

Making a difference



Thomas Harris a driving force for UWL, area social justice

When Thomas Harris was graduating with a bachelor’s degree, three of his UW-Stevens Point mentors told him he had what it takes to make a difference among college students.

Harris drove to La Crosse in August 1988 to discover how to do that through UWL’s college student personnel master’s program. He started classes that fall – the beginning of a 30-year UWL career that allowed him to mentor thousands of students and impact a community.

“I stayed because the longer I remained connected with the off-campus community, the more opportunities, options, and assistance I was able to engage, offer, and provide for UWL students, faculty, staff, and individuals and organizations across the region,” explains Harris.

He credits nearly a dozen supervisors in Residence Life and Multicultural Student Services – the two office areas in which he has worked on campus – for his UWL longevity and career growth.

“The most valuable part of my UWL experience has been my supervisors trusting me, my abilities and my decision-making,” he says. “Through these relationships and experiences, I have learned many lessons, especially from the students I have encountered and interacted with over the years.”

Harris says working with community and regional events and initiatives linked to equity, access, inclusion and social justice compelled him to stay.

“In more recent years, my community activism role has been to build genuine relationships across racial and power structural lines, especially with open-minded white folks willing to recognize that they have the power, privilege, and capability to act to create positive equity improvements when it comes to interactions and partnerships with people of color and Indigenous people,” he explains.

Harris specifically points to those who came with an open mind and used their privilege to make change benefitting everyone, not only the white majority.

“This critical shortcoming in the La Crosse area has provided me an opportunity, as a Black man, to play a unique role to welcome white individuals at every level to learn, reimagine and participate intentionally cross culturally,” he says.

He's seen efforts among many area white leaders change how they address equity, access, inclusion and social justice.

"This new trend is that other area organizations are creating new positions and offices at the top of the hierarchal ladder to coordinate, assess, and collaborate equity, access, inclusion, and social justice efforts," he says.

UWL colleagues credit Harris for his many efforts to lead change on campus and in the community.

"I am impressed by Thomas's commitment, diligence and focus on making the campus and community a more welcoming environment for students, faculty and staff of color," says Antoiwana Williams, director of Multicultural Student Services.

With more than 20 local organizations now promoting equity, access, inclusion and social justice, Harris shares pride in achieving success. But he knows those efforts must continue through collaboration, commitment and intentionality.



The Thomas Harris file

- Assistant director in the UWL Office of Multicultural Student Services since 2003; assistant coordinator in the Housing Office, Southern Illinois University Carbondale, 2002-03; various positions in OMSS, Admissions, and Residence Life offices, UWL, 1988-2001.
- Recipient of La Crosse Area Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Leadership Award, 2009; CouleeCap People Helping People Award for La Crosse County, 2010.
- Recipient of UWL Rada Distinguished Alumni Award, 2012; UWL Parker Multicultural Alumni Award, 2018.
- UWL residence hall students establish the Thomas Harris Student Involvement Award Scholarship to annually recognize outstanding student dedication and commitment to Residence Life excellence, 2001.
- WURHA Advisor of the Year Award was renamed by UW System student leaders the "Thomas Harris Advisor of the Year Award," 2000.
- Bachelor's in political science/public administration and policy analysis, UW-Stevens Point, 1988; master's in college student personnel, UWL, 2001.