

— CLASSIC EDITION —

# EXCELLENCE WITHOUT EXCUSE

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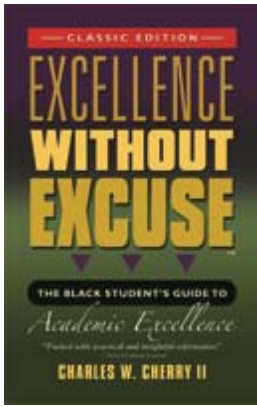
THE BLACK STUDENT'S GUIDE TO

*Academic Excellence*

*"Packed with practical and insightful information"*

— School Library Journal

**CHARLES W. CHERRY II**



Low expectations of Black students' performances and lack of study skills are two of the most important factors that cause Black students to perform poorly academically in high school and college. Author Charles W. Cherry II, who earned two masters-level degrees simultaneously, focuses on teaching skills like time management, goal-setting, aggressive listening, speed reading, effective note-taking, library and computer research, test-taking and memory systems, image management, and self-knowledge to improve Black students' scholastic performances.

## **EXCELLENCE WITHOUT EXCUSE™: The Black Student's Guide to Academic Excellence (Classic Edition)**

By Charles W. Cherry II

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**(CLASSIC EDITION)**  
**The Black Student's Guide To Academic Excellence**  
by Charles W. Cherry II

Published by International Scholastic Press, LLC, Plantation,  
Florida, USA.

On the Web: [www.excellencewithoutexcuse.com](http://www.excellencewithoutexcuse.com)

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ISBN 978-1-56385-500-9 (Classic paperback)

ISBN 978-1-56385-499-6 (Classic e-book)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2011962289

**Publisher's Cataloging-in-Publication  
(provided by Quality Books, Inc.)**

Cherry, Charles W. (Charles William), 1956-

Excellence without excuse : the Black student's guide to academic excellence / by Charles W. Cherry II. --  
Classic ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

LCCN 2011962289

ISBN 978-1-56385-500-9 (paperback)

ISBN 978-1-56385-499-6 (ebook)

1. African Americans--Education (Higher) 2. African American college students--Attitudes. 3. Academic achievement--United States. 4. Study skills.

I. Title.

LC2781.C48 2012                    378.1'982996073  
QBI11-600234



**EXCELLENCE WITHOUT EXCUSE™  
(CLASSIC EDITION)**

THE BLACK STUDENT'S GUIDE TO ACADEMIC  
EXCELLENCE

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## **2012 INTRODUCTION TO THE CLASSIC EDITION OF 'EXCELLENCE WITHOUT EXCUSE'**

On August 13, 2009, I got this e-mail that explains why my publisher, International Scholastic Press, LLC and I decided to reprint this book (which I'll abbreviate as "EWE" from now on).

*Hello Mr. Cherry,*

*You may remember signing your book at my bookstore, Montsho Books, etc., in Orlando. The bookstore is now closed but I have a copy of Excellence Without Excuse, signed in October, 1993, when you addressed young high schoolers here.*

*I do hope you have reprinted that book again and again, and that Black students everywhere can have access to this wonderful "blueprint for success."*

*Congratulations to you for following your own good advice...for following in your father's footsteps with the Florida Courier, and for all the other successes you have achieved...giving back to the community and raising a beautiful family. You have never forgotten from whence you came and are continuing the tradition. God Bless You!*

*It's been a while but I hope you still have copies of Excellence...and that I can purchase about 30 copies for The Montsho Foundation, Inc., a non-profit literacy program designed to encourage parents to become a factor in their children's future by developing early literacy standards at home. I believe that HOME is where everything begins!*

*I'm the widow of Atty. Paul C. Perkins, and mom of Paul and Byron, both of whom are attorneys as well...Please let me know if you do have copies of your wonderful book.*

*Sincerely,  
Jackie Perkins*

My response:

*Hey, Mrs. Perkins, of course I remember. Great to hear from you!*

*Don't have any books left in print right now. Unfortunately, I let the perfect become the enemy of the good, got into the media ownership full time, and let EWE go out of print because I hadn't kept up with what's going on in education. I've been asked by literally hundreds of people to get it back out, actually took some time off to completely rewrite it, but couldn't (not to my satisfaction, anyway) because of so many changes in education, particularly with respect to the impact of computers in the classroom.*

*I've given it some rethought, and some readers have told me to focus on the human side (study skills, memory systems, etc.) rather than on the changes technology has wrought. That's what I'll do-put together a moderately revised version (not a complete rewrite). I think it's more important than ever, since Barack Obama's election has raised the bar for Black people generally & Black students particularly ("No excuses. If he can succeed, so can you, with no special consideration"). I expect to have it in print by the end of the year.*

*Love,*

*Charles*

Mrs. Perkins' response:

*Thanks for your beautiful response...which leads to my next request...that you visit Florida's still "segregated" schools, having been ignored for forty-five years the "all deliberate haste" clause in the Brown vs. Board of Education Order of 1954.*

*Please accept my suggestion that you visit the schools in Florida, speaking at every opportunity to address young men and women who are so direly in need of attention!!!! The schools are failing our young people, the neighborhoods are falling apart, and our parents are absent from the scenes.*

*Can't wait for the next printing of EWE...even a shorter version!*

## **DECISIONS, DECISIONS**

My e-mail 'conversation' with Mrs. Perkins substantially tells the story of the book and of my life in the 20 or so years that I wrote EWE.

I toured America from 1992 through 1996 giving book signings, speeches, lectures and seminars on the skills and techniques contained in EWE. I spoke to audiences at churches, community banquets, book fairs, expos, and organizational conferences and conventions. Demand for the book was consistently high.

But in 1996, I made a decision, with my brother Dr. Glenn W. Cherry, to dive full-time into the radio industry. The Cherry family had purchased a small radio station, WPUL-AM in Daytona Beach, Florida in 1988. My father Charles, Sr. had successfully operated the station in conjunction with our family-owned newspaper, the Daytona Times, and Glenn and I

believed we could build on Daddy's example and become a 'player' in the larger telecommunications industry.

So off we went. It was Glenn's goal at the time to do a billion-dollar radio deal; I agreed to use my legal skills and energy to help us all get there.

EWE was essentially placed on the shelf in 1997, when we sold all the remaining copies of the publisher's second 10,000-copy print run. In 2001, Glenn and I started Tama Broadcasting, Inc., ("tama" is a Kiswahili word for "talking drum") which, at its height, became one of America's largest Black-owned private broadcasters, owning nine FM and two AM stations in Florida, Georgia and South Carolina.

(Compare that to Clear Channel Communications which, at its height, owned more than 1,200 stations. There are more than 16,000 radio stations in this country. That lets you know how few African-Americans own radio stations.)

### **LIFE GETS IN THE WAY**

Verse 51 of Edward FitzGerald's often-quoted translation of the "Rubaiyat," written by poet/philosopher/mathematician Omar Khayyám, states as follows:

*The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ/Moves on: nor  
all thy Piety nor Wit  
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line/Nor all thy Tears  
wash out a Word of it.*

The "Moving Finger" writes in every life. Since publishing EWE in 1992, I've endured divorce, my father's death and the death of a stillborn daughter. I've weathered financial and business reversals during the corporate consolidation and



subsequent decline of the radio industry and the real estate market crash.

