

# THE PATH

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## Shared Experience: What DBAN Can Learn from Others

Most historians believe Edward Jones, who received a degree from Amherst College in 1826, was the first African American college graduate. Technically speaking, the first Black alumni network was born when the second African American graduated from Amherst. Since then, Black alumni from colleges and universities across the country have formed networks focused on establishing and maintaining substantive links among alums, both for their benefit and that of current and prospective Black students.

Established in 1988, Davidson's Black Alumni Network (DBAN) is one of the oldest organizations of its type among similar schools (see sidebar). However, some of the younger networks seem to be more productive. Why? Seemingly, it's not what these organizations do, but rather what they do differently.

### WHAT WORKS

The "why" for establishing a Black alumni organization is the same for most, if not all, schools: to connect alums and serve as a resource for current and potential students. Whether or not a school is successful—consistently—at achieving these goals has a lot to do with the "how." A few things that seem to be working well for others include:

- *Localized chapters:* In politics and policy, the grassroots approach works by galvanizing opinion around issues near and dear to the hearts of a community. It also seems to work for Black alumni organizations.

The Harvard Black Alumni Society (HBAS) has based its long-term strategy for growth and expansion on a franchise model. In 2002, HBAS launched its first chapter, The Harvard Black Alumni Society of Boston. Over the past four years, HBAS has established operations in Atlanta, Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C. These local chapters serve as a valuable resource for black Harvard alumni interested in developing programs and planning events in their cities. The Cornell Black Alumni Association (CBAA) employs this method also, establishing "regions" in areas with significant numbers of alumni (100 or more) or where a critical mass of alumni express a strong interest in holding activities that further CBAA's mission.

**The Harvard Black Alumni Society (HBAS)** was founded in 2002 by nine alumni. Since then, it has grown into a national organization with operations in Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York and Washington D.C.

**YBAN: Yale Black Alumni Network (YBAN)** was founded in 1996. It is an independent, autonomous online community for alumni of African descent from Yale College and the university's graduate and professional schools and executive programs.

**The Black Ivy Alumni League**, founded in 1998, is a national non-profit organization representing alumni of African descent from the colleges and professional/graduate schools of the nation's eight Ivy League institutions: Brown, Columbia, Cornell, Dartmouth, Harvard, Princeton, University of Pennsylvania, and Yale.

**Cornell Black Alumni Association (CBAA)** was founded in 1976 to provide a communication network for Black alumni. Over the years, CBAA's mission and scope of activities has expanded to encompass four major programs— Recruitment, Mentorship, Update, and Scholarship.



## Connections Count: The Value of a Davidson Network

By Linsey Ray Mills '92

I am a firm believer that after graduation, your network matters. And very few colleges and universities have an alumni network like Davidson's. Our alumni hold positions at the top of every major career field, and they are active members and leaders of local communities. For me, that network has been important in all aspects of my life, both personal and professional.

I grew up in Jacksonville, a military town in eastern North Carolina. My football coach and mentor introduced me to Davidson and suggested I visit the college. I had never heard of Davidson, but I became interested when a friend of my mother told us another student athlete from Jacksonville, Terry Hines '91, was a student there. Terry hosted me on a campus visit and spoke highly of Davidson's academic reputation and the value of a Davidson degree. His advice and encouragement were a big influence on my decision to attend Davidson. Terry and I became close friends.

The Davidson network actually became a family affair. I met my wife, Michelle Serrano-Mills '90, during my freshman year. We became good friends and business partners, and in June of 1995 we were married. My sister, Andrea Mills '02, participated in a summer enrichment program Michelle and I created for African-American students in the community. A recipient of a Davidson Black Alumni Network Scholarship, she has worked to develop programs that teach students about life, career, and business skills. This work is a continuation of the community outreach she did at Davidson as a Bonner Scholar. My niece, Elyse Harris '08, participated in Love of Learning. A leader in the Black Student Coalition, she currently is studying abroad in Italy.

The network has helped me professionally. When Michelle and I decided to write our book, *Simply Outrageous: Lessons Learned on the Road to Entrepreneur of the Year*, we asked Ike Bailey '95, a writer in Myrtle Beach, SC, to help edit the manuscript.

Personally, the network has also been there for me. In January 2004, a unique meeting took place in South Africa. George Penick '70, Athan Lindsay '93, Michelle Serrano-Mills '90, and I traveled to South Africa as a part of a trip commissioned by the Ford Foundation. While there, we reconnected with Clement Radebe '92, a native of South Africa. Clement joined us for dinner and we talked about a new South Africa, as well as how attending Davidson helped him make a transition to a post-apartheid South Africa.

This past summer, Michelle and I joined Tony Perez '92 to facilitate Davidson Summer, a program for first-year students of color. It was an exciting experience that strengthened our commitment to helping students connect with the Davidson Black Alumni Network. I was further encouraged at Homecoming, when Black Alumni from the classes of '74 to '06 (the class of '76 celebrated its 30th reunion) came back to campus and met at the Black Student Coalition with students, alumni, faculty, staff, parents, and prospective students.

When I talk to Davidson students, I encourage them to make a commitment as alumni to be involved on campus as mentors, visiting executives, career contacts, and internship providers. As Davidson alumni, we can serve as an open and interactive channel between the college and the business world. We can be there for students and fellow alumni at every turn in their career paths, whether they are applying for their first jobs or changing careers.

