"Exuding Levels of Excellence" is the winning slogan for elementary education (ELE) teacher candidates. The slogan, coined by Satira Holliday, a spring 2012 graduate from Philadelphia, captures the essence of the historical legacy of Winston-Salem State University (WSSU) and its continuous drive for excellence in teacher education.

The focus of excellence began when WSSU was founded in 1892 as the Slater Industrial Academy. Winston-Salem State University has a long history of contributions to the field of elementary education. The new ELE slogan reflects the continuous high quality of elementary school teacher preparation that in 1925 warranted the General Assembly of North Carolina to reward the University with a new name, Winston-Salem Teachers College, and a new charter with authority to confer degrees. As such, "Teachers College" became the first historically Black institution in the United States to grant elementary education degrees. High levels of excellence, no doubt, were required in order for the institution to receive this auspicious recognition.

It is fitting during this year of our 120th anniversary to recognize the tenacity and courage of our founder, Dr. Simon Green Atkins, for his commitment as an advocate for social justice: liberating African Americans from the bondage of illiteracy. The legacy of his devotion to educating those who would otherwise not have had the opportunity represents the levels of excellence expected in WSSU’s elementary education program today and is embodied in the program’s commitment to social justice.

As a 1974 graduate of WSSU’s elementary education program, I am a product of Dr. Atkins’ vision of excellence. In fall 2006, I returned to serve as coordinator of the elementary education program. My strong desire to continue the legacy of excellence propels me to make habits of excellence as contagious among my students as my WSSU professors made them for me. Today, I teach habits of excellence in each course, and my students and I celebrate excellence at all levels. When asked, "At what level will you perform as an ELE major?", teacher candidates respond in unison, "There is a high expectation for excellence in the demonstration not only of knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed for teaching, but also in the social understanding of oneself, not only as an educator, but as a citizen in society."

Excellence, then, is not just a grade for which elementary education majors aspire; it is a habit, and it is an expectation that Satira Holliday fulfilled during her matriculation in the program. Her voice and the voices of the spring 2012 graduates echo the slogan "Exuding Levels of Excellence." Satira explains her basis for developing this slogan, what it represents to our program, and why she feels she is now ready to teach.

I came to Winston-Salem State University because my uncle was a Ram, and he was determined to have one of his nieces or nephews carry on the family’s Ram tradition. All he talked about was his great experience here. I did my research about the elementary education program and heard that it was great, so I applied and got a full scholarship. I am now ready to teach, and I am excited to have my own classroom. What prepared me best for teaching were
the hands-on experiences, field experiences, and the actual opportunity to be in the classroom. I had the foundation, but once I was in the classroom, I could practice the theory I had been taught. Everything came into reality.

This is the first time I had you [Ms. Oates] as an instructor; excellence is an expectation. In everything you say and everything you do, it comes through, it exudes. I chose those words because ELE is the acronym for elementary education and I found out that the elementary education program is excellent. When excellence exudes, it means you know it, you can see it everywhere. It means coming forth; you can’t stop it; it’s coming from everywhere. No matter where we go and no matter what we do, everyone else can see it coming from us. People recognize excellence when they see it. It’s been a great experience and I can’t imagine being anywhere else. I value all that I have learned and all that I have gone through: the good, the bad, the ugly, everything. I look forward to coming back and sharing with new candidates what I have learned.

Octavia Hammond, also a spring 2012 graduate and a teacher at Julian Gibson Elementary School in Winston-Salem, completed both the national and state performance-based assessments. She speaks to their rigor and the value of going through the process.

The TPA was like nothing I had ever done before. I knew I would be looked at nationally, and I wanted to be meticulous and thorough. Not knowing what to do, without an example, really scared me at first, but now I can see how struggling through it to learn my own teaching skills was well worth all the work. It was hard, and it took an enormous amount of time to complete, but it was worth it to know how to reflect on all that I do as a teacher. I am ready to teach and I am so excited to have my own class.

WSSU, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and East Carolina University are the only three teacher education programs in North Carolina participating in edTPA. They join a consortium of teacher preparation programs in 23 other states. This is just one more indicator of our efforts to ensure excellence in the elementary education program.

Only those experiences at the highest levels could yield the degree of competence reflected in these graduates’ performance. They are now members of the historic and prestigious league of educators who have graduated from Winston-Salem State University. The spring 2012 elementary education graduates walked through the infamous arches ready to learn, and they have departed well-prepared and ready to teach!