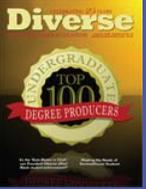




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Current News

Spel-Bounding: All-Female Spelman College Ranks No. 2 in Sending Black Graduates On to Ph.D.s in Science and Math

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by Chandra R. Thomas
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Coming in second usually isn't a big deal. But, when it is a tiny, historically Black women's college placing No. 2 to a fellow HBCU with a student body just more than three times its size in a national science- and math-related survey, it seems that it is something to celebrate.

Atlanta's Spelman College, an all-female liberal arts college with a student body of about 2,200, sent 150 Black students on to Ph.D. degrees in the traditionally male disciplines of science and engineering from 1997 to 2006, according to a survey released by the National Science Foundation. That's more than any other undergraduate program in the country besides the considerably larger, coed Howard University. Howard, which has about 7,000 undergraduates, sent 224 on to advanced degrees.

"This is not surprising at all; we push our students and challenge them to do well," says Associate Provost of Research Lily McNair, who insists that the accolade is the direct result of seeds planted by former math professor Etta Falconer, who established a summer program in 1972 to recruit more students interested in science. "Professor Falconer had a dream to attract more Black women into the science and math fields and that dream has been nurtured and supported over the years by all of our presidents, administration and faculty."

Historically Black colleges and universities, including Spelman's "brother school" – all-male Morehouse College – claimed eight of the top 10 spots in the survey, which also included predominately White schools. Researchers ranked the numbers of Black doctoral graduates per 1,000 bachelor's degrees awarded the previous nine years in an effort to examine the role of Black colleges in fostering opportunities for their students.

Spelman's accolade is not surprising considering the plethora of opportunities available to its students, including participation in the Research Initiative for Scientific Enhancement (RISE) program, an effort funded by the National Institutes of Health to encourage students in underrepresented groups — such as women and African-Americans — in the sciences; the NASA-funded Women in Science and Engineering (WISE) program; and a dual-degree program with the nearby Georgia Institute of Technology, which allows students to earn a science degree from Spelman and an engineering degree from Georgia Tech simultaneously. Those programs, paired with an ever-expanding science and math curriculum (the number of chemistry professors alone has grown from four to 13 since 1981) and a state-of-the-art 100,000-square-foot science center, which opened in 2000, have helped catapult the college – founded in 1881 to train Black teachers – into a top producer of female scientists.

"If every school in the country were doing a fourth of what we are doing, there wouldn't be such a shortage of African Americans in the field of science," says chemistry professor Albert Thompson. "It's the nurturing that we do that makes the difference. We talk to the students very early on about what it takes to be successful in the sciences, and we immediately start preparing them for graduate school. They know that we expect them to succeed."

Spelman also gained international recognition in 2005 when its "SpelBots" robotics team became the first all-female and African American undergraduate team to compete in a global robotics competition in Japan.

Sophomore biology major Britney Lambert was recently accepted into an early medical school placement program at Boston University. She says access to diverse resources, exposure to role models and a nurturing environment help Spelmanites in their pursuit of excellence.

"We get the sense that our professors genuinely care about us and want us to succeed," says Lambert, 20. "They're always making us aware of the many opportunities available to us. Having professors that look like me also makes a monumental difference; it lets me know that these fields are not exclusive to Caucasians or Asians."

The National Science Foundation honor was followed by another prestigious distinction for Spelman. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* recently recognized it as among the "Top Producing" four-year liberal arts institutions with the highest number of U.S. Fulbright awards for the 2008-2009 academic year.

Adds McNair of the accolade, "I think this shows that we are not only excelling in the sciences and math, but that Spelman College is doing well across the board."

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