The strides Davidson alumni make in the business, education, and non-profit arenas increase the value of our Davidson degrees. I consider my contributions of time, talent, and treasure to Davidson a wise investment with an exponential return.

*Since graduating from Davidson, Linsey Mills has enjoyed a career in financial services and entrepreneurship. In 1997, he received the U.S. Small Business Administration's Young Entrepreneur of the Year award for North Carolina and the Southeast Region. In addition, the City of Winston-Salem issued a resolution to Linsey and Michelle honoring them for their dedication to entrepreneurship.*

(Continued from page 1)

- *Thriving online communities:* The first electronic mailing list software was introduced in 1984. Over the following decade, email lists evolved into virtual organizations, like the Yale Black Alumni Network (YBAN). Founded in 1996 as an informal email list, YBAN originally comprised a handful of Yale alums from the early 1990s. Today, YBAN's membership is in the hundreds and the organization serves as the primary conduit for communication between, and information on, Yale's Black alumni.
- *Alumni involvement in recruitment:* Who better to help a school determine which Black students will thrive in its unique environment than those who have done just that? The Black Ivy Alumni League—a consortium representing alumni of the eight Ivy League institutions—employs this approach to help its member schools identify and recruit top Black high school students. Each school coordinates a network of alumni volunteers to recruit, conduct interviews, and serve as informal liaisons to secondary schools.
- *A sense of history:* Because of their typically dispersed governance model, alumni organizations have a particular need to maintain continuity across administrations. Brown University's Inman Page Black Alumni Council (IPC) meets this challenge with an historian function as part of its governing board. As the "embodiment of its institutional memory," IPC's historian ensures continuity across administrations by documenting proceedings, activities, and all other significant moments in the life of the organization.
- *Strong connections to students:* Black alumni organizations have a dual mission: to maintain real-world relevancy and provide value for alumni while serving as resources for current and prospective students. The stronger networks address both by way of critical mass—namely, enough interested alumni to have members focused on each mission. They also make campus involvement part of their organizational framework. At Harvard, HBAS joined forces with the Black Students' Association to build the Harvard Black Alumni Mentoring (BAM) Program. An e-mentoring program that uses the web and email to connect undergraduates and alumni across the country, BAM matched more than 70 undergraduates, graduate students and alumni in its first year. Online resources, ranging from a list of typical mentee issues/questions to mentor profiles, help strengthen the program by ensuring value for both sides of the mentor relationship.
- *Strong connections to the institution:* Black alumni involvement in an institution's governance is critical to furthering African American interests. It also can be a valuable networking opportunity. CBAA focuses specific efforts toward encouraging alumni participation in the life and development of Cornell and developing alumni leaders for service as trustees, council members, class officers, fund officers, and alumni posts. YBAN counts among its stakeholders "faculty, university employees, the Afro-American Cultural Center (AACC), the Afro-American Studies Department, and the greater university and New Haven communities."

While each college and each student is unique, the Black experience has similarities across many of them that shapes Black alumni organizations nationwide. By taking what works for them and applying those same things to DBAN's unique challenges and opportunities, we can create a thriving, enduring organization that provides value for alumni and students alike.

## Getting It Straight

Janet Harrell '85, editor

In 1968, Malcolm X advised: "Examine the historic method used...by others who have problems similar to yours. Once you see how they got theirs straight, then you know how you can get yours straight." In this issue of *The Path*, we're doing just that. In the Alumni Profile, Linsey Mills '92 talks about how the Davidson network has had an important impact on both his personal and professional lives. In the lead story, we examine what Black alumni networks at schools like Davidson are doing that DBAN isn't—YET. DBAN can and should make a big difference in our lives and in the lives of those who come behind us. The question is, will we get it straight so it can? I think we'd be foolish not to. DBAN president Erwin Carter would love to hear what YOU think DBAN could and should be doing. And so would I. Email Erwin at [erwin.carter@newboldonline.com](mailto:erwin.carter@newboldonline.com) or me at [jharrell@thepointcomm.com](mailto:jharrell@thepointcomm.com). We're working to get DBAN straight—and we could sure use your help.





## Davidson College Black Alumni Network

Erwin Carter '79  
President

Janet Stovall Harrell '85  
Editor, *The Path*

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**Website**  
**[davidson.edu/alumni/  
net\\_dban.asp](http://davidson.edu/alumni/net_dban.asp)**

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Davidson College  
Office of Alumni Relations  
Post Office Box 7169  
Davidson, NC 28035-7169

## What's Up (and coming)

- Questions, comments, suggestions?  
Re: DBAN, Erwin Carter  
404.731.0821 or [erwin.carter@newboldonline.com](mailto:erwin.carter@newboldonline.com)  
Re: *The Path*, Janet Harrell  
404.377.6380 or [jharrell@thepointcomm.com](mailto:jharrell@thepointcomm.com)  
Re: Alumni relations, Nikki Sawyer  
704.894.2399 or [nisawyer@davidson](mailto:nisawyer@davidson).
- DBAN Yahoo Group: [DBAN-subscribe@yahoogroups.com](mailto:DBAN-subscribe@yahoogroups.com)