



FROM COTTON FIELDS to UNIVERSITY LEADERSHIP

All Eyes on Charlie, A Memoir

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A TEACHING AND RESOURCE GUIDE

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Introduction

The debate over racism and its effects on American society has persisted for years, and *From Cotton Fields to University Leadership: All Eyes on Charlie, A Memoir*, by Charlie Nelms makes an invaluable addition to this national conversation. Charlie describes his journey from rural poverty to university leadership with the support of his parents, family, school, and the Black community in the Arkansas Delta. With hard work, determination, and help from mentors, Charlie became the first and youngest African American chancellor of a predominately White institution (PWI) in Indiana and the head of several other institutions, including an historically black college and universities (HBCU). He openly discusses the many challenges he overcame on the journey to becoming chancellor of North Carolina Central University. This guide will provide meaningful analysis and reflection as it supports the purpose of First-Year Experience Programs and One Book Initiatives.

Discussion Questions

These questions can be used to spark discussion with the entire class, shared with small groups, or used for online dialogue.

1. Explore the critical personal or family values that served as the foundation for Charlie's professional success. What role did Charlie's parents play in instilling these values?
2. Charlie's parents believed that education, voting, and land ownership were crucial for freedom. What were the specific obstacles to achieving these, and how are they present today?
3. Charlie tells the story of his brother jailed for a crime he did not commit, as well as the murder of his friend by a deputy sheriff. What similarities exist between these experiences over 50 years ago and what young African American men face in our time?
4. Why are lyrics from the song "How I Got Over" quoted in the book? Explore other examples of poetry and song quoted in the book. How do these examples reflect the memoir's major themes?
5. How is the phrase "American-style apartheid" used? What is its relationship to contemporary American life?
6. How did expectations surrounding gender affect the lives of the young girls and women when Charlie was growing up? Explore how these continue to contribute to gender disparities in pay and other examples of discrimination.
7. What role did standardized tests play in Charlie's higher education and in his life choices? In what ways can such tests perpetuate educational and socioeconomic inequities? How is equity different from equality?

8. “All Eyes on Charlie” is a key part of this book’s title. How does this set up readers’ expectations? How does the meaning of these words change as Charlie moves from childhood to adolescence and adulthood?
9. The chapter entitled “Boot Camp” describes Charlie’s experience as a U.S. Marine. What did he take away from that period, and how did it change him?
10. During the course of his education and professional life, Charlie had to relocate, first with his wife, and later with their son. The challenge of finding appropriate housing is constant. Why is this the case, and in what form does this problem still exist today?
11. When Charlie visits Gary, Indiana, for the first time, he notices a strange smell. What does it come from, and what is its importance? Charlie also headed the University of Michigan-Flint, in a city where severe water pollution led to a statewide crisis. How do these two episodes illustrate the meaning of environmental (in)justice?
12. What does being a servant-leader mean? Why is this important to Charlie? What other kinds of leadership styles are illustrated in the book?
13. What are some examples of philanthropy that appear in the book? How are they different from common depictions of philanthropy in the media?
14. In what ways have HBCUs played an important part in Charlie’s personal and professional success? How can HBCUs take the lead in helping to solve today’s greatest challenges?
15. The crucial importance of mentors is highlighted throughout the book, starting in the Preface. What are the most meaningful examples of mentorship that Charlie encounters, and how did they change his life?
16. As he nears retirement, Charlie reflects on significant life lessons he has learned along the way. What are the most important, and how are they connected to the book’s opening chapters?
17. What do the words “full circle” mean as the title for the final chapter? Discuss the images in the book’s final paragraphs and what they could mean.

Suggested Classroom Activities

Designed to help students generate their own questions about the text and therefore take ownership of the critical inquiry process, these activities can be done in small groups or pairs. Ask students to create a list of four questions, one from each of the following categories. Students can use Google docs or other collaborative platforms for responding to questions or select a few for discussion in the classroom.

1. Who, what, and where?

Answers can be found directly in a specific part of the text.

Examples: What happened to the smartest girl in Charlie's school? What did Carrie teach Charlie about life?

2. How and why?

Answers are created by weaving together different sections of the text.

Examples: How does microaggression (or "casual" everyday racism) play a role in how Black leaders are treated? Why are HBCUs important in American life?

3. Personal interpretation

Requires a personal interpretation from the reader based on textual evidence.

Examples: How does Charlie explain his decision about the Thomas Hart Benton murals depicting the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) in Indiana state history? Do you agree with him? Why or why not?

4. Personal experience

Connects personal experience with major themes and images from the text.

Examples: Have you ever witnessed or been a target of bullying or discrimination based on difference? What was your reaction? Could you have responded differently? If so, what effect do you think this would have had?

Collaborative Research Opportunities

Ask students in small groups to create a website that illustrates a major historical theme in the text using photographs, primary documents, references to pop culture, personal testimonial, and/or expressive writing.

Example: "The Obstacles Faced by Black Farmers" could include a graphic to illustrate the decreasing number of black-owned farms and the reasons for this, quotes from interviews with Black farmers, documentary photos, contemporary parallels drawn from the television drama series "Queen Sugar," and song lyrics or poetry.