

Ohio State University Inspire Podcast

## **Onward: Building diversity on American campuses**

*As college students, they struggled against a system that often made them feel inadequate. Now Ohio State leaders, Ayanna Howard, James Moore and Don Pope-Davis are creating change and showing how everyone benefits from diversity on campus.*

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Robin Chenoweth: Even at age 10 or 12, Ayanna Howard had a reputation as the brainy girl.

Ayanna Howard: I knew I wanted to do robotics back in the day, in middle school, because I loved Star Trek, loved science fiction. And I wanted to build a bionic woman.

Robin Chenoweth: A bionic woman, a cyborg. Like in the 1970s TV show – with superhuman cybernetic powers — better, stronger, faster. And that kind of described Howard, too, at least academically. Most girls wanted to be Jaime Sommers, who could run 60 miles an hour and crush tennis balls with one hand. Howard wanted to be the scientist in the white lab coat.

Ayanna Howard: I grew up in public education, public school system. I was a smart kid, right? The football players would be like, 'Hey can you help me with my math?' My identity, I already had a label. I was a smart one, and everyone knew I was going to be smart somewhere and go off and do great things.

Robin Chenoweth: True to everyone's expectations, she went to college. But when she got there, something happened to that single-minded confidence she had developed back home in her integrated school in California.

Ayanna Howard: I always saw myself as a roboticist. And I didn't realize that this was something that was different, or an anomaly. I'm at the intersection of being a female and a Black female in engineering. Did not know that was an anomaly until I did go into my undergrad education and was basically smacked in the face about, 'Oh, yeah, you...you don't belong here.'

Robin Chenoweth: Ayanna Howard is now the dean of engineering at The Ohio State University, a professor, accomplished roboticist and engineer who worked at NASA. She belonged. In this episode we will talk to three leaders at The Ohio State University about overcoming the persistent cultural problems that tell some college students, potential students and even faculty members that they don't belong. This is the Ohio State University Inspire Podcast. I'm Robin Chenoweth. Carol Delgrosso is our audio engineer.

Robin Chenoweth: The numbers don't lie. At elite colleges and flagship universities across the country, from Harvard to Johns Hopkins, from Ohio State to University of Virginia, the rates of enrollment for minoritized students lag well behind their white counterparts. A fair measure for where we should be, experts say, exists in the population itself. Fifteen percent of college-age Americans are Black. Yet, on average, only 5.7% of undergraduate students enrolled on the main campuses of Big Ten universities are Black. Nationwide, the number of Black and LatinX students earning certain degrees has increased, but most aren't making it into 4-year programs, particularly the selective ones. Black undergraduates are less likely than members of any other

racial or ethnic group to attend selective institutions, says a 2020 report by the American Council on Education.

James Moore: In many of our Big Ten schools and large, comprehensive public institutions, African American males are almost invisible. And when you look at the student population, you may have less than 500 at an institution.

Robin Chenoweth: James L. Moore III is the vice provost for diversity and inclusion and chief diversity officer for The Ohio State University. He is director of many initiatives to create college accessibility for minoritized and disadvantaged students.

James Moore: Native people as an aggregate, they're virtually almost invisible at our institution, as well as many other institutions. And there's many explanations that people try to use. But guess what? As a society, we have grown accustomed to individuals not being at the table, we have grown accustomed to oftentimes that women are not in STEM in specific areas, to the point that we do nothing. Absolutely nothing. It's just no action. And as a society, we can no longer do that if we want to maintain our global edge. We have to invest in domestic populations. And we have to move beyond our class arrogance and intellectual snobbery that exists at institutions like ours and others similar to it around the country.

Don Pope Davis: It is not enough to simply say, we're going to recruit more faculty of color.

Robin Chenoweth: Don Pope Davis, dean of the College of Education and Human Ecology.

Don Pope Davis: It's not enough to say, we're going to recruit more students of color, it's not enough to say, we're going to address social injustice. Because these statements without a plan does not bring anything to fruition. In fact, it encourages people to continue with the status quo. I see that as a big challenge.