The good thing is that for me, the Moving Finger is still moving, and the individual story of my life is still being written. And I know that things could always have been much worse!

My mother Julia is 84 years old is still thriving. I have a loving family, including two great kids, and I'm still healthy and "clothed in my right mind," as Black church folks say. And every day I still breathe and wake up, I have a chance to enjoy a day I've never seen before, and make a positive difference in someone's life.

In the midst of all the other 'life events' I've experienced in the last 20 years or so, I've had hundreds of conversations, phone calls, and emails from folks like Mrs. Perkins asking me to "get back in the educational game" and speak directly to Black students. I recognize now that getting EWE's concepts in the hands of Black students, parents, and anyone who is interested in improving the academic performance of African-American studies is one of the things I'm on this lovely blue-green-brown planet to do.

### **WHY? AND WHY NOW?**

My original motivating factor for writing EWE some 20 years ago remains the same now as it was then: to help take Black children – especially Black boys – out of what child advocate Marian Wright Edelman accurately calls "the cradle-to-prison pipeline" that they are in if they don't receive a quality education that assists them in achieving their own personal goals.

I thought the way to do it was to speak directly to Black students, since, as my late, great Aunt Mable Barlow told me,

“Everybody’s got to row their own canoe.” If I could teach them the skills, they could succeed academically at any level. They’d be unstoppable, once they (1) set their own goals (2) understood that education was a critical component in accomplishing those goals, whatever they may be (3) learned the skills necessary to succeed academically at any level.

The motivation came out of my experience as a South Florida (Broward County/Fort Lauderdale) prosecutor in the early 1980s during the beginning of the so-called ‘war on drugs.’ In my first day in court in 1983, I’ll always remember seeing six young men handcuffed and sitting in a row of seats usually reserved for jury members seated during a jury trial. Of the six, four were Black; two were White. Of the four Blacks, three were age 25 or younger.

That first day was an omen. Black males are typically disproportionately disciplined more harshly, whether it’s educational discipline (referrals, out-of-school suspensions) or criminal justice discipline (probation, prison sentences). I saw that constantly as a prosecutor.

When I got a chance to speak to some of the young brothers who had been arrested for misdemeanors – typically for possession of marijuana – I came to understand that many of them were smart, sometimes too smart for their own good.

Many of them came to misdemeanor court without lawyers – not even public defenders. They knew they could cut a deal, pay a fine, and be back on the streets (sometimes going back dealing drugs) the same day. What they didn’t know was that they had pled “no contest” or “guilty” to an adjudication of a misdemeanor criminal offense, which gave them a criminal record that would haunt them the rest of their lives – even if no jail time was involved.

(Meanwhile, defendants with private lawyers almost never got criminal records for first-time drug offenses, even of possession of cocaine. I decided early in my prosecutorial career to treat everyone the same, whether they had lawyers representing them or not. I gave Black unrepresented defendants the same plea offer I'd give the White businessmen with the best, most expensive local legal talent.)

Some of these young Black men came from middle-class, two-parent households. But the key similarity was that almost all of them had problems in school. Either they couldn't navigate through the educational system (tests, grades, etc.) or they had come to the conclusion that school was useless to them and what they wanted to do with their lives (usually make fast money.)

The idea of writing EWE began to form in my mind after I had spent about two years as a prosecutor. I had been promoted from prosecuting misdemeanors, then to prosecuting vice and obscenity cases (mostly clerks making minimum wage working in X-rated bookstores – a waste of everyone's time). Finally, I became a felony prosecutor, handling serious offenses – including homicides.

Seeing young Black lives wasted – many times due to dumb decision-making – weighed on me, and I saw how EWE could help change lives. I went to my boss and asked for an unpaid six-month leave of absence for me to finish writing the book. He refused to give me the time off – so I quit, and eventually opened my own law practice to make a living.

I didn't know it would take me another five years to get EWE done.

## **THE PERSPECTIVE OF 'AN ANGRY BLACK MAN'**

In 2011, I had to re-read EWE so that I could digitize it or reissue it as a paperback or hardcover "Classic Edition" and as an e-book download, one of which you are reading right now.

What comes across clearly is that 20 years ago, I was angry. And I wrote it from the perspective of one 'escaped African slave' speaking to another.

But could I have been angry about in 1992, more than 125 years after American slavery was abolished?

I was angry about my treatment at the University of Florida's law school during the late 1970s, where many of my White classmates made it clear that Black folks had no business being there, and that admission via "Affirmative Action" meant that Black students were innately inferior human beings. (Florida had admitted its first Black law student less than ten years before I entered its law school.)

I was angry about the unfairness of the criminal justice system. Eventually, I saw myself as a paper-shuffler more concerned with moving cases, keeping judges from working too hard, and maintaining conviction rates rather than truly doing justice.

I was angry about seeing Black men my own age, whose youthful mistakes and bad decisions had destroyed their futures, being funneled into the only jobs they could get in crime-invested, blighted Black communities – selling drugs on the corner – with a wink and a nod from cops and politicians.

I was angry that the 1980s war on drugs had become a war on the Black community, while everyone else – fear-mongering

politicians, drug kingpins and their top management who imported drugs in Black communities, police departments that kept and spent confiscated drug money, criminal defense attorneys who were swimming in cash from arrested dealers, and South Florida banks that laundered billions in drug money – was getting paid or amassing power.

I was angry about the “Black tax” African-Americans pay from cradle to grave: higher rates of infant and child sickness and death, lower educational performance, higher murder rates, lower income levels, higher chronic illness rates, earlier deaths. (Still, some ‘Black taxes’ can be avoided, or minimized, if we did the things we know we should do, like proper eating and exercise, and making good personal decisions.)

I was angry that even when Black Americans play by the rules, the double standards apply. When we graduate from the same schools, work on the same jobs, live in the same neighborhoods, go to the same doctors, start the same businesses, and patronize the same vendors as our White neighbors, we make less money, sell our houses for less, are treated with a lower standard of care, pay more for investment capital, and are charged higher prices.

I was angry then – and I’m still angry, because many of the conditions that pissed me off in the 1980s haven’t changed. And they won’t change, even with the 2008 election of Barack Obama.

I’m angry that in so-called “post-racial America” (where did THAT designation come from?), anybody like me that speaks about proven, historically disproportionate Black pain in America is accused of “playing the race card,” which prevents any further conversation about solving historical racial inequities.

I'm angry that President Obama is the new standard by which all Black achievement is measured – rather than evaluating his election as the historical aberration that it is, and without consideration of the “Black tax” ordinary African-Americans pay every day of their lives. America's prevailing attitude seems to be, “If Obama can succeed, any Black person can. You've got an African-American president. What else do you people want?”

I'm angry that there are almost 55,000 Black men locked up in prisons in my home state of Florida, as of this writing. And that number doesn't include thousands locked up in county jails.

