

## David Williams II—Mentor, Colleague, Friend

LEROY PERNELL\*

In 1985, I was the only African American male professor at The Ohio State University College of Law. Being the only one carried with it a privilege, a responsibility, and a burden. While there was and is much talk about the significance of Black law faculty as role models for students and for aspiring African American lawyers in the community, there is and was an equal, if not greater need, for such models for other Black faculty as well. Teaching in the legal education academy is at best a largely monastic and sometimes nomadic experience for all, and particularly for those whose very professional existence screams both uniqueness and challenge to the repressive status quo of a White-dominated elite world. In short, try as I might, to move forward each day, driven by a commitment to open doors of opportunity and diversity both within and outside the legal profession, I was both needy and desperate for partners and compatriots on this journey.

Therefore it was as much for selfish reasons as for bringing about a transformative change that I sought in 1985 to once again seek out persons and convince the institution to bring them on board, not just as an arrow in the quiver of diversity, but as a strong catalyst for both the law school community and myself.

I was blessed when we successfully attracted David to join the faculty. His presence was a strong reinforcement for students and faculty alike (myself included) of the power of diversity strength. But his significance went well beyond enhanced demographics. What David Williams II, appointed to the Ohio State faculty, meant was also a shot across the bow for those who had a rigid, elitist, and racist conception of what an African American law professor was all about.

In 1985, the perception was still strong and widely held that any concession to the presence of faculty of color came with the largely unspoken (but not always) notion that such change might be “acceptable” if such faculty were restricted to teaching those subjects that were of value and existence in the then-recognized expertise allotted to Black faculty. Only the most repressive and uninformed would deny our expertise and leadership in areas such as civil rights and racial justice, which was provided by Black lawyers icons such as Charles Hamilton Houston, Wiley A. Branton, Constance Baker Motley, and, of course, Thurgood Marshall. The largely White legal academy was less confident that Black intellectual, instructional leadership could be provided in subject areas

---

\* Professor of Law and former Dean, Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University College of Law; Professor Emeritus and former Dean, Northern Illinois University College of Law; former Professor of Law, The Ohio State University Moritz College of Law; former Vice Provost for Minority Affairs, The Ohio State University; J.D., 1974, The Ohio State University College of Law; B.A., 1971, Franklin and Marshall College.

that ventured outside the white-imposed comfort zone and ventured into subject matters that were not only considered “White” but also critical to a majority-concept of areas necessary for real professional success and prestige. Such courses were often viewed as the gateway to large firm practice, business achievement, and elite recognition.

Then came David Williams II—teaching tax. In the imagined picture-encyclopedia, next to a training roadmap for money and prestige in the practice of law, you will find the image of tax law and the tax law professor. Only a handful of Black law professors (outside of the faculty of historical Black law schools) had ventured down this path by the 1980s. Dave came onto to the faculty not only boldly declaring his mastery of the heretofore “reserved” subject, but bringing to it an expertise based not only on intellectual acumen but on practice and practical experience as well.

David Williams, the tax law professor, was remarkable not only for his bold challenge to the status quo but also for the remarkable degree of acceptance he received from the students who had the foresight to take him and his fellow faculty who, sometimes begrudgingly, grew to know him as a colleague. David’s initial impact, however, went way beyond the classroom. He was immediately a source of mentorship, an advisor, a counselor, and a sounding board for students—particularly students of color, who desperately needed a showcase all the possibilities of law as a profession.

Others, perhaps, can speak in greater detail about what David Williams II meant to students. I can speak as to what he meant to me. His presence, along with Professor Vincene Verdun, allowed a nucleus to be formed of African American faculty who could both support each other and further the larger mission of opening both the doors of excellence and opportunity. This was work, the burden of which needed to be shared. David did more than his part in bringing about a transformation that today is still a beacon as to what a law school can do in providing opportunities for excellence for a diverse population deserving a chance for a legal education. As a person who is an alumnus of this law school, seeing what he did in this regard has an emotional and intellectual impact that these words cannot adequately describe.

My connection and remembrance of David Williams is not limited to Dave Williams the law professor. As I have suggested in other essays, the role of academics of color is to speak with many unique voices.<sup>1</sup> The need for those voices transcends the legal education academy and exists in the larger world of higher education as well. The opportunity to articulate our unique perspective while, at the same time, acting administratively to implement policies and provide real-time opportunity is often limited. David Williams, however, had such an opportunity and took full advantage of it, when in 1992 he assumed the mantle of Vice Provost (first interim and then permanent) of Minority Affairs for The Ohio State University. This position was unique in the history of Ohio

---

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., LeRoy Pernell, *Deans of Color Speak Out: Unique Voice in a Unique Role*, 20 B.C. THIRD WORLD L.J. 43 (2000).

State. First occupied by the legendary Frank Hale, Jr., and created in recognition of his leadership, the position allowed for the direct involvement in recruiting and funding opportunities for students of color to attend the graduate and professional programs offered throughout the University. The history of this office accounts for hundreds of PhDs, masters, M.D.s, and J.D.s of color who have served this nation with distinction—all because of the Office of Minority Affairs (OMA). The Vice Provost for Minority Affairs also had the unique position of answering both to the President of the University and to Academic Affairs, headed by the Provost.

David Williams II was the successor to Dr. Frank Hale, Jr. in this critical University and community-supporter position. Under his leadership, the impact of the office was expanded to include not only graduate/professional student recruitment, but support, monitoring, and encouragement of minority faculty hiring. David's leadership not only continued the vision of Frank Hale, but also focused the President and University leadership on providing the resources necessary to accomplish the dream.

When David's expertise in minority affairs, as well as his academic and practical interest in college athletics, were rewarded with his appointment as Vice President for Student Affairs, by President Gordon Gee in 1993, I was fortunate enough to be convinced by David to succeed him as the next Vice Provost for Minority Affairs. Together we were able to forge paths that ran deep into opportunities for not just African Americans, but for Native Americans, Latino-Latina Americans and Asian Americans as well. I found David to be the perfect partner in this endeavor. Our different approaches melded into substantial opportunities for the University and the larger community.

I do not know if my path through legal education, which led down the road of leadership (including deanships) at three law schools, would have occurred without David. There is a certain amount of irony in that the person who I helped recruit to The Ohio State University College of Law in turn helped to open the broader vistas of administration at both the university and law school levels, for me. I do know that I will both cherish and deeply miss the colleague, the mentor, and the man. I came to know both him and his family, and I have often marveled and smiled at their success then and now. I will not know if I was as much a mentor for him as he was for me. I do know that we shared a bond, a vision, and a friendship that will always be.