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## Reestablishing a Culture of Water Competency at an HBCU

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### Abstract

African American children ages 5 – 19 years drown in swimming pools at rates of 5.5 times higher than those of whites (Gilchrist & Parker, 2014). Literature suggested culture is the culprit for this disparity. A fear of water dates to slavery (Pitts, 2007). After slavery was abolished, the memory of drowning remained part of the African American culture. In the twentieth century, the popularity of swimming grew with the increase in public pools. The era of the Jim Crow laws kept African Americans out of public pools (Pitts, 2007). Although the political landscape has shifted since the Jim Crow era, inequities have continued to linger. Despite the reported disparity between drowning among African Americans and others, a gap exists in the literature regarding aquatic programming at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Delaware State University (DSU) is addressing the fear of water among students on campus and among members of the surrounding community to DSU by implementing the American Red Cross Parent Orientation to Swim Curriculum. DSU's current motto is "Making our mark on the world;" the previous motto was, "Only an educated man is free." We prefer to recall that Plato said, "A man is not learned until he can read, write, and swim" (Silver, 2018).

*Keywords:* swimming, drowning prevention, water competency, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU)

### Introduction

Waller and Norwood (2011) pointed out several potential national institutional partners, such as the American College of Sports Medicine, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the American Red Cross, which could catalyze a broad-based "learn to swim" agenda for institutions of higher learning. Given the impact of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) on academic and professional success of African Americans (Albritton, 2012), HBCUs must be added to the list of national learn-to-swim partners to address the well-documented disparity in drowning rates among racial and ethnic groups. Unfortunately, a gap exists in the evidence-based literature addressing the amount and efficacy of aquatic programming at Historically Black College and Universities (HBCUs).

The recent success of African American swimmers at the highest level of competition has not helped HBCUs maintain their competitive swim teams (Steinbergh, 2016). For example, the North Carolina A&T swimming program disbanded in 2016, leaving Howard University as the only HBCU with a competitive swim team (Steinbergh, 2016). Interestingly, Howard University is one of the few U.S. colleges and universities including the HBCUs with a swimming proficiency graduation requirement built into their curriculum (Howard University, 2018).

### **Historically Black College or Universities**

HBCUs would be an ideal forum to move from awareness to action when addressing the impact of drowning among diverse populations including K-16 environments (Crewe, 2017; Beale, 2016). Historically, HBCUs have been categorized as institutions of higher learning founded to educate the descendants of slaves (Brown, Donahoo, & Bertrand, 2001). Although HBCUs were established for descendants of slaves, these institutions have always been open to all regardless of race, ethnicity, or gender (Crewe, 2017). Today the focus of HBCUs remains on principles of inclusion, social justice, diversity, empowerment, and cultural competence. HBCUs continue to provide a point of access in higher education to African Americans and to emphasize social and cultural heritage as part of the college experience (Kennedy, 2012). The impact of the loss of swimming experiences, including competitive, co-curricular, and educational activities, from the HBCU academic culture needs to be addressed with evidence-based study.

### **History of Swimming and the African American**

Numerous reports by European explorers, slave traders, and government officials from the 1600s through 1840 documented that Africans living along the west coast of Africa were excellent swimmers (Dawson, 2006). Initially, slaveholders believed they could profit from the swimming and diving skills of their African slaves. Some slaveholders specifically targeted Africans with swimming and diving skills while others associated aquatic skills with a strong work ethic (Dawson, 2006).

Since most slave owners did not know how to swim, the swimming skills of the enslaved presented concerns and problems to the Whites. Stories of slaves escaping by swimming caused some slave owners to take drastic measures to protect their property (Pitts, 2007). Evidence showed that some slave owners even drowned disobedient slaves to create a fear of water (Pitts, 2007). The fear of drowning contributed to the eradication of the culture of swimming among first- and second- generation African slaves. Consequently, the culture of swimming that had existed in Western Africa did not carry over into African American culture. Ironically, swimming was not a part of White culture until after the Civil War (Pitts, 2007).