Robin Chenoweth: In a nation that has been catalyzed in the last year to look deeply at issues of racial equity, where do we begin to fix the problem?

Ayanna Howard: When we're thinking about these plans, how do you design them so that they can be institutionalized? Right now, we're in a moment in time. And if they are not institutionalized, where they become part of the best practices, and they become part of the processes that we become used to, then what happens is in two or three years, we revert back to the before time.

Robin Chenoweth: Dean Pope Davis, Dean Howard and Vice-Provost Moore understand college diversity challenges because they lived them. Moore attended Delaware State University on a football scholarship and lived in a dorm with African American men.

James Moore: I'll never forget that one time we had a major thunderstorm, and the lights went off in the dorm, but everybody fled to the hallways. We began to share reflections. We began to think about our lives and it was a probably about, you know, 20 to 30 individuals that were sitting down in the hallways.

Robin Chenoweth: They were all Black, and unlike Moore, the rest came from major urban areas. But the new freshmen found common ground there, sitting on the linoleum in the dorm hallway. They talked about homicide rates, which were at an all-time high for Black men, and

about how they wanted to make a difference in their communities. They talked about their dreams. But then, four years later...

James Moore: There were only two of us who actually made it to graduation that I'm aware of. Out of that I became this researcher studying, in many ways, African American males, trying to understand my situation through their situation.

Robin Chenoweth: Black students enrolled in bachelor's degree programs have higher drop-out rates and are less likely to return to college the second year than any other racial or ethnic group, studies show. Why? There are many reasons. One is societal — because the schools where Moore's classmates attended were under-resourced, they might not have had advanced placement classes, computers or teachers trained to take them to the next level.

James Moore: You see the most vulnerability in schools that have high percentages of black and brown children, as well as high percentage of free and reduced lunch. Those students don't always have a seamless pathway to flagship institutions like Ohio State University. Let's face it, we see malpractice throughout K-12. Even at our beloved Ohio, when you look at the state of K-12, it went to the Supreme Court, two times, how we fund schools. And the state has yet to right the wrongs.

Robin Chenoweth: He's referring to a decision by the Supreme Court of Ohio in 1997, and again in 2001, that the state system based on property tax valuation failed to provide fair funding for public schools. The state was ordered to find a remedy. Twenty-four years later, it still hasn't. Another issue is affordability. Most underrepresented students work as they obtain their undergraduate degrees. Some start school and then can't afford to continue. If they qualify for Pell Grants, those don't pay for high housing costs, double or even triple security deposits that off-campus landlords charge, Wi-Fi or books. President Kristina Johnson is making college affordability a focus of the university, after announcing a 10-year plan to help undergraduates receive degrees debt-free.

Robin Chenoweth: Dean Howard put herself through college, taking out student loans, earning scholarships and doing work study — a full load for any student. But getting to college, and paying for it, is not enough. To prevent the dropout that is more likely among Black and Hispanic students, a culture shift on campus is critical, she says. Because most of all, you have to believe a degree is achievable.

Ayanna Howard: Going into college, it's a different experience for a lot of students. And in some fields like engineering, it's going to be hard. It doesn't matter what your background is. When you're struggling in your classes, and you're like, Oh, this is so hard, I don't know if I'm going to get through. And then people basically imply that, yeah, you don't belong, this isn't for you, you start to internalize that. And so if you're in an environment where one you don't feel like you belong, where you don't feel like you could bring your whole self, to your class or to your job, you are more likely than not to say I'm going to go into a different field, or go to a different area, where I feel like I belong and can bring my whole self. And so that's a detriment, because we don't want to impede a student's progress and their goals and their passions, because they don't feel like they belong in the world that they thought they did, because of others people's perceptions or attitudes toward them, because of what the way they look or the way they walk or the way they talk.