I'm a former prosecutor; I'm no bleeding heart. But prison ought to be reserved for the violent and the incorrigible, not for addicts, the mentally ill, or somebody on probation that drove without a drivers' license.

I don't apologize for my anger back in 1992 – or now. It's righteous anger. And if you are not angry – especially if you are African-American – then you must be dead.

## **2010: THE NEW STATUS QUO**

In January 2010, I was in New York City for two cold days at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice for a seminar among journalists covering crime-related issues. I was the only Black journalist, ex-prosecutor, and media owner, which added a different perspective to many of the discussions.

African-Americans know what everyone else in America, especially mainstream media journalists, is just starting to learn at conferences like this: that Black America is being destroyed because a third generation of Black boys, starting in elementary schools, are becoming “inmates in training.” That destruction

costs America billions just with regard to incarceration, to say nothing about the damage to the nation's collective humanity and morality.

Right-wing nuts shouldn't take my "inmates in training" reference to support their racist philosophy, because the social scientists with the damning empirical statistics know what the causes are: poverty, bad schools, non-existent health care, intergenerational incarceration, "thug culture," absent fathers, juvenile mental illness – AND straight-up racism – among other factors.

These same scientists showed us, through empirical data, what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. preached about: that we are all connected via "an inescapable network of mutuality." If nothing else, we are "connected" because we all pay taxes – billions of which go to prisons and not prevention.

The question – What's next? Whether the destruction of the Black community is happening by design or by malignant neglect, what will we as Americans do about it? What will the Black community do if Black children are to survive and succeed?

Another thing: With regard to the country's national systems and infrastructure, to call them merely 'dysfunctional' is a complement. They are generally disastrous, especially when it comes to Black people.

Name something that works for the masses of ordinary citizens, much less for African-Americans. Health care? (Maybe "Obamacare" will help. We'll see.) Education? Criminal justice, either the court systems or 'corrections'? Juvenile justice? Housing? Public safety? Banking? Finance?

Even the military doesn't work for the "grunt." How many vets are homeless, broke, receiving occasionally substandard Veterans Administration medical care, or otherwise thrown on America's social trash heap, even after honorable discharges?

**ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE FOR BLACK STUDENTS.  
NO EXCUSES.**

Better to light a candle than to curse the darkness – or be consumed by rage. I chose to channel my anger. The 1992 version of EWE is still a small candle in the generalized darkness of public education in America with regard to the academic performance of African-American students.

I've decided to maintain the integrity of the original book, and not fall prey to my own perfectionism and to the temptation to partially update it as I re-read it. What you will read is exactly what I wrote in 1992 (other than punctuation or grammatical corrections), and it retains my voice in the tone I was feeling at the time.

Ultimately, here's my suggested holistic solution for African-Americans who want to truly succeed in life generally, and it's what my children tell me they will do for themselves every day: "Make good decisions. Never give up. Be a leader, not a follower – except when necessary. Focus and finish. Work hard, but have fun. Learn the fundamentals. Use the right tools to succeed. Take care of my money so my money will take care of me. Work to be the best I can be. Git 'er done; first things first. Fear never rules. Confront bullies and defend myself when necessary. Be grateful today."

Hold on, brothers and sisters. The completely revised version of EWE is coming, and I'm hitting the road to support the message that Black students CAN succeed in education, if they "use the right tools to succeed." And if you are mad as hell



about the condition of your home, neighborhood or school, channel your righteous anger in a positive direction. Refuse to be taken for granted by anyone. Be Black and proud. Remember that you and your life have meaning, and there's a mission (or missions) that only you can accomplish while you are here on this beautiful Earth.

May this book continue to be a tool for the liberation of our people. And let us all look toward Africa as part of the physical, mental, spiritual and cultural restoration of the descendants of Africa worldwide, especially those of us here in America. (That's another book in itself!)

Thank you. I love and respect everyone who “thought it not robbery” to read these few words.

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August 2012  
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## **CHAPTER THREE: PRESEASON CONDITIONING**

**Do you not know that in a race, all the runners run, but one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the game goes into strict training...I do not run like a man running aimlessly, I do not fight like a man beating the air...**

*1 Corinthians 9: 24,26 (The Bible, New International Version)*

No athlete in his right mind would compete in a major athletic competition without preparing his body and mind for the rigors of the contest before game day. Can you imagine being at the starting line at the Olympic marathon, knowing that you have not run a single mile in practice?

Believe me, you'll get the same feeling just before your instructor hands you your test paper of a crucial exam, and you know you don't know anything about the subject tested. Just as the Olympic marathoner must train long before he gets to that starting line, so must you prepare and train before that quiz, midterm, or final exam is placed on your desk.

### **PREPARING THE MIND: SELF-CONFIDENCE AND DISCIPLINE**

Your mind is really the only natural weapon you have to win the athletic competition. Yet by various estimates, human beings only use a fraction of potential 'brain power' that the good Lord gave us. The key, then is to maximize your use of your natural thinking abilities.

As a student, you have only a moderate amount of control over your life. You go to class when told, sleep where you're assigned, eat what the cafeteria offers. You play when you can. Your worth as a student, and sometimes as a human being, is judged by a stranger who doesn't know you and probably never met you. Just about all the events that happen in your academic life are beyond your control.

It is this feeling of powerlessness and lack of control in a pressurized, grade-conscious, competitively cutthroat environment that literally drives students crazy and sometimes to suicide. Almost all major colleges and universities in this country have full-time psychological counseling services, and they are there for a reason. For instance, at finals time, students are lined up around the block for help.

If you are to cope, you must realize that you can't control everything in your life. A cynic would say that belief in God or some 'force' allows you to rationalize to yourself the reason why you seem to do everything right and still get screwed.

The bottom line is that even if you follow all the instructions in this book; even if you read every book ever written on how to study; there will still be occasions when things will go wrong. Do you fold up your tent and pack it in? No! You've only suffered a temporary setback.

Whether you believe in God or not, if you have thoroughly examined the situation and truly believe in your heart you've done all you can, **DON'T BLAME YOURSELF!** Consistency and perseverance will pay off for you in time.

## WHY BLACK STUDENTS SHOULD HAVE CONFIDENCE

I firmly believe that many of the problems Black students have, especially in predominately White institutions, are due primarily to a lack of self-confidence. This is caused both by the collective and wholesale brainwashing of Blacks over hundreds of years as well as by the subliminal 'mental massage' of today's contemporary American society which continues to reinforce the stereotypic image of the intellectually inferior/athletically superior Black race. Black students are literally dying mentally and academically for lack of knowledge of their own past.

### A SIDE TRIP INTO HISTORY

It is important to know that you are part of a whole, proud, strong, intelligent people with a long and noble, yet tragic, heritage. Because of a warped, demonic biological selection system as a consequence of slavery, we are descendants of the best human specimens Africa had to offer the world. We are the survivors of the fittest, physically and emotionally. Even with all our problems, no other race of people (except our brothers and sisters still in Africa) has had to walk the road we have. Yet we have survived and will thrive here in America. This is what I call your *sociological point of reference*.

These days almost every individual claims that he or she is a 'survivor.' Well, I'm here to tell you that no group of individuals has survived like Black Americans.