Around 1870 public pools became popular at seaside resorts, but most of these pools were for Whites only (Pitts, 2007). African Americans were excluded from recreational or educational opportunities to swim throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Pitts (2007) explained Jim Crow Laws kept African Americans out of the pools until around 1930, when some less-than-equal “colored pools” first were constructed. Consequently, a cultural disconnect between the African American community and swimming opportunities continued. The

disconnect has continued to contemporary times as indicated by the significantly higher rates of drowning among African Americans as opposed to Whites (Pitts, 2007).

### **Current Trends**

Today, many African Americans feel that family history, role models, and myths all have contributed to the current drowning disparity. In addition, low levels of water safety awareness, water safety education, and aquatic programming among members of the African American community may have contributed to drowning disparities (Anderson, 2017).

Anderson (2017) reported many African Americans fell victim to the myth that African Americans could not swim. Furthermore, the tradition of fear of drowning has led to the water safety strategy of simply “stay[ing] away from the water” in many African American families. Earlier research by Fogan (2014) had reported that interest/ motivation and parents/caregivers had the greatest influence on the level of swimming skill among the African-American college students, ages 18-24 years. In other words, the current generation has seemed to be carrying on a tradition of avoiding water as a primary strategy to avoid drowning. Unfortunately, avoidance is an ineffective strategy for several reasons. Drowning is one of the top three causes of unintentional death in the United States among individuals under the age of 30 (Gilchrist & Parker, 2014). The drowning death rate for African Americans is 1.4 times that of Whites (Gilchrist & Parker, 2014). Evidence also shows that most drownings occur to fully-clothed individuals who did not intend to enter the water.

### **Call to Action**

Now that the gap in drowning has been identified, the emphasis should be to create strategies to close this gap (Waller & Norwood, 2011). In other words, it is time to shift from awareness to action. Re-establishing a historic culture of swimming among African Americans ought to start with assessing and developing water competencies among the most vulnerable persons including especially African American children (Pharr, Irwin, Layne, & Irwin, 2018). The American Red Cross has identified water competency as the skill to (1) enter the water with full submersion; (2) recover to the surface and float or tread for at least 1 minute; (3) turn 360 degrees and orient toward an exit point; (4) level off and move on front and/or back position for at least 25 yards; and (5) exit safely from the water (Quan et al, 2015). More recently, Stallman, Moran, Quan, and Langendorfer (2017) expanded the definition of water competency and proposed 15 psychomotor tasks, cognitive knowledges, and affective attitudes and judgments. The Stallman et al. taxonomy of competencies included those of the original Red Cross skills, but is

more comprehensive and addresses a wider range of tasks, knowledge, and attitudes.

### **Interventions**

Although the five water competencies from the Red Cross identified in the preceding paragraph are well described, evidence-based research on the competencies among the African American communities, who are at an elevated risk of drowning needs to be conducted (Quan et al, 2015). In fact, the somewhat limited evidence about whether water competency is an effective public health prevention measure against drowning in general needs to be studied (Quan et al, 2015; Stallman et al., 2017). The research initiative at Delaware State University (DSU) seeks to address the current gaps in the literature regarding the HBCUs efforts to overcome barriers to water competence and provide water safety education in African American communities (Ito, 2016) by educating, instructing and evaluating best practices in facilitating water competency.

### **Strategic Partnerships**

The pilot project was conceived during a classroom conversation regarding the disparities in drowning among African Americans. A student who worked at the Wellness and Recreation Center (WRC) on the DSU campus reached out to the WRC to collaborate with an inquiry made to the Department of Public and Allied Health. It was through this request that the aquatics collaborative team was formed. The WRC quickly agreed that the zero-entry pool, with an average depth of 3.5 feet, would be perfect for a “learn to swim” initiative. A member of the WRC staff and a representative from the Department of Public and Allied Health requested a meeting with the Early Childhood Laboratory School (also known as the Delaware State University Lab School or DSU Lab School) on the DSU campus.

