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# **Frederick Douglass in Pennsylvania Strategies and Experiences Towards Achieving Curriculum Diversity**

**C. James Trotman**

West Chester University in West Chester, Pa.

**“The presenter provides an overview of the Frederick Douglass Institute activities that address the strategies and experiences associated with the institute’s history to date.”**

Frederick Douglass [1818-1895]

Who was he and what did he accomplish? Born in Tuckahoe, Maryland, Douglass escaped from chattel slavery in 1838 to become one of his century's most eloquent spokesmen for freedom for African Americans and all others denied the promise of American values and democratic principles. The Abolitionists knew him as the representative voice declaring the slave's desire and human right to be free. In an age of oratory, the self-taught Douglass added to his speaking brilliance the famous 1845 publication "The Narrative of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave," written by himself. He followed that by founding "The North Star" in 1847, thus adding journalism to his widening influence and authority. The Suffrage Movement knew him as the only public male figure to support the Declaration of Sentiments and women's rights to vote at the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848. American presidents from Abraham Lincoln through Grover Cleveland knew Douglass as advisor and consultant on many public issues. The international community knew the great patriot as the first Black ambassador to Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

By the time of his death in 1895, Frederick Douglass, recognized as the Sage of Anacostia, was an authentic American hero, an icon. His life continues to be a source of inspiration for artists and writers, historians and cultural preservationists.

## **Background and History**

The Frederick Douglass Institute and West Chester University is named for this most distinguished and timeless voice for freedom. His connection with West Chester, Pennsylvania is personal and historical. The great American patriot was a frequent visitor and speaker in West Chester after his escape from slavery in 1838. He gave his last public lecture on West Chester's campus as an invited guest on February 1, 1895, just 19 days before he died. A centennial celebration of Douglass's life and times was the focus of an academic conference on October 12 and 13, 1994. "Voices of the Nineteenth Century: The Roots and Realities of Multiculturalism" drew 70 scholars from 100 institutions to West Chester, and introduced this extraordinary American to a new generation.

Douglass is the human example for the Institute, which is committed to the values of education and public service that his life richly reflected. The Institute grew out of the successful response of the academic and educational community at-large to the conference and to the subsequent academic programs and experiences that have followed.

## **Rationale for the Institute**

Central to the opening of the institute in 1995 was the concept that it would be a catalyst

for multicultural activity on West Chester's campus and throughout Pennsylvania's state system of higher education. Secondly, institute leaders believed that Douglass's name and legacy would create opportunities for the historically underrepresented on campus, especially in the classroom where the themes of race, gender and ethnicity would assume greater cognitive recognition. Plans were made to include teachers and educators at all levels, as well as public and private institutions (libraries, museums, cultural centers) that would cosponsor forums, lectures and exhibits around Douglass (his era, and settings designed to address today's social themes of equity and representation, which coincidentally are suggested topics of the conference).

### **Diversity in the Institute**

Using these points, I will provide an overview of institute activities that will address the strategies and experiences associated with the institute's history to date. They are diverse. They range from the uses of Douglass's writings and speeches in the university curriculum to examining the processes of reading and writing for students across the curriculum *K-12*, to encouraging teachers to engage the importance of books on slavery and pluralistic views of North American society and culture.

With two handouts, I will further discuss program and administrative initiatives involving, for example, the National Park Service and the Smithsonian Museums. I will also discuss the Douglass Institute's dedication to stimulating the historically oppressed to become more responsive and involved in matters affecting their own destiny, sense of history and culture. The focus in this section will be to emphasize increasing the number of ethnic minorities through the institute, with the result that diversity has both a human and curricular outcome. Examples will include the activities of public school teachers, the creation of Frederick Douglass Summer Teaching Scholars, Frederick Douglass Graduate Assistantships, and the creation in Pennsylvania of a Frederick Douglass Institute Partnership, a collaborative involving twelve of the fourteen state-owned campuses.

Finally, I will outline the resistance to multiculturalism and to the Douglass Institute from the perspective of teachers, administrators and school districts. I will outline patterns of overt and subtle resistance to the project at *K-12* and beyond. Two more handouts will show the nature of arguments that have been used to discourage districts, colleges and universities from investing in similar projects. The reasoning generally includes "overcrowded curriculum," seeing interdisciplinary approaches as territorial invasions of one's discipline, the subject of race as overstated, gender blindness, etc.

### **Institute Outcomes and National Implications**

To date the Frederick Douglass Institute at West Chester University has positioned itself to engage some of the most important issues driving the questions of curriculum diversity today. Using Frederick Douglass as icon and influence, the programs of the institute offers some insights into what can be done nationally to promote diversity in the curriculum. I will conclude the address by highlighting the following:

1. The possibilities of a national Frederick Douglass Program in elementary and secondary schools, public and independent institutions;
2. The role of schools named for Frederick Douglass;
3. The role of historically Black colleges as leaders in a national Douglass Schools Program;
4. Linkage with national programs such as the Underground Railroad and the

National Endowment for the Humanities, and its programs in preservation and public programming.

**PRESENTER:**

**C. James Trotman** is professor of English and founding director of The Frederick Douglass Institute at West Chester University in West Chester, Pennsylvania. He teaches courses in American ethnic literatures, with a focus on the theory and writings of Black writers in America, African American religious history and in applied pedagogy in the teaching of English. His most recent book is "Langston Hughes: The Man, The Myth, and His Continuing Influence" (Garland Press~ 1995). Dr. Trotman is currently Chair of the Pennsylvania Humanities Council and Vice-Chair of the Bicentennial Committee of the Borough of West Chester, Penn. He lives in West Chester, Penn. with his family.