

An Educational Journey to Deanship: A Memoir

Author: Terence Hicks

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The power of role models and mentoring relationships in higher education is immeasurably profound and lasts a lifetime for many students. *An Educational Journey to Deanship: A Memoir* is the story of Dr. Terence Hicks's journey through the education system and into professional success—a journey facilitated by effective mentors and role models. Hicks, a Black man, is the son of parents who were products of the racially segregated school system of Prince Edward County, Virginia, where government officials chose to close public schools for 5 years rather than address educational inequities. He describes a pathway to educational and professional success that is not highlighted as frequently as it should be. In reflecting on the influences that shaped his journey to two academic deanships, Hicks underscores the importance of role modeling and mentorship and offers lessons and guidance for others aspiring to become academic administrators. Referencing his purpose in writing this book, he notes that he hopes to inspire other young professionals to seek experiences and to use them as stepping-stones for advancement.

The book is organized chronologically and begins with his early educational years, progressing through his accomplishments as an academic administrator and professor. A resident of Prince Edward County in Virginia, Terence Hicks was a product of the same Prince Edward County Public Schools, whose students challenged segregation in *Davis v. the School Board of Prince Edward County*, a case later consolidated with Brown in the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* landmark judicial decision. His parents had been lockout victims in the early 1960s,¹ and he valued education and was motivated to excel in the classroom in spite of a

¹ See Hicks's book with Abul Pitre (2010), *The Educational Lockout of African Americans in Prince Edward County, Virginia (1959-1964)* for additional discussion and personal reflections on the fight for equal access to education in Virginia.

school system that he describes as “broken in a county that did not value educating African American children.”

As a young man, Hicks did not dream of becoming a professor or publishing multiple books, or even becoming the president of his own research consulting firm. Rather, he wanted to play professional sports. In high school, he was involved with (and excelled at) basketball and cross-country. Considering himself an average student during these years, he spent the latter part of his high school career trying to improve his grades. He began taking college preparatory courses to raise his GPA. He entered college as a mathematics major but graduated with a bachelor’s degree in business administration from the historically Black land-grant institution of Virginia State University (VSU) in Ettrick, Virginia. The direction of his future was decided after he graduated college, though he didn’t know it at the time. Unsatisfied by the prospects and opportunities within his degree field, he began to focus on the field of education but was concerned that his lackluster GPA would hinder his admission to a graduate program.

He applied to the Master of Education in Guidance and Counseling program at VSU, hoping that his alma mater would accept him to their program. Admitted conditionally, he worked full-time during his first semester. The balancing act proved to be a more difficult experience than anticipated, and he earned an “F” and a “C.” Despite his less than satisfactory progress, VSU admitted him to the Guidance and Counseling program, but this time he was mentored by two very influential administrators who took an interest in his success. Their mentorship served as the turning point in his academic career, and he began considering a career as a university professor. Despite the rocky beginning in his program, the mentorship of these caring individuals within the higher education system at VSU changed the outcome of his future.

After completing his master’s degree, Hicks worked in several administrative positions in the mental health and education fields. As he progressed through his professional endeavors, gaining entrance to a doctoral program became a driving force to achieve his goal of a university professorship. He was accepted to the Innovation and Leadership doctoral program at Wilmington College (now Wilmington University) in Delaware. Hicks served as a coordinator while completing his doctoral program. In this role, he learned more about the field and how to be a mentor and source of guidance for others. Upon graduation, he received a full-time teaching position and was later hired as a tenure-track assistant professor. It was from this experience that Hicks began to branch out into administrative, teaching, and other engagements at a variety of colleges and universities throughout the country. These opportunities included a second doctoral degree, various types of research, publishing more than 100 articles and books, as well as being offered

deanship positions at two institutions, and founding Hicks Research Consulting, LLC. These experiences provided a strong sense of leadership style and vision, which he leveraged to improve the quality of the programs serving students, staff, and faculty in his portfolio.

One shortcoming of the book is a lack of detail about the more influential relationships in Hicks's personal and professional journey. Compelling detail is an aspect of the memoir genre that allows readers to feel connected to the subject, to understand the lessons learned through the author's perspective. Given the emphasis on educational experiences, role modeling, and mentorship, readers will understandably want greater insight into those aspects of Hick's story. Mentorship and role modeling are powerful forces within his journey, and the audience would be better served by understanding the practices that made mentorship effective. For example, the relationships Hicks describes often span several years, but the more intimate details of why these relationships are important aren't well explained. Introducing specific conversations or describing how support was given during difficult times would have been powerful additions in this area. The text would also benefit from descriptions of the introspection that likely occurred during the journey. Changes on a personal level and in his thought processes during pivotal crossroads are left more to the imagination but making these explicit may offer an inspirational and uplifting message for students and aspiring professionals, especially coming from such an influential and accomplished person as Hicks.

Hicks' story serves as an example of success in several arenas of education and leadership. His journey outlines a pathway to success for first-generation college students, students of color, and others from marginalized backgrounds. The narrative highlights key factors contributing to the success of students who have been deprived of educational opportunities and sheds light on the need for mentoring relationships and role models within these student populations. As he reflects on his journey at the beginning of this book, he acknowledges the social and historical context that contributed to the motivations and challenges that he experienced. He also argues that opportunities are best paired with hard work and motivation to become better and to consistently develop personal characteristics that contribute to personal success and leadership as well as the success of others.

Opportunities do not merely come from being accepted to a program or institution but are provided in consistent and tangible experiences for students who are often overlooked or viewed as average or failing. The mentors who guided and encouraged Hicks saw past his grades to who he was as a person. They saw him as someone with potential and leadership qualities who wanted more from his experiences than he was producing. There is an overarching story of relationship

building where meaningful relationships had a deep impact on the quality of his life as a student. Within his journey, he finds what it means to be resilient and to embrace professional relationships with others who want to invest in his future and success.

Orientation, transition, and retention (OTR) professionals are often the first point of contact for students as they enter an institution of higher education, which places these experts into centralized roles that deliver momentum shifts. As seen in Hicks's story, the relationships with staff and faculty at his institutions were critical to the trajectory of his professional career. The impact of mentorship, outreach, and relationship building provided during a turning point in his educational career was a significant factor in his success. Without them, he may not have persisted in his programs or developed the leadership skills he possesses.

This text should serve as an example to OTR students and professionals of how powerful and long-lasting the relationship-building aspects are in this field. In creating and implementing programs designed to facilitate student success, OTR administrators should highlight the tangible opportunities for students, especially those from marginalized backgrounds, including students of color and first-generation students. Highlighting possibilities for leadership, mentorship, engagement, and belonging are critical factors manifested through stories like that of Hicks. Unlocking the potential of students allows higher education professionals to see more than grades on a transcript. In advancing the practices of OTR, an emphasis should be placed on programmatic changes that promote student opportunities according to their interests and professional goals rather than program objectives and quantitative outcomes.

References

Hicks, T., & Pitre, A. (2010). *The educational lockout of African Americans in Prince Edward County, Virginia (1959-1964)*. University Press of America.