

# THE VANDERBILT Achievement Gap PROJECT

BY Ashley Crownover

With decades of theory and research focused on eliminating the academic achievement gap between black and white students, you'd think it would be as much an artifact of the past as legally enforced segregation. But to the contrary, "research shows that the gap is widening," says LSI investigator Gilman W. Whiting, and increasing diversity among the U.S. population means the gap will continue to grow—unless there is a comprehensive effort to address all its causes, from disparities in health care to institutionalized racism.

Making that effort is something Whiting (director of undergraduate studies, Vanderbilt African American Diaspora Studies) and fellow LSI investigator Donna Y. Ford (Betts Professor of Education and Human Development, Department of Special Education) do every day in their personal and professional lives. Their initiative, the Vanderbilt Achievement Gap Project, aims to expand that effort to the institutional level, enlisting the support and participation of

the Vanderbilt and Nashville communities to create programs that raise awareness and make a direct impact on students.

"We want to bring more visibility to the issue," Ford says, "particularly on campus and in the surrounding areas. Large-scale change has to first be implemented locally." Ford and Whiting see the project as an opportunity for Vanderbilt to take leadership on a pressing educational and societal problem.



DANIEL DUBBOIS

## It's About More Than Academics

*Whiting and Ford*

There are many factors that contribute to the achievement gap, Ford explains. "It's not just what goes on at school," she says, "it's what goes on at home. And it's not just whether you can read or write, it's how healthy you are and how fit you are." These "concentric rings of influence" include cultural, familial, school, social, and psychological factors. Efforts to ameliorate the gap must therefore be crossdisciplinary, collaborative, and comprehensive, embracing the perspectives of many fields, from sociology to medicine, and encompassing both research and practice, outreach and social change.

The project's collaborative approach is essential to its success,



DAVID LARSON

### The Vanderbilt Scholar Identity Institute

Very seldom will you hear of masculinity tied with the achievement gap, says Gilman Whiting, but the Vanderbilt Scholar Identity Institute, held for the first time last summer in collaboration with the organization 100 Black Men of Middle Tennessee, does just that. The two-week program for black males in Grades 5–9 focuses on students' self-identity and self-esteem, with particular emphasis on fighting the notion that being successful means "acting white." Alarming, recent studies conducted by Whiting and Donna Ford reveal that not only teachers, but students themselves, share the common notion that achievement is acting white, while behaving thuggishly and "ghetto-like" is acting black.

"The goal is to get black males to see themselves as studious, as academicians," says Ford. "If you really like yourself, and ideally love yourself, you are just comfortable in the skin you're in, when somebody says you're acting white or you're a sellout, it doesn't bother you because you know what black means, or you feel that you know what black means, and black means being successful—academically, socially, economically."

and begins with its co-directors. "I bring a perspective from the African American Diaspora Studies side," says Whiting. "Together with Donna, and her notable work in special [gifted] education, right from the beginning we have a collaboration that you don't usually see."

Both researchers feel that studies on the achievement gap run the danger of maintaining the status quo while purporting to address the problem. "People conceptualize things differently," says Whiting, "and we see regurgitation of prior research. So we ask, What is new? Give me a new idea, because obviously this was said 10, 15, 20 years ago, and we've done nothing about it. What is new now?" Ford agrees, adding, "We've found only one study that has looked at teachers' perceptions of why the achievement gap exists. How are you going to close the achievement gap if you don't know what teachers are thinking? What families are thinking? What black students are thinking?" To help fill this "gap on the gap," Ford and Whiting have conducted a number of studies examining students', teachers', and families' perceptions related to the achievement gap, and are currently completing a report on their work with teachers.

### A Project With Many Components

Of the Vanderbilt Achievement Gap Project's many planned endeavors, two are already underway: a monthly lecture series highlighting both research and practice, and a summer institute for young black males (see sidebars). Additional upcoming initiatives include an online resource bank/clearinghouse featuring data sources, links, articles and a newsletter; a Diversity Institute for Nashville educators (Summer 2008); and eventually, courses for Vanderbilt students on the achievement gap. Organizations supporting or participating in the work include the Vanderbilt Provost's Office, the Learning Sciences Institute, the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities, the Bishop Joseph Johnson Black Cultural Center, the Center for the Study of Religion and Culture, and the 100 Black Men of Middle Tennessee.

The project's various aspects are united by their common goal of moving beyond research and into action. "Researchers have a lot of information on the achievement gap," says Ford, "and the findings don't trickle down to the real world. I want this [project] to reach the schools and, just as importantly, the community, the families. We've researched and theoreticized all day long, now let's do something with this information."