend inadvertently. Nevertheless, offenses do affect the learning environment and thus must be discussed here. I probably do not need to explain stereotyping and discrimination as it pertains to relationships between majority and minority people. They color our attitudes toward ourselves as well as the attitudes of others toward us. What about an attitude that some minority students hold about themselves? It's the belief that we need to be models of some idealized perfect student; we don't need any help. This is demonstrated in unwillingness to take part in study groups, unwillingness to ask faculty members or peers to help for fear of revealing a stereotypic “weakness” or “lack of knowledge.” Clearly this attitude will have a negative impact on your achievement. Of course, some or your peers will not invite you to join study groups, in which case you should invite yourself, or start your own. By all means confer with faculty members. They are there to teach; if you don't consult with them, they can't assist you. Have confidence in yourself, but don't be afraid to ask questions. This set of attitudes is often played out in putting pressure on yourself to succeed because you are a minority student. You might find it helpful to confide in your network of friends who are in the same boat as you.

The attitudes of individuals of other races toward you might be influenced by the way they understand affirmative action. Predominant views of affirmative action characterize all Black students as inferior in ability, academic preparation, and financial resources. Fellow students and professors sometimes will say things that reflect these beliefs. I advise you to have con-
fidence in your own ability in order to keep such comments from derailing you.

Some people believe that Black students are admitted under affirmative action guidelines. This means that they believe that admission requirements have been lowered so that you can matriculate. Faculty members who believe this might hold Black students to lower standards of performance. If this happens, you might not be given tough assignments or responsibilities that are given to majority students because it is not expected that you can handle them. In other words, expectations are low.

An attitude that affirmative action has spawned among some Black people (to our detriment) is that we deserve to be held to lower standards—we ought to be given a break, as it were. Nothing could be further from the truth. There is no goal that is worth shoddy preparation or doing just enough to get by. Always strive to be the best that you can be. At the same time, however, realize that you do not have complete control of your destiny. In part, your fate is indeed controlled by others, and some of what happens might, indeed, be the result of racist beliefs.

Although I mentioned your undergraduate college in remarks above about securing admission, there is another aspect that might be especially important for Black students who are graduates of predominantly Black colleges, most of which are in the southern part of the United States. You will find that some of the mores and habits are different in predominantly white institutions—especially those outside the South. Making the transition may result in culture shock. Because a period of adjustment could detract from the ordinary transition to graduate study, it is wise to take advantage of opportunities to visit your future university before you matriculate.

Some Black students believe that White professors cannot adequately meet their needs. It is very important for Black graduate students who feel this way to find a support system and a Black mentor, particularly a Black faculty member. Let me share with you comments from a recent Black Ph.D. recipient from a predominantly White university. She told me that “there was no Black faculty member in the department—someone to give you that sense that you belong there and that there is someone you can go to with your fears, concerns, ideas. It can be very isolating at times. I was fortunate to have had persons like Professor X, Y, and Z across campus that didn’t mind listening to me. Personally, I think Black students will need that, because they are usually going into alien territory where they are often given subtle and not so subtle messages that say ‘You don’t belong here and we don’t want you here.’ ”

It is necessary that you feel that you belong, and it might be your association with Black faculty that helps you to reach that point. On the other hand, you might go to graduate school with a comfortable sense of self and therefore experience little anxiety about your sense of belonging. The key is
to develop a good relationship with someone whom you respect and who has your best interests at heart, regardless of race.

Create your own community. If being isolated gives you pause, you can also reach out to Black students in other departments. Even national gatherings of Black students offer community. One example is the National Black Graduate Student Association (e-mail: NBGSA@ccaix.jsums.edu). Take advantage of opportunities to attend national gatherings in your academic discipline. You are likely to meet other Black students who are specializing in your area and thus plant the seeds for a network of scholars. You can share your experiences and thus support each other.

A broader, more carefully developed community is sometimes needed to validate your purpose for engaging in graduate study. Family and friends, for instance, do not always understand the purpose of graduate study—in contrast to professional study like medicine or law. Some might question the time, expense, and forgone income, and even question your sanity. To say the least, these questions become detractors. In order to stay the course, you will have to cultivate a community of supporters—those people who you know are pulling for you.

Some of these folk can be regarded as mentors. To be sure, you will need more than one. Your research adviser will be one. That person will see you through completion of your thesis or dissertation and is likely to help you get a job, write references for you, and guide you in organizing your time. Another mentor might be the one who takes an interest in you and your family or helps you think through a personal crisis. Some mentors will sit and listen to you as you recite your dreams and aspirations, your disappointments, and your quandaries. Each one is critical to your making it through graduate school.

Your community need not be limited to your department or institution; it could be spread over several institutions, and it could involve townspeople in the university community. Many Black graduate students participate in local churches and thereby strengthen their spiritual life. Know that there are people pulling for you. They may not necessarily be those you expect to do so. Include faculty. People who might become supporters don’t always approach you; you must take the initiative. Cultivate a community of supporters who will serve your needs in a wide range of ways.

If things are not working out, change majors or even schools. Graduate study is difficult, and there may be very good reasons to shift to a different department or even to drop out altogether. It’s one thing to shift directions because you have reevaluated your life situation. It’s another to be anxious over one of the many hurdles placed before you. The former reason is reasonable; the latter—the hurdles—with some help, can be taken in your stride. In either case, don’t burn bridges behind you. You will benefit from good references from former advisers and professors.
DO YOU STILL WANT TO PURSUE GRADUATE STUDY?