Robin Chenoweth: Don Pope-Davis came from a family of 12 children. Making it to college and then graduate school seemed like a pipe dream.

Don Pope-Davis: I ask myself that every day, what are you? What are you doing here? You're not supposed to be here. This wasn't supposed to happen to you. I remember a teacher in grade school, who I still remember her name. She believed in me. She was very supportive. There were teachers along the way that have allowed me to be where I am. Whenever I was doing my undergrad, master's, doctorate, and even when I became a faculty member, there was always someone who said, you can do this. You need to do more than this, you have the ability. Or when I thought about quitting, there were people that said, I will not let you quit, you can make a difference here. And, so, there was always somebody who saw something in me that I didn't see in myself.

Robin Chenoweth: The common theme, though these leaders' experiences were quite different? Belonging. Believing they could and would achieve. As affirmative action comes again under attack, how can The Ohio State University create inclusivity at scale? How can we make an investment into a more meaningful educational experience for all students, providing everyone the rich perspectives that diverse students and faculty bring to the table? Because to solve the really intractable problems facing the world today, diversity of thought, diversity of solutions, are key.

James Moore: First and foremost, it starts with leadership, courageous leadership.

Robin Chenoweth: James Moore.

James Moore: We have the answers. There's a body of knowledge. When you look at the scientific and theoretical literature, we know what works, but oftentimes, we don't have the courage to implement the work. When Russia made their quest to go to space in the 50s, the US Department of Defense began to outline the plan for the nation and say, we're going to create the National Defense Act. And we're going to invest in school counselors. We're going to invest in education, and we're going to shape our brightest minds, to get them in STEM. And it became not just a social justice issue. It became a national security and an economic imperative that we invest in these communities. And guess what? We lead the world in going to space because we were committed to it, we put resources to it. And we charted the course.

Don Pope-Davis: We need to have leaders who are not risk averse. and subscribing to a set of traditional approaches to problem solving.

Robin Chenoweth: Don Pope-Davis

Don Pope-Davis: And so take some risks. Not every risk turns out the way you want. But without taking it, we don't create new opportunities.

Don Pope-Davis: When it comes down to a point of tension, the usual response is to go back with what has worked before. Tension is a necessary part of change. And so not to be risk averse, not to be conflict averse, but use those as opportunity to challenge some of the practices that have been here for a while.

Robin Chenoweth: And, so, these leaders are boldly tackling racial disparities at Ohio State in several ways. Though the numbers of non-white students are low at many learning institutions, diversity among faculty is even worse, years after Howard lead a student group in protest at her undergraduate college.

Ayanna Howard: I really did feel isolated. We were petitioning to try to get more Black and brown faculty in engineering because there were none. Traditionally, engineers don't do these kind of protests, because we like fixing and making new gadgets. But I just felt that I had to because I wanted to make sure I fixed it for the ones that were coming behind.

Robin Chenoweth: She's still fixing it. So is Pope-Davis. In 2018, he instituted an ambitious diversification program, increasing faculty of color to 30 percent in the College of Education and Human Ecology and launching a program to intensively coach postdoctoral scholars of color who could later apply to become faculty.

Don Pope-Davis: My commitment is to get more diversity sitting at the table both in terms of phenotype experience and intellectual prowess. I think the more we can do that, it allows for the conversation to change. The challenge is how do we get the old and the new to work together? And therein, ~~there~~ lies the tension, but I think it's a dialectical tension that is healthy. Referring to the notion of change; change requires struggle.

Ayanna Howard: When I think about fixing problems, I want to make sure that things are accessible for all individuals, whether you're of an underrepresented population, or you're a female, or you have a disability, or you're from a rural part of Ohio. I want equal opportunity for anyone who wants to be an engineer. It's a philosophy I have that engineering should look like the world. For the students, it's about ensuring that they feel included. And they are empowered with aspects of self-efficacy and having an environment where you can bring your whole self to engineering and not just, you know, the piece that people think you should be. So whatever your community is, whatever your culture is, whatever your language is, whatever your dress is, your whole self should be part of your engineering solution, because that's how we solve problems. You bring your whole self and someone else brings a whole self. And we figure out the commonality so that we can create solutions for the entire world.