First, contrary to popular belief, we are an ancient people.

Whether you believe in biblical creationism or the theory of evolution, it is an uncontroverted fact that the African continent is the cradle of world civilization.

Understand one thing: If you are Black, you are African. It matters not if you prefer to call yourself Jamaican, Haitian, Bahamian, Cuban, a New Yorker, or whatever. All that means is that your ancestors probably got off the slave ship a little earlier (or later) than mine did, or at a different place from my ancestors.

African civilizations housed the world's first and greatest centers of learning in Timbuktu; formed the first democratic governments; built the pyramids; were among the chosen people of God who miraculously crossed the Red Sea with Moses; conceived the first idea of monotheism, i.e. belief in one God, rather than the many gods, as the Greeks and Romans believed.

The remarkable thing about these accomplishments is that they were done in spite of environmental and social conditions that would have killed off a weaker people. And they were done thousands of years ago, under the worst conditions possible.

The long tradition of African achievement continued, even after our wholesale enslavement and export to America.

The first man to die for this country was Crispus Attucks, a Black man. He was killed by the British just before the Revolutionary War. Even before the war, Black fighting men had developed a tradition of service in the military, having fought wars against the French and the Indians.

Only in the last 20 years or so have conditions truly begun to improve for Black America. But how can we, as a transplanted people, bloom where we have been planted here in the United States? How can we ever reattain the preeminence on the stage of world civilizations?

The relatively few hardy Africans who survived the original African Holocaust 5,000 years ago were able to overcome environmental conditions by thinking, planning, and working their way through the enormous difficulties they faced. Even when they weren't given the time to think, they had to take the time from somewhere.

Let's take a look at the lives of some of our ancestors.

- **Imhotep**, an Egyptian, lived almost 3,000 years before Jesus Christ was born. He is acknowledged as the real father of modern medicine who lived more than 2,000 years before Hippocrates, a Greek doctor after whom today's Hippocratic oath is named. There is evidence that Imhotep and other Egyptian doctors diagnosed and treated more than 200 diseases. As such, Egypt was the acknowledged world leader in medicine as well as architecture. Later, the Greeks sent their doctors to Egypt to study medicine; compare that to today's situation where African students must go to Europe to study.

- **Akhenaton** lived almost 3,400 years ago. He preached a gospel of peace 1,400 years before Christ, refusing to attack neighboring nations that would not pay tribute money to Egypt. He wrote poetry to God that rivals any of David's Psalms; a thousand years before Moses received the Ten Commandments from God, Akhenaton banned worship of graven images of bulls, cats and other animals in the land of Egypt. He believed firmly that there was only one true God, without form, who was the Unity that ran through all life. As best can be determined, he took only one wife with whom he had seven children. Most paintings show him with his family. His features, like that of his son Tutankhamen, (the boy king we know as "King Tut") are typically African: very thick lips, oblong head.

- **Hatsheptut**, a Black woman pharaoh of Egypt, is called the greatest female ruler of all time. **Aesop**, a Black man who

profoundly affected Western thought and morality. **Hannibal**, a Black man considered the greatest military mind ever, whose war tactics and strategies are still used on today's modern battlefields.

- **Phyllis Wheatley**, a slave who later became a world famous American poetess. **Benjamin Banneker**, a Black man who was a mathematical and mechanical genius chosen by U.S. President George Washington to design the Washington, D.C. street system.

- **James Derham**, a slave who became America's first Black doctor and who was fluent in French, Spanish and English. **Frederick Douglass**, a former slave who physically whipped his former master and became one of the most eloquent Black spokesmen against slavery. **Harriet Tubman**, an illiterate ex slave who was the greatest conductor on the slaves' Underground Railroad to freedom.

- **Booker T. Washington**, who saw the future of Blacks becoming secured through vocational education and entry into the business and commercial world. **W.E.B. DuBois**, who believed in the development of a 'Talented Tenth' of Black intellectuals who would guide the Black community to the fulfillment of its highest potential.

- **Malcolm X**, a school dropout at 15, a convicted jailbird at 21, set the tone for a militant Black Power movement in the 1960s. **Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.**, a child of the Black middle class, used the power of his mind harnessed with supernatural faith to break the backbone of American segregation.

My brother or sister, those are your people. Six thousand years of history and leadership in a few pages. The best of us survived and proceeded to change the world.

Now tell me you can't make an 'A' in calculus.

### **WHY YOU SHOULD HAVE CONFIDENCE IN YOURSELF**

You are a success, even if you have never 'achieved' any of the goals you have set for yourself. You have been successful in your life and you may not even realize it.

How can this be?

First you are alive and well; at least you're well enough to be reading this book. That in and of itself is an accomplishment in today's world.

Secondly, you are motivated to improve yourself. I know that because you are reading these words, which means you are willing to invest your precious time to find out if you can learn how to be a better student.

Third and most importantly, you still have a relatively sound mind. That's the key to winning this game.

Everyone, and I do mean every human being on God's green earth, goes through changes and difficulties. If you look on any street corner in America, you can see the result of the unwillingness to deal with life's problems. That's right. *Unwillingness*, not inability.

Every conscious human act is an act of the WILL. You choose to get angry with someone who curses you out in reaction to the other person's action. Nobody makes you react.

You see people – street people, alcoholics, junkies, stockbrokers, doctors, lawyers – who have chosen to solve their problems by opting out of life. And don't let anybody fool you.



Though some people are truly physically or mentally unable to cope with life, many others have chosen to give up the fight.

Look at what is happening in the news on a daily basis; high government officials, rich movie stars, and others who seemingly have reached the pinnacle of American life are either attempting or actually committing suicide. They deal with their problems by letting the problems overwhelm them, suck them in, to the point of becoming an empty, burned-out husk of what they could have been. Or they end up cold and dead, physically or emotionally.

The reason why this happens is simple: these people have lost hope that things will get better. And when you lose hope, you may as well be dead.

That has not happened to you, because you have not let the everyday tedium of life get to you. Neither have you let the major tragedies mow you down. To prove that to yourself, ask yourself this question: "What is the hardest thing I have ever done, or the most difficult problem I have ever faced, in my life?"

The answer, of course, is different for different people. Whatever the problem, the point is you've emerged from it, and you are still around to tell the story.

Understand that success and survival are mostly learned behavior; academic success is no different. Many times, it is the painful experiences that teach us how to survive bad times.

Mental survival through problem periods of your life provides what I call *individual points of reference*. Simply put, that means that you've succeeded at things that are tougher than the problem that confronts you now. And since you've

succeeded at the tougher thing, your current problem will be more easily hurdled.

Once you have established your point(s) of reference, you have overcome a major psychological hurdle. You have made a conscious decision to be a success and to change a defeatist attitude. That is the first step to be made in the continuing battle for academic success.

### **WINNING ATTITUDES AND ACTIONS**

Dennis Waitley has identified ten qualities that exist in successful people, no matter what their races, religions, aims, goals, or professions. Five of these qualities are *winning attitudes* (positive self-expectancy, positive self-image, positive self-control, positive self-esteem, and positive self-awareness); five of Waitley's qualities are *action qualities* (positive self-motivation, positive self-direction, positive self-discipline, positive self-dimension, and positive self-projection).

