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Affirming Our Commitment to Diversity: The Oakland University Trustee Academic Success Scholarship Program

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Oakland University

Gloria Sosa

Oakland University

“If today’s students are to function effectively in a global economy and society, they must develop cross-cultural understanding and communication skills as an integral part of their education.”

Oakland University is located in a northern suburb of Detroit, Michigan. Enrollment figures for the fall semester 1998 indicate that minority students constitute 12 percent of Oakland's undergraduate population of over 11,000 students. Of those students, seven percent are African American. In both its Strategic Plan 1995-2001 and a recent policy document titled, "Creating the Future," Oakland University states one of its highest institutional priorities to be the recruitment, 'retention and graduation of a richly diverse student body equipped with cross cultural and leadership skills necessary to ensure success in a global economy. Oakland University's Trustee Academic Success (OUTAS) Scholarship Program is dedicated to achieving that same goal. The program is becoming a national model for retaining and graduating a diverse group of high achieving university students. This model can also be replicated in programs that target other student groups.

Despite challenges to preferential admission policies and race-based scholarships, recruiting and retaining students of color remains an important issue facing higher education. If today's students are to function effectively in a global economy and society, they must develop cross-cultural understanding and communication skills as an integral part of their education. Increasing campus diversity affords all students the opportunity to live, work and learn in a culturally diverse setting. The OUT AS program represents a paradigm shift from the traditional approach of serving minority students by keeping them tied academically and socially to their racial or ethnic peer group to a progressive approach that creates a satisfying, positive, learning environment for a racially and culturally diverse critical mass of high-achieving student leaders. This is achieved by offering a broad range of support services to ensure that core academic experiences are reinforced and personal and social transitions to college are successful.

The OUTAS Program is administered by the Office of Equity. It focuses on several major elements necessary to retaining and graduating students - financial assistance, psychological, academic and social support and career exploration. Scholarships are awarded each year to a diverse cohort group of entering freshmen, and are renewed annually for students who perform well academically. Frequent interaction promotes strong connections between the student and the university community and identifies the university as the student's academic home; connectivity to the university is recognized as

essential to retention, especially during the critical first year. Personal adjustment and development is stimulated by requiring exposure to professional counseling. Students are required to meet bi-weekly with their counselor during their freshman year and throughout their academic career. Students also meet weekly with a peer mentor, an upperclassman who provides support needed for a successful transition to university life. Peer mentors serve as the new student's first personal contact on campus. Based on frequent interaction and assessments, counselors and mentors make referrals to university resources provided by other departments - tutoring, financial aid assistance, student organizations, counseling, health services, internship placement and career-assessment.

The OUT AS Scholarship program's success depends on the regular interaction, even after the first year, between scholarship recipients, peer mentors and counselors to sustain the connection made between the university and the student. Regular contact and follow-up create and enhance fellowship and inspire student focus and responsibility. Academic progress is monitored through the use of mid-term progress reports completed by each student's instructors. This "early warning" system tracks the mid-semester academic performance of students and connects them to campus tutorial services. Referrals are also made by Office of Equity professionals and peer mentors who are aware of the student's progress as a result of this invasive counseling model. In addition, faculty mentoring fosters faculty-student interaction beyond the classroom setting.

The leadership development seminar, designed as a ten-week intensive academic, leadership and personal skill-building course, focuses on enhancing student involvement and leadership skills and is required in the first semester of the first year. Participation dispels feelings of alienation experienced by underrepresented students in predominantly white institutions and offers opportunities for the formation of new friendships. In this class, OUT AS students come together to learn leadership and study skills and share experiences. Career development is offered to give students a career counseling and career-related experience and includes career assessments, job shadowing, resume preparation and appropriate interviewing skills.

Early outcomes indicate that the program, whose first cohort group of students entered the university in 1994, has been effective. First-year and annual retention rates, along with persistence-to-graduation rates exceed university and national averages. Cumulative grade point average is higher for participants than for the student body at large, and the proportion of OUTAS students and underrepresented students in general who serve in leadership positions on campus (i.e. resident advisors, peer mentors, orientation group leaders) has increased measurably. The positive academic and social results are consistent with the research, which confirms that student connectivity to the university in the first semester of the first year is a chief indicator of student retention.

PRESENTERS:

Glenn McIntosh is director of both the Office of Equity and the Advising Resource Center at Oakland University (Rochester, Michigan). He is the founder of the Oakland University Trustee Academic Success Scholarship Program (OUTAS), initiated in 1994. He provides senior level administrative leadership and has written and presented many works on the development of undergraduate success strategies. His vision has inspired an institutional shift in the approach to achieving student body diversity at Oakland University. His recent appointment as director of Oakland's Advising Resource Center

affords him the opportunity to extend the successful OUT AS model to Oakland's undecided major students and provide them with the support services that will see them through graduation.

Gloria Sosa currently serves as assistant director of the Office of Equity at Oakland University. The focus of her work has been on the expansion and delivery of student support services. She initiated the Peer Mentor Program and refined and facilitated the Leadership Development Seminar, key components of Oakland's OUTAS scholarship program. Participants in the program have achieved a mean grade point average of 3.1 and an annual student retention rate that exceeds the national average.