



EDITORIALS

Excellence isn't easy

It's hard to fault President Mary Sias for trying to improve the deplorable graduation rates at Kentucky State University, especially those of black men. Just 7 percent of that population segment enrolled in KSU's 2002 freshman class ended up with diplomas. Something needs to be done. And yet, we have to wonder about her plan to attack the problem by establishing a "boarding school" on campus, perhaps next year, housing African-American high schoolers in dormitories to help them make the transition to college life.

The \$250,000 pilot program for 30 to 50 students hinges on approval of government grants and expansion of dormitory space, now under way. It would target young men with potential for academic success who are handicapped by environmental, social and economic factors.

The college preparatory regimen would constitute sort of an academic boot camp, in which students wear uniforms and work under close supervision. It's based in part on Chicago's Vivian E. Summers Alternative School, which Sias visited. She found students learning calculus and other subjects and graduating at a rate of 95 percent.

One of the fundamental principles has minority students taught by minority teachers. "Having someone who looks like you in the classroom is critically important," the KSU president said. Maybe it is, but what if someone suggested poor, underachieving white kids ought to get their lessons exclusively from white teachers? The concept is neither politically correct nor indicative of life in the real world.

It's also debatable how much can be achieved by concentrating efforts on high school students who've already spent a dozen or more years developing inadequate study habits. Reversing that process in a crash course on campus is a big assignment.

The KSU president recognizes that the road to achievement – for black males and everyone else – has to start much earlier. She rightly calls on public schools to do a better job preparing their students for the more demanding college curriculum. In fact, preparation should start not just in school but in the family circle. President Obama got it right in his Father's Day message when he again lamented the decline of responsible parenting, particularly in a black culture riven by single motherhood and indifferent fatherhood. His own father, though an intellectual heavyweight, was too often absent to exert much influence on the future president's character.

Kentucky, which aims to double its population of bachelor's degree holders of all races by 2020, should try to resist the temptation to seek an easy shortcut to that goal. Unfortunately, there is no fast track to academic excellence. The commitment needs to begin in childhood and continue for a lifetime.