The DSU Lab School provides services for children ages one to five years old. Approximately half of the students at the DSU Lab School are children of DSU employees; the remaining half come from the surrounding community. The stated goal of the DSU Lab School is to offer individualized educational opportunities in a positive multi-cultural learning environment that prepares the students to become lifelong learners and contributing members of society. Beale (2012) had documented that collaborative relationships were effective measures for combating drowning in minority communities. Because drowning disparities among the most vulnerable populations was recognized as a leading cause of unintentional injury death especially among African American children (Pharr, Irwin, Layne, & Irwin, 2018; Beale, 2016), a collaborative agreement was reached.

A needs assessment was conducted to take proactive action against drowning which impacts youth in minority populations. The DSU Lab School community along with the DSU aquatics team enlisted the help of parents to form a parental focus group to discuss the importance of an aquatic collaboration to save lives. At the focus group meeting, the aquatics team proposed delivering the American Red Cross Parent Orientation to Swim Lessons presentation to parents free of charge. The parents in the focus group agreed to schedule two events. The Parent Orientation to Swim Lessons was scheduled for January and March of 2017. During each event students from the Department and Allied Health Sciences volunteered to deliver the content to parents. The American Red Cross Parent Orientation Learn to Swim Programming presentation highlighted the importance of swim lessons and water safety; explained the steps necessary to keep children safe in, on and around: and discussed the circle of drowning prevention (American Red Cross, 2014).

After the presentations were delivered and the appropriate waivers were completed, American Red Cross (ARC) certified Water Safety Instructors (WSIs) and Lifeguards (LGs) taught students how to safely get in and out of the pool. After brief instruction the children were permitted to play in the water. Students ages 1-5 were encouraged to engage in aquatic exploration (as described in the ARC Parent Child swim program) with the parent or guardian agreeing to enter the water with their child. Students ages 3 -5 were required to have a parent or guardian present, but a parental opt out of entering the water option was allowed by assigning a volunteer to play in the water with the child as a proxy.

During the first event, hosted in January, 2017, six Public and Allied Health students hosted eight parents and eight children. The event was considered successful as evidenced by attendance at the second event. The second event held in March 2017 featured a volunteer group of 12 Public and Allied Health students who hosted 17 parents and 30 children. Inspired by the increased attendance, the WRC and the Department of Public and Allied health began hosting Parent Orientation to Swim Lessons on a regular a monthly basis during the academic year. Most notably, approximately 20 percent of the students who attended the orientation signed up for formal swim lessons.

### **Conclusions**

Waller and Norwood (2011) called for African American communities to ameliorate the swimming gap and reduce the disparity in drowning rates among African Americans and Whites. HBCUs have had a profound impact on the academic and professional success of the African American community (Albritton, 2012). Much less is known about the degree to which HBCUs have addressed the

swimming gap and drowning disparity. Over the next academic year DSU intends to conduct two research studies exploring the perceptions of water competence among undergraduate students at DSU to measure the effectiveness of a currently-established aquatic educational program.

### **Future Research**

Anecdotally, students at DSU initially reported they knew how to swim; however, after listing the five American Red Cross water competencies, consistent with a study conducted by the American Red Cross in 2014, students' results revealed that they were less confident regarding their swimming abilities. Based on these findings, a water competency survey will be administered to all students during student orientation in the fall of 2019. The survey will include general demographic information and ask the general question, "Can you swim?" After indicating whether the student can swim, each student will self-assess their water competency for each item separately. Finally, students will be asked if they are willing to demonstrate the competency they indicated that they could perform. In addition to evaluating whether a need exists for more aquatic programming, the survey intends to allow the researchers to identify the degree to which individuals' perceptions of water competency match their actual performance proficiency.

The second study will assess the effectiveness of the Parent Orientation to Swim Lessons Programming within the DSU Lab School Collaboration. Its goal is to measure the impact of the ARC Parent Orientation to Swim Lesson on parents' attitudes toward water safety. Beginning with the 2018 fall semester, parents of children enrolled in DSU Lab School will be required to take a pre- and post-survey regarding the importance of swim lessons and water safety; to explain the steps necessary to keep children safe in, on, and around; and to discuss the circle of drowning prevention. DSU is committed to conducting several research initiatives to re-establish a culture of swimming in the African American community.

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