

Black leaders: the next generation

Saturday College prepares black high school men for college

By John Hamlin
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The Saturday College Preparatory Academy, a program for black men in their junior year of high school, threw down the gauntlet at its second meeting Feb. 12.

The students watched and discussed “The Vanishing Black Male,” a documentary summarizing the challenges they face. “It was about how most of our men now are incarcerated — or just dead — and not in college. And, how we’re decreasing every year in college and increasing in prison,” said Pierre Booker, a 17-year-old Hillside High School student.

“As an African-American, people look down upon you in certain things,” Booker said. Although people might look up to an African-American because of their athletic ability, Booker said they still look down upon their academic level. “They say, ‘You can’t do this. You can’t do that.’”

The Saturday Academy is all about changing that, said Jim Johnson, co-director of the Minority Male Bridge to Success Project. Johnson said, “It has to do with the deteriorating economic circumstance of African American males in our society, the deteriorating educational experiences and the need to build a better pipeline to higher education.”

Johnson said, “That’s what this is all about: the next generation of African American male leaders, or minority male leaders, in the city of Durham and the state and nation.”

While the program offers extensive tutoring, it also equips students with the non-academic skills needed to succeed once accepted into college. “They’re teaching us how to get into college and how, once you get into college, to not be affected by how much work you have, and to manage your time and money,” Booker said.

According to Johnson, research shows many black males drop out of college, either because they have a bad experience or get bad grades. Johnson said that there are practical things



Staff photo by Jock Lauterer
Juniors at Hillside High School participate in a group discussion led by Director Michael Woods on the “Vanishing Black Male.”

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that nobody tells you in high school such as how to adjust to life away from home, how to choose your friends and how to manage your time wisely.

Saturday Academy Director Michael Woods said they will experiment to identify the best ways to prepare young black men for college. Woods said that they have to meet the students where they are academically instead of putting shame on them for not being at the desired level.

The program is dedicated to helping students improve their lives, Woods said. “One of the things that is really going to distinguish this program from other programs is it’s not ‘just throw something out there and hope it works and, kind of, shield yourself behind your good intentions,’ but really actually look and painstakingly evaluate what you are doing,” Woods said.

The Saturday Academy is unique because it is based on researching techniques that can be used anywhere, Woods said. “You’ve got a whole lot of different people who are doing really

great work, but a lot of it is on a charismatic model: it’s a single leader, it’s a single founder. It’s one person pushing that agenda,” he said.

The data generated, both internally and in collaboration with Durham Public Schools, will be researched and reviewed by scholars, Johnson said.

“Our goal is to develop scalable models that you can expand and roll out in high schools and other kinds of institutions around the country,” Johnson said. “We want to follow these young men and see how well they do based on the kinds of interventions we are using in our program.”

Woods said that the Saturday Academy will take direction from the students themselves. Johnson said that empowering the students to control the program also teaches them valuable lessons.

Johnson said young people need to be engaged in the decision-making process because when they get to college, no one will be there to hold their hand and guide them along.

Planning for the Durham program started last year, following a \$700,000 W.K. Kellogg Foundation grant, Johnson said. With a grant from the Golden LEAF Foundation, Johnson has already begun working with community colleges in Halifax County to take the program there.