**POSITIVE SELF-EXPECTANCY:** This can simply be described as optimism. Positive self-expectancy is expecting the most favorable result from your own action. Optimistic people with a positive self-expectancy look at problems as opportunities, and can always see the positive aspects of any difficulty. This attitude can be developed by making an effort to stay relaxed and friendly, no matter what the circumstances, and to be calm in all situations.

**POSITIVE SELF-MOTIVATION:** This is the action component, the inner drive that puts optimism into action.

According to Waitley, winners are driven by desire, rather than fear. Fear causes a person to dwell on the past, to think about the penalty of failure; fear restricts the person, and

constantly causes the person to replay painful episodes in his mind.

Desire is the opposite of fear. Desire focuses the person's mind on the future, and directs the person's mind to dwell on the possible rewards for behavior. Desire attracts good things, and constantly replays successful episodes in the person's mind. A person with positive self-motivation concentrates on the desired results, not possible problems, and dwells on rewards, rather than penalties for failure.

To achieve positive self-motivation, try to replace fear with desire. For example, you can replace fear of poverty with the desire for financial wealth. You can replace fear of failure with desire for success.

**POSITIVE SELF-IMAGE:** The image that you have of yourself is a key attitude that will determine your success. People are controlled by their mental pictures at their subconscious level of awareness. According to Waitley, "It's not what you are that holds you back, it's what you think you're not." For example, all the plastic surgery in the world will not be helpful to a person whose mental concept of self is one of complete ugliness and self-loathing. You can begin to have a positive self-image by visualizing yourself as successful, i.e., by using the *action quality*, positive self-direction.

**POSITIVE SELF-DIRECTION:** This turns imagination into reality, and dreams into goals. If you have a positive self-image in which you visualize yourself being successful, you must set goals and accomplish them to make your vision come true.

## GOAL SETTING

Life forces us to make decisions every day. Despite this, most people do not have clearly defined, written goals for their lives, usually as a consequence of fear. Zig Ziglar, a renowned salesman and motivational speaker, believes that FEAR stands for '*False Evidence Appearing Real.*'

I believe that FEAR is the greatest obstacle facing Black students, and maybe even Black people worldwide. Fear causes most of Black folks' self-talk, the thoughts that run through our minds from second to second, to be negative.

All our lives we are told that we cannot do certain things, and that the goals and desires we have set are unrealistic and a waste of time. Thus, many people fail to make goals because of fear of failure; other people fail to make goals because of fear of success, if they believe success will make friends and relatives jealous or uncomfortable.

Another major factor causing people not to set goals is poor self-image. In their wildest dreams, many people cannot imagine accomplishing anything. Positive thinking will not work for an individual who has a warped, totally negative image of himself.

Still other people have not set goals because they have never been convinced that setting a goal accomplishes any purpose.

For most students, lack of time for studying is not really the problem. The real problem is lack of direction.

Ziglar describes a goal-setting process that will be helpful in determining positive self-direction. Setting goals gives

direction, which frees time. Ziglar suggests the following procedure:

**1. Develop a wild ideas list.** List everything you ever want to be, do, or have.

**2. Let the wild ideas list sit for 24 or 48 hours, and add any other wild ideas that come to mind.** By this time, you should have everything you ever wanted to do on this list.

**3. Shorten the list, but do not throw it away.** Your aim in shortening the list is to "say no to some good goals, so that you can yes to the best goals," according to Ziglar. Certain goals, though they may be good, are not priorities, and can be worked on later.

**4. Categorize** the remaining goals into following categories: physical, mental, spiritual, social, financial, and family. A well-rounded person has goals that encompass each of these categories.

**5. For each remaining goal listed, ask yourself the following questions:** Will reaching this goal make me happier? If the goal is one that will provide pleasure, can I repeat this pleasure indefinitely and be happy as a result? Will accomplishment of this goal make me healthier? More prosperous? Will accomplishment of this goal give me peace of mind? Improve my family relationships?

If this goal is to remain as a goal, you must answer yes to at least one of each of the preceding questions for every goal.

**6. Further categorize** the goals into long-range, short-range, and daily goals.

**7. Set ongoing goals,** such as maintaining a positive self-image, staying healthy, and maintaining a loving relationship

with your spouse, family, or other loved ones. Make them specific! According to Waitley, "What you set is what you get." The mind does not respond to general statements, such as "I'd like to lose weight." Set specific goals: "I'd like to lose 25 pounds; I want to make an 'A' in Mathematics; I want to make a 'B' in English Composition."

**8. Check all your goals,** and ask yourself these questions: Are the goals just out of reach (which is OK), or are they out of sight? All of your goals must be realistic. Realistic goals do not depend on luck for their accomplishment. Zeigler says that unrealistic goals are the seedbed of depression and frustration.

**9. Ask yourself the following questions:** Are these my goals? Note that it is almost impossible to achieve goals that other people have set for you. *YOU must set and accomplish your own goals, not those of your parents, teachers, or others.*

Is this goal morally right and fair to everyone concerned? Will accomplishment of this goal take you closer to or further from your major objective? Can you emotionally commit yourself to start and finish this project, and do everything needed to accomplish this goal? Can you literally see myself accomplishing this goal?

**10. Attempt to work all of your goals down to about four or five goals, in addition to your regular daily goals.** This will usually be a reasonable number for you to accomplish at any one time.

**11. Take inventory of where you are right now.** (See the self-assessment process described a little later in this chapter.)

**12. List all the benefits** that accomplishment of every listed goal will bring you.

**13. Once your goals are set, ask yourself some more questions:** Have your goals been written down? Have you spelled out why you want to accomplish these goals? Have you identified the obstacles that you must overcome to achieve your goals?

Have you identified what you need to know in order to achieve your goals? Have you identified the people, organizations, or groups that you need to work with in order to accomplish your goals? Have you designed a concrete plan of action to accomplish your goals?

Ziglar estimates that it should take you anywhere between 10 and 20 hours to set your goals and devise a plan to accomplish them. If the goals and plans are complex, it might take longer.

## **FOLLOWING THROUGH ON GOALS**

Once goals and plans are set, the work really begins.

**1. Make a real commitment to achieve your goals.** There are going to be times when you do everything right and you still do not accomplish your goal. Where do you go from there? When obstacles arise, learn how to change the direction of how to accomplish your goals, but do not change your decision to accomplish your goals. People who consistently accomplish goals learn how to respond positively to disappointments and obstacles.

**2. Keep a daily detailed account of the progress that you have made toward accomplishment of the goals.** However, don't confuse activity with accomplishment. Just because you are busy doesn't mean you are doing work that will lead to accomplishing your goal. A caged hamster on a treadmill generates a lot of activity, but goes nowhere.

**3. At the end of every day, make a list of things that you have done with your time.** At the same time, you can make your plans for what you will do tomorrow. A convenient time to do this is ten minutes just before bed. If you fail to this, you quickly lose sight of the goals, and the probability of failure increases.