Now that you have considered what it takes—*the right stuff*—I challenge you to remember that we need you—a Black intellectual—among the leadership in academe, in business and industry, in politics, in communities—in every walk of life. The good news is that in the fall of 1997 approximately eighty-two thousand Black students were enrolled in graduate school. That is a substantial group of individuals who had the courage to take such a giant step. It’s all about heroism and resolve. The bad news is that they represented only 9 percent of all enrolled U.S. citizens and permanent residents. Furthermore, Black students were only 9 percent of all degree recipients. Note also that most Black people earn degrees in the fields of education, business, and the social sciences. Although it is essential that they serve well in their chosen fields, we need to play catch-up in other fields such as biological sciences and engineering. So don’t shy away from study in those fields.

In sum, *the right stuff* includes ability, your prospective department, and your baccalaureate institution. It also includes your decision as to whether you will delay study, the financial resources available to you, the people you invite to serve as references, and how certain you are about your chosen area of study. You must give special attention to your attitude about yourself as a Black person and the way you deal with race in America. If you can say “Yes, I have the right stuff,” it doesn’t matter whether it’s fashionable; it’s heroic. You will swell the numbers of Black degree recipients. And besides, you’ll have a great time.
You will receive a great deal of advice on many useful topics in this publication. I am going to concentrate on advice to get into school. I will lead into what to do after you are in school, but that will be dealt with in more detail elsewhere.

YOUR REASONS FOR POSTGRADUATE STUDY

Why do you want to do postgraduate study in this particular area? This may seem like an obvious question, but it is one that you and other applicants will be answering in one way or another in the application process. Have you thought about your answer? Have you read publications or checked the Internet on the field? Have you talked to an adviser or career counselor about the area? Have you consulted with students currently in school in your proposed field to get their reactions? Have you discussed what it’s like to work in the field with someone currently employed in it? Do all these things and more before you do anything further. If it looks good, proceed to the next step.

ASSESSING YOUR STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

Do you know your strengths and weaknesses? This is a particularly difficult question for a Black student for a number of reasons. First, you may
have less clear information about your potential than applicants from other races have. One of the long-term legacies of racism is that we have not developed measures that are as valid in telling us about your potential as we have for other students. Tests such as the Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SAT), the Graduate Record Examination (GRE), and the Medical College Admission Test (MCAT) don’t work so well for you, but many schools will employ them anyway out of habit or ignorance (Sedlacek, 1998a,b). So you need a way to figure out how first to evaluate yourself honestly and then to present that information to the school(s) to which you are applying.

I recommend that you evaluate yourself on a set of what I call noncognitive variables. Nearly all schools in all fields will be interested in how you look on such variables, but they will vary in their manner and specificity of assessing them. You may work them into an essay, an interview, a letter, a recommendation, or a phone call, but get them into your application file somehow.

NONCOGNITIVE VARIABLES

Why should you care about noncognitive variables? Because they may help you present some of your outstanding qualities that would otherwise be missed. Sternberg (1985) has suggested that there are three kinds of intelligence: analytic, which is verbal and math problem solving such as we measure on standardized tests; experiential, which is the ability to be creative or adaptive; and contextual, which is the ability to negotiate a system. You may not show what you really can do through your analytic ability and may need to stress your experiential and contextual intelligence in your application. Why? Because dealing with racism in your life has probably caused you to develop those other abilities in order to survive and succeed. It’s not fair, and most schools do not understand this or have a systematic way to get at your true abilities, but that’s the way it is. This is one of the best examples of racism we currently have in our education system. But you can beat it by making sure all your abilities get presented. Table 2.1 describes some noncognitive variables that get at your experiential and contextual intelligence. Many schools in different fields use this list or a similar one (Sedlacek, 1998a,b). So check yourself on the list to see whether you are on the high or low side on each scale. Since we are not always so honest with ourselves, have someone who knows you well and can “give it to you straight” evaluate you on the dimensions as well. Don’t hustle yourself. A key strategy for handling a system is self-knowledge. You may not choose to share your limitations, but you should know what they are. Once you have figured out your strengths and weaknesses, you are ready for the next step.
Can you work on your weaknesses? Yes, the noncognitive variables were designed to provide for your improvement on each. They are changeable characteristics. Work with an adviser or a counselor, a good friend, or a family member whenever possible in order to improve yourself on the noncognitive variables. It’s tough to go it alone (see “Strong support person” in Table 2.1). The more time prior to application you have to improve your shortcomings, the better applicant you will make. I will give some advice on working on each of the dimensions, which may be helpful.

**Positive Self-Concept**

Try to imagine yourself as a student in the program you wish to enter. Is it you? Will you seem out of place? These are common concerns of Black students in graduate and professional school. The key here is not that you feel generally good about yourself but that you feel good about yourself as a student or professional in your field. Discuss these questions with any Black students or professionals you know, and see what things came up for them and how they handled them. Also, remember your strengths. You have gotten this far on your ability. Where do you show it? All those noncognitive dimensions are forms of ability.

**Realistic Self-Appraisal**

Using feedback to improve yourself is an important positive attribute. The biggest problem you may have is that because of racism not all the feedback you get is accurate. Some will intentionally mislead you; others will not understand the experiences you have had or your cultural context and will give unintentionally uninformed feedback on your abilities. This feedback can be overly positive as well as overly negative. Many who are uncomfortable with you or have lower expectations of you will give you more praise than you deserve. You have to have the ability to sort through the “noise” in the system and know what is useful and what isn’t. This is where knowing yourself and having a strong support person who can be honest with you become important.

**Understand and Deal with Racism**

I have used the word *racism* several times; now I will define it. Racism is action taken by individuals or institutions (e.g., social systems) that results in negative outcomes for members of a certain group, independent of other considerations. Results, not intentions, count here. If an individual or system has the power to influence you, what happens to you is what is important, not