Robin Chenoweth: That means opening doors and opportunities for more students, working to ensure that introductory courses don't weed certain people out who could succeed.

Ayanna Howard: We do things like implicit bias training but we can't just do that. So how do you train the gatekeepers? And if you can't train the gatekeepers, how do you bring in new gatekeepers that are trainable?

Robin Chenoweth: When you say gatekeepers, who are you talking about?

Ayanna Howard: Gatekeepers are everything from the way that admissions are done — so that's a process — to who is it that the faculty member asked to do research with them? That's a form of gatekeeping. We know that when students are involved in research in the faculty lab, it usually helps them identify and figure out that this is interesting, and also helps motivate them to go into grad school. There's data that shows this. And so as a faculty member, who you choosing to bring into your lab. So there's all these little things, and just one by themselves doesn't have an impact, but it's the fact that they're systemic.

Robin Chenoweth: Moore's Office of Diversity and Inclusion funds scholarships for hundreds of students and then provides supports to ensure that they flourish.

James Moore: We've got a learning community, for our students that they can engage in. We have a robust tutoring and supplemental instruction program. And we try to disrupt students thinking because oftentimes, regardless of their backgrounds, they were among the best of their

high schools. In our office, we have first generation college students to sixth generation college students. But if you don't create an apparatus that connects with them, you may not get optimal success for them. We've been very, very blessed that the university has had a total nine Rhodes Scholars in two of the last four have come out of our office. And we just had a student that was recently announced as a Truman scholar. We know that excellence come from all zip codes. But we know opportunity does not always easily flow through all those zip codes.

Don Pope Davis: I have met students who come from an experience and they have animated the discourse in class because they bring a real-life experience to the class.

Robin Chenoweth: Don Pope-Davis.

Don Pope-Davis: They may struggle academically, but my job as a teacher is to work with them, mentor them, help them get through the system. And you know, when you hear this is at graduation when these students get up and say, so and so changed my life because he or she would spend time with me after class. And now I'm here because I now see other possibilities. And I am a non-traditional student. I come from a poor family, I'm first generation. You hear all of these things and, yet, here they are. And here they rise. And they step up to that moment, because somebody gave them an opportunity.

Robin Chenoweth: People ask Dean Howard why she chose to leave Georgia Tech to come to Ohio State.

Ayanna Howard: It was really the ability to do things around inclusiveness and diversity and belonging around in engineering at a scale that I think is important. And having the support at the upper administration level to do it. And that's what was exciting, because all these things, doing it at scale, and having direct support, that's a win-win. Like you don't get those type of opportunities too often.

Robin Chenoweth: Howard served on Ohio State's search committee that chose the university's new provost, Dr. Melissa Gilliam, a pediatrician and researcher from University of Chicago.

Ayanna Howard: She self identifies as a black woman. And I think with that she has also navigated this world, where she's been the first in a lot of spaces. And I think what that brings to Ohio State is we are going to be doing a lot of firsts here with respect to the vision of President Kristina Johnson. And given that she's successfully navigated as a first and in many different ways and areas, she can bring us that talent and that insight of how we can do some of these ambitious goals that we have around diversity here at Ohio State, but also do it in such a way that research is first and foremost as well.

Robin Chenoweth: Courageous leadership with a clear vision. It takes individuals and institutions to heights that others consider unreachable, whether it be moonwalks or representation in classrooms.

James Moore: I won't stop until I can create a groundswell, if you will, where we can help people of all backgrounds realize their dreams and aspirations. These institutions in theory, they were designed to do that, but not at scale, thus far. And I'm hopeful with the right synergies, commitments and tenacity, I think we can do something even greater than what we've already been able to do thus far.