Before you leave home for the day, consider placing your activity planner, or whatever you are using to keep track of your goals, under the pillow. When you get ready to go to bed, you will see your planner on the pillow and will remember to review the activities of the day, and to make plans for tomorrow.

**4. List the most important things you have to do tomorrow morning, from the most difficult to the easiest.** When you get up in the morning, work on the number one task on the list first.

**5. Keep these other things in mind:**

- **If you're going to start toward accomplishment of the goal, you must start with a solid foundation.** That foundation includes trust, honesty, integrity, perseverance. If this means getting right with God, then do so.

- **Start the goal-setting process today.** It is the series of little things that you do on a daily basis that determine whether you accomplish the goal. Divide the activities necessary to accomplish your goal into small bites.

- **Do not become a person who is susceptible to the negative influences of other people.** Though you may not have accomplished all of your goals, you must not begin to lower your goals because other goals have not been accomplished.



- **Do not allow other people to set your goals for you**, or place mental burdens upon you, which will prevent you from giving 100 percent effort toward accomplishment of your goals.

- **Know your time. Be a time miser, particularly with regard to television.** Get a Sunday paper, circle those programs you wish to watch, watch them, and turn the TV off immediately after the program is over. Alternatively, you could record the program you wish to watch, and schedule a time later on when you can see that program, and that program only, at your convenience.

- **Focus on the accomplishments you can make.** You must literally see yourself achieving the goals you have set.

- **Once a week, look at and review all of your goals on your goals list.** Decide which goals you should work on during the week. At the end of each day, you should have done some activity toward accomplishment of that goal that you have picked for the week. If you allow two days to pass by consecutively in which you have not worked on a weekly goal, you're in trouble.

- **Decide whether to share your goals with someone else.** According to Ziglar, share your “go-up” goals only with those people whom you believe will encourage and help you to achieve your goals. For example, a goal to be the #1 student in the class should be shared with the teacher, rather than another student, because another student may be considered a competitor. Share “give up” goals, i.e., giving up smoking or drinking, etc., with everyone you know, so that they will help you put pressure on yourself.

- **There is a definite positive correlation between success and physical exercise.** People who consistently

exercise also seem to be able to set and accomplish their goals more easily.

• **Whenever you accomplish one goal, immediately set a new one from your list.**

**POSITIVE SELF-CONTROL:** This is an attitude that winners have, that makes them believe that they are in control of their lives. According to Waitley, "Winners make it happen, while losers let it happen."

All conscious human activity is volitional, which means that you decide to do things on your own. No one makes you get up in the morning, go to school, go to work, or anything else. You even have control over whether you live or die. Nobody makes you rob somebody, steal something, or put drugs in your veins. Each person must reach a form of maturity, and become responsible for his or her own actions.

**POSITIVE SELF-DISCIPLINE** is what puts positive self-control into action. Consider reprogramming your conscious mind with thoughts of self-control, success, and positive self-images. This is done by self-discipline, which involves practice, practice, practice. Just as a tree grows from the inside, layer by layer, our thoughts also grow one layer at a time. You must begin to put new thoughts into your mind, one thought at a time, and reinforce these thoughts, minute by minute, on a daily basis. Positive self-discipline involves committing yourself to thinking new thoughts and habits, and relentlessly repeating them everyday.

Everyday, visualize accomplishment of the goal, whatever it is. If your goal is losing ten pounds, you must visualize yourself ten pounds lighter, and squeezing into that brand new bathing suit. If your goal is improving your basketball free-throw percentage, you must visualize yourself shooting the

perfect free throw in your mind, time after time. If it's making an 'A' on a Math test, you must visualize yourself sitting for the exam, knowing every formula, and correctly answering each question, so that you can make an 'A'.

Your new positive thought patterns must become the dominant thoughts in your mind. Even when you do not reach your goals, and fall short of all desired performance, criticize yourself in a positive manner, rather than saying "I'm dumb, stupid, and should have done better," tell yourself that you did well, that you will learn from the mistakes that you made, and that next time you will do better. Then, continue the visualization of the positive results, and rehearse everything as if you have already mastered it.

**POSITIVE SELF-ESTEEM:** Winners who have decided to like themselves, and feel that they are worthwhile persons. A person with positive self-esteem would rather be himself or herself than anybody else in the world.

Positive self-esteem is learned through practice. Actions you can take which will build your positive self-esteem include using affirmations and constructive self-talk, i.e., building yourself up even when you make mistakes (I am a strong person, I can be successful, I will lose ten pounds, etc.); accepting all compliments with a "Thank you!" rather than telling the person who complimented you that you don't deserve it; and dressing the best that you can at all times, since looking good physically makes you feel better emotionally.

When meeting people, tell them your name first, proudly and boldly. Walk tall and briskly ; if you are in a class or in a seminar, try to sit up front, if at all possible. Enjoy yourself, indulge yourself on occasion, and don't be ashamed to do so.

**POSITIVE SELF-DIMENSION:** When you put positive self-esteem into action, project it into everyday living, your self-dimension then becomes positive. Waitley describes having a positive self-dimension as "being in harmony with the divine order of things, and having a keen awareness of the value of time." Old folks call it "getting right with God." A person with a positive self-dimension realizes that growing old is a state of mind, and enjoys life, while taking care of his or her body, and setting goals which benefits others, as well as himself or herself.

**POSITIVE SELF-AWARENESS:** A person with this attitude accepts his uniqueness as a person, and knows his strengths and weaknesses. He is able to place himself in others' situations in an attempt to understand as they do.

**POSITIVE SELF-PROJECTION:** A winner holds herself out as a winner, and projects a winners' aura. The image that people see of us tells them a lot of what goes on in our minds. People who are satisfied with their looks, their state of mind, and their path in life, are generally happier and are more confident people. Winners project constructive support of ideas, and can differ with people without destructive criticism. A person with positive self-projection can help other people solve their problems. In solving their problems, the winner can reach goals of his own.

## **SUPPORT SYSTEMS**

Support systems can be defined as almost anything or anybody that can keep you going when you want to throw in the towel. For the purposes of this book, we shall refer only to academic/psychological support systems, not a financial support system.

Let me say that drugs or drinking should not be considered part of anyone's academic support system, for a number of reasons – most of which you already know.

### **A WORD ABOUT PLEASURE**

Physical pleasure is addictive. Physical pleasure can be simply defined as anything that feels good to your body; eating food, lounging in hot tubs, drinking alcohol, to name a few things. There is nothing wrong with anything on the preceding list in and of itself, if done in moderation.

But before you get upset and accuse me of being an alcohol-soaked, sex-crazed junkie, let me say something. In all behavior, we must consider the consequences of and circumstances surrounding our actions.

Example: Is sex wrong? Is partying wrong? No, in and of themselves. Then why shouldn't you have sex with whomever, whenever, and wherever you want? Because of the possible consequences, or effects, of that willful decision. What are possible consequences of sex without planning, or without spiritual, legal, and emotional commitment? Unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, emotional pain. What are the possible consequences of non-stop partying? Academic failure, the embarrassment of parents and friends, financial hardship and obligations to repay school loans for nothing, more emotional pain.

