

Handout 5.2B: W.E.B. Du Bois “The Talented Tenth” Essay from *The Negro Problem* (1903)

(Key Ideas Highlighted)

This essay was published as part of a collection written by leading African Americans. The term the “talented tenth” originated in the late 1800s as a phrase used to help establish colleges to train black teachers and elites.

1 The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men. The problem of
education, then, among Negroes must first of all deal with the Talented Tenth; it is the problem
3 of developing the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination
and death of the Worst, in their own and other races. Now the training of men is a difficult and
5 intricate task. Its technique is a matter for educational experts, but its object is for the vision of
seers. If we make money the object of man-training, we shall develop money-makers but not
7 necessarily men; if we make technical skill the object of education, we may possess artisans but
not, in nature, men. Men we shall have only as we make manhood the object of the work of the
9 schools—intelligence, broad sympathy, knowledge of the world that was and is, and of the
11 relation of men to it—this is the curriculum of that Higher Education which must underlie true
life. On this foundation we may build bread winning, skill of hand and quickness of brain, with
never a fear lest the child and man mistake the means of living for the object of life.

13 If this be true - and who can deny it - three tasks lay before me; first to show from the past that
15 the Talented Tenth as they have risen among American Negroes have been worthy of leadership;
secondly to show how these men may be educated and developed; and thirdly to show their
relation to the Negro problem.

17 [...] Can the masses of the Negro people be in any possible way more quickly raised than by the
19 effort and example of this aristocracy of talent and character? Was there ever a nation on God's
fair earth civilized from the bottom upward? Never; it is, ever was and ever will be from the top
21 downward that culture filters. The Talented Tenth rises and pulls all that are worth the saving up
to their vantage ground. This is the history of human progress; and the two historic mistakes
23 which have hindered that progress were the thinking first that no more could ever rise save the
few already risen; or second, that it would better the uprisen to pull the risen down.

25 How then shall the leaders of a struggling people be trained and the hands of the risen few
strengthened? There can be but one answer: The best and most capable of their youth must be
27 schooled in the colleges and universities of the land. We will not quarrel as to just what the
university of the Negro should teach or how it should teach it? I willingly admit that each soul
29 and each race-soul needs its own peculiar curriculum. But this is true: A university is a human
invention for the transmission of knowledge and culture from generation to generation, through
31 the training of quick minds and pure hearts, and for this work no other human invention will
suffice, not even trade and industrial schools.

33 [...] Education and work are the levers to uplift a people. Work alone will not do it unless
35 inspired by the right ideals and guided by intelligence. Education must not simply teach work, it
must teach Life. The Talented Tenth of the Negro race must be made leaders of thought and
missionaries of culture among their people. No others can do this work and Negro colleges must
train men for it. The Negro race, like all other races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men.