The bottom line: always consider the consequences and circumstances of your actions! The consequences of doing drugs are addiction and possible death. The consequence of legal drinking under improper circumstances (i.e., while driving) is jail; the consequence of cooling out in a hot tub under improper circumstances (i.e., while your teacher is passing out a test) is failure.

Of course, it is your right to disagree with my analysis. But believe me you are dumb, dumb, dumb to add anything to your support system that has a high possibility of becoming compulsive or addictive.

I have seen brothers and sisters who have literally screwed or partied their way onto academic probation and eventually out of school. Why? Because they couldn't keep their dresses down or their zippers up, or because they could not pass a party by. These types of behaviors are just as compulsive and addictive as any illegal drug, and can have the same devastating effect on self-esteem and self-confidence.

### **INTERNAL SUPPORT SYSTEM**

Your internal support system is the thoughts, emotions, and intellectual and spiritual processes that will help you through hard times. This is probably the more important of the support components. So many times, you will get discouraged and disappointed. Maybe you can't get in contact with a friend or parent; maybe you were able to talk to them, but it didn't help. It is then that you may be forced to look within yourself and tap into the God-given reservoir of strength that we all have. As a result, many students find that prayer or meditation is an indispensable factor in their support system.

### **EXTERNAL SUPPORT SYSTEM**

External parts of your support system include family and friends, your church, classmates, spouses, etc. I call *external* because it's outside your body, as contrasted with *internal*, which is inside the mind.

Many times, your external support system is very informal and intuitive. Most people have at least one good friend with whom they can discuss anything. This person is probably part

of your support system, an outlet for blowing off steam, a willing ear to share triumphs and tragedies. At major colleges, the school psychologist serves this purpose. It is important to be able to get a pat on the back or a sympathetic ear.

Fraternities and campus organizations can be very important components of your external support system. They provide that camaraderie that comes with common interests.

However, be careful that you are not sucked in by negative peer pressure. Your first obligation is not to the club, organization or fraternity. Somebody is paying good money for your education; that somebody may be you. You are not in school to be cool or necessarily to be accepted by your classmates. You are there to learn and to prepare yourself for life after school.

### **LEARN TO TURN MINUSES INTO PLUSES**

I firmly believe that fear of failure and embarrassment is one of the major emotions that plague Black students every day of their academic existence; in class, on exams, and in study groups. The reasons why are easy to understand: pride, high expectations of family and friends, and low expectations of instructors and classmates.

However, fear of failure, anger, and other 'negative' emotions can also be part of your internal support system, if you tie them in with your more positive attitudes and emotions, such as pride and self-confidence. How? By forcing you to uplift yourself from the morass of self-pity, doubt, laziness, procrastination, or depression in which you may find yourself.

Let me give you a personal example.

There were times in the University of Florida's Master of Business Administration (MBA) program that I literally cried; failed Accounting tests, class participation embarrassments, and on and on. But what kept me going was fear of failure. I refused, because of pride and ego, to let anyone say that I flunked out of school.

When I would visualize myself telling close friends that I couldn't cut the mustard; when I saw in my mind's eye the smirks on the faces of instructors and classmates who told me I couldn't do it; I would quit feeling sorry for myself and redouble my efforts.

Be aware, however, that you have to have confidence in yourself and the willingness to work to the limits of your physical, mental and emotional endurance for this approach to work. Otherwise this 'visualization of failure' approach will kill you by sinking you deeper and deeper into depression and self-pity.

Now I know that this approach is directly contrary to the 'visualization of success' that was described earlier. But remember one of the premises on which this book is written: DO WHAT WORKS FOR YOU. This tactic worked for me, and still does.

## **STRESS REDUCTION TECHNIQUES**

Notice that the subject here is stress reduction rather than stress elimination.

First, it is impossible to eliminate external stresses from your environment, since you have a limited amount of control over this environment. You can't control crime, traffic, or other people. Thus, you do the best you can to cope with those stresses that you cannot control, while making every effort you



can to reduce or eliminate those stressful situations that are within your control.

The major stress factor within your control is physical stress. Literally, too much anxiety will kill you physically and academically. A regular program of physical exercise is highly recommended, especially exercise with some aerobic benefit, such as riding to class every day.

Eating the proper food is also important. While in grad school, I became a part-time vegetarian, which helped keep my weight down.

For relaxation, I highly recommend yoga-type exercise that emphasizes flexibility within your body's limits, and because it is a discipline that makes you very aware of your body, much like biofeedback. If you know what your body feels like when it is relaxed, you know what it feels like when it is tense. During an exam, you can take a quick 'inventory' of your body for tenseness and, if necessary, relax that portion of your anatomy by force of will. A very powerful technique!

By now, you have probably developed your own method of dealing with stress. If you have, continue to use the methods that work for you. Again, let me emphasize that drugs have no place in my suggested program. I'll suggest only grudgingly that you go out for a beer with some friends, maybe as a reward for your hard work; I only suggest this because alcohol is legal in this society, if not consumed to excess. You are aware, I am sure, that alcohol is a drug. The main danger is the possibility of both physical and psychological addiction that was mentioned earlier.

Ah, but what of emotional and mental stress? Again, the key is to eliminate the causes of stress that you can, and manage the causes of stress that cannot be eliminated.

Note that it is the causes of stress than should be examined; for example, if you absolutely bug out at the thought of being called on in class, you should immediately ask yourself why.

Different causes call for different solutions. If you are afraid because you are unprepared, the obvious solution is to prepare to respond before you get to class. However, if you get extremely nervous because you may be self-conscious about a dialect or the sound of your own voice before an audience, the solution is different.

Maybe a public speaking course will help; maybe asking and answering questions aloud in front of a mirror may help. Other suggestions include practicing in front of trusted friends whose criticism and judgment you trust, or recording your voice so that you can evaluate the sound of it yourself. Maybe just coming to terms with how you speak is the answer.

Here are some other things you can do to reduce stress:

- **Adopt and maintain an objective attitude.** Try not to take every bad thing that happens to you so personally. Don't get mad about everything that happens, particularly things you can't change.

- **Evaluate your own behavior objectively.** Are you causing your own pain and disappointment? What can you do or change about yourself that can make your life better?

- **Assume an active attitude.** Inaction, laziness, and pessimism breed hopelessness, which leads to frustration, anger, and resentment. Concentrate on making the difference by your personal participation. Light a candle rather than curse the darkness.

- **Live in the present.** Be aware of the past. Learn from the past. Live for today and use your time wisely. Make plans for tomorrow.

- **Develop a sense of humor.** Even in the midst of daily pain and chaos, life is funny. There is plenty to laugh about every day, especially in school.

- **Don't work all the time.** Reward yourself for personal achievement. Try to set aside some time every day to do something you like, just for yourself.

- **Substitute planning for worry.** Plan your work, then work your plan. If you have a good plan for accomplishment of your goals, you can direct your energy toward achievement, rather than squandering time worrying about failure. **PRIOR PLANNING PREVENTS POOR PERFORMANCE.**

Specific answers to specific problems of emotional stresses such as marital problems, etc. are beyond the scope of this book. But many of the stresses you will face in your academic environment are related to your level of preparation. You'd be surprised at how your level of anxiety decreases as your level of academic preparation increases.

But no matter what happens, always, always do your best. Be satisfied in your mind, heart and soul that you could have done no more to prepare for the task ahead.

### **SELF-ASSESSMENT: TAKING A GOOD LOOK AT YOU**

Self-assessment is a critical but difficult part of our preseason conditioning program. Self-assessment can be described as mentally stepping outside of your body, appraising yourself, and determining your strengths and weaknesses as objectively as possible. (I said it wasn't easy.)

The reason self-assessment is critical is that only when you sit in judgment and evaluate yourself can you determine if you have the necessary endurance, desire and discipline to run and finish the academic marathon. And make no mistake: academia is a marathon, not a sprint! If you are not willing to sign up for the duration, don't even bother.

Self-assessment is no mystical process, however. We do it all the time when we constructively criticize ourselves and make a promise to do better. Can you count the number of New Year's resolutions you have made? They were probably due to some shortcoming you perceived about yourself or some goal you knew you had the possibility of obtaining.

Suppose one student's academic self assessment reveals this student: (1) has a knee-shaking fear of numbers, because of carelessness and inattention (2) writes well and is comfortable taking essay exams (3) enjoys arguing with people and is verbally quick (4) works fairly well under tight time constraints (5) a glutton for punishment and will study all day and night to prepare for an exam (6) has no discipline (7) is a party animal (8) studies better with a partner than alone (9) is a very proud person who finds it difficult to ask a question.

Obviously, such a person would find it difficult to major in mathematics, for a number of reasons. Let me say here, however, that nowhere in this book will you read the word *impossible*, because I believe that it is possible to achieve any academic goal.

Assuming that this person decided to major in math anyway, is he or she willing to pay the price to achieve academic success, given the difficulties to be faced?

Is this person willing to develop disciplined study habits instead of cramming? Work problem after problem? To

squarely confront his or her fear of numbers, determine the cause, and work to eliminate it? Do those weaknesses in the skills most important to success in math outweigh personal strengths? Is the motive for choosing this major (i.e., money, ego, etc.) powerful enough to make all the studying worthwhile?

These are only a few of the questions every serious student should ask during self-assessment:

- **What strengths and weaknesses do I have academically?** Do I have strong writing, verbal, or numerical skills? Do I have a good basic foundation for using the English language? Do I have solid, disciplined study habits?

- **What are my personality traits?** Am I a loner or a ‘people person?’ Aggressive or shy? Hard-working or lazy? Impulsive or deliberate?

- **Am I highly motivated to achieve the academic goals I have set for myself?** If not, why not? If so, is the motivation internal (ego, pride, sense of accomplishment) or external (community or professional status, money, etc.)?

- **Am I willing to throw out bad habits that I am comfortable with, if necessary, to achieve my academic goals?** If not, why not?

- **Where does finishing school fit on my list of life's priorities?** Is getting a degree really important to me?

- **Am I willing to ‘sweat’ to achieve my academic goals?** Will I study long hours; cut back on recreational activities; make financial and personal sacrifices, if necessary, to be a successful student?

- **Am I willing to sacrifice ego and control over my academic life in order to achieve success?** It is this question that poses so many of us independent thinkers real problems in school.

Many times, Black students have to decide to either stand up for what we may perceive as racist behavior, or to ignore, forget and move on. This a tough decision to make. Rather than give you an ironclad rule to follow in these situations, I'll just tell you the differences between principle and egotism.

Let's define *principle* as *a fundamental rule or code of conduct by which you live your life*. A primary principle for most people is respect for self and others.

*Egotism* is defined as *an exaggerated sense of the person's importance*. An egotistic person is convinced that the world revolves around him and him alone, and his (or her) moral standards are higher than the standards of the rest of the world. Egotism is self-respect that becomes conceit and arrogance.

Egotism and principle overlap; it's basically a matter of degree. You will be faced with situations that will be racially motivated if you are in a White school, and they will be subtle. Such situations may include never getting called on in class; being frozen out of study group discussion; never receiving an invitation to a classmate's weekend party.

Remember, you can choose your reaction to these situations! NEVER let anybody manipulate you into jumping to his or her tune. If you decide to raise hell, ask yourself whether a diehard, live-or-die principle is involved, or merely ego. Ask yourself whether getting upset and launching a verbal attack against an instructor or student will serve a valid purpose. (Sometimes it does.) Then, you decide for yourself how to react, given the circumstances.

You now know how to assess yourself. Once you have completed your self-assessment, find out from an informed source what it takes to succeed in your desired major or career path. If your self-assessment matches the requirements for the particular major or career you have chosen, you have a much higher probability of success. If the match is a poor one, you should consider your motivational level in tackling the major or career, because a lot more effort will be required of you.

Using the previous example of the math major described above, it seems that this person may be more suited to another major that may not be so numbers-oriented, such as journalism. However, if this individual decides to stick with math, it must be recognized that the road to success will be long, hard, rocky, and probably difficult – BUT NEVER, EVER IMPOSSIBLE.

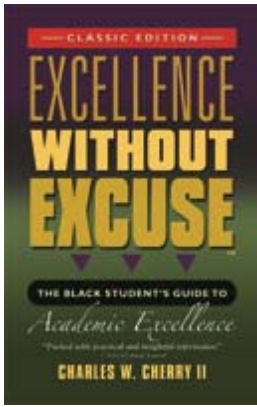
Only you can decide if the race is worth running and winning, given the demands school will make on you. If you decide to run the academic race, then run to win!

### **SUMMARY**

- You are a part of a people with a history of more than just survival. Black people have excelled, because of persistence and imagination, throughout world history, under worse conditions you will face in any academic program, no matter how difficult.
- In your life you have faced difficulties before, and you have successfully overcome them.
- Successful people all over the world have winning ATTITUDES (positive self-expectancy, self-image, self-control, self-esteem, self-awareness) that eventually become ACTIONS (positive self-motivation, self-direction, self-discipline, self-dimension, self-projection).

- Goal-setting is critical. You MUST spend time developing a set of realistic goals, and regularly evaluate whether you are accomplishing these goals.
- Develop internal (God/spiritual) support and external (friends, other people) support systems.
- Beware of any physical pleasure that can become addictive and lead to misplaced priorities: sex, drugs, etc.
- Turn fear of academic failure and its consequences into a positive motivator to go the extra mile.
- Physical exercise and diet and preparation for school can help reduce stress.
- Objectively assess yourself to determine your academic strengths and weaknesses.
- Check your ego at the classroom door.





Low expectations of Black students' performances and lack of study skills are two of the most important factors that cause Black students to perform poorly academically in high school and college. Author Charles W. Cherry II, who earned two masters-level degrees simultaneously, focuses on teaching skills like time management, goal-setting, aggressive listening, speed reading, effective note-taking, library and computer research, test-taking and memory systems, image management, and self-knowledge to improve Black students' scholastic performances.

## **EXCELLENCE WITHOUT EXCUSE™: The Black Student's Guide to Academic Excellence (Classic Edition)**

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