

Awareness, Advocacy, Accountability!

GAME PLAN

Former pro-football player, Dean of Students Irvin Clark, has big plans for Student Affairs.

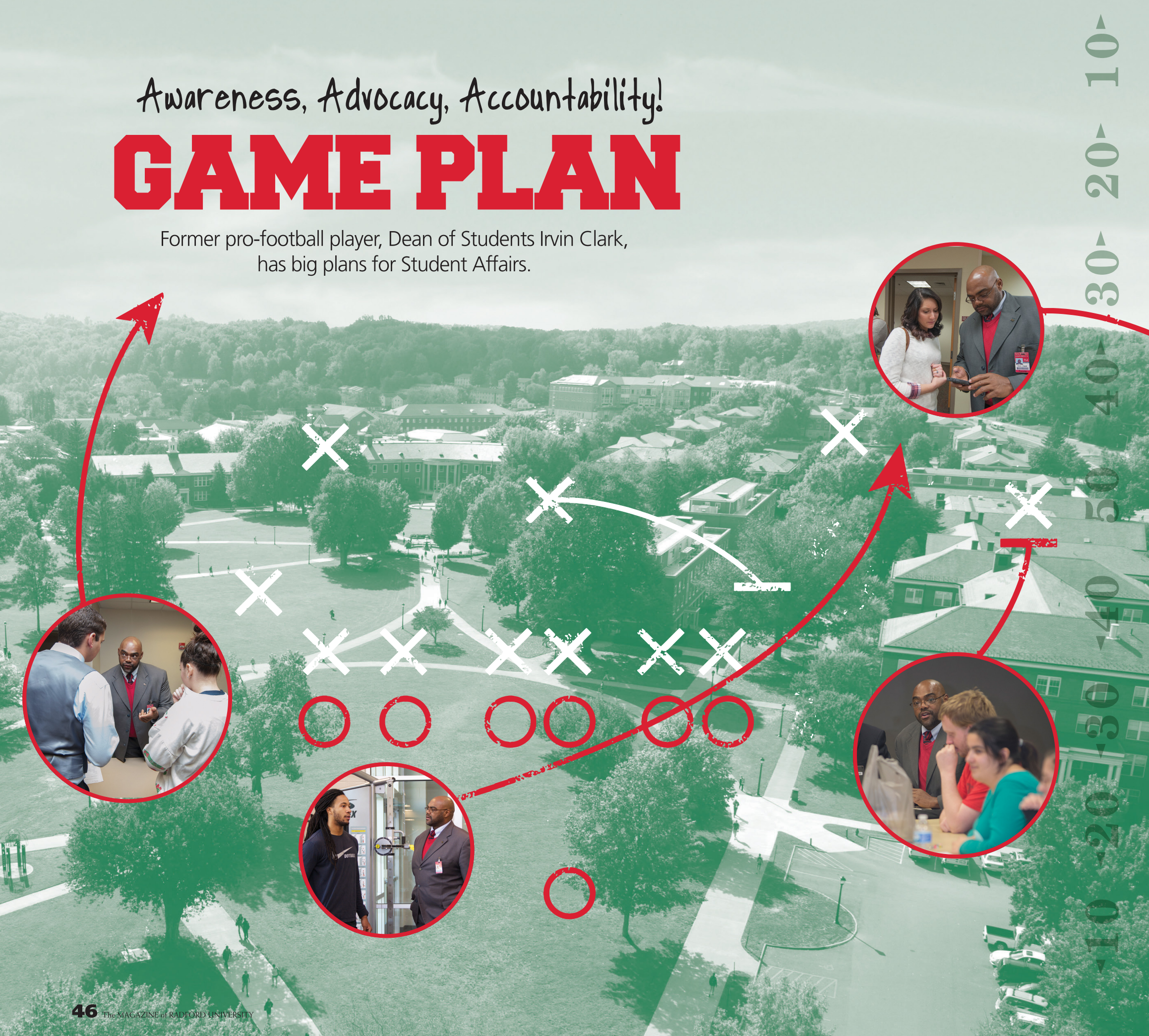
By Mary Hardbarger
Photos by Lora Gordon and
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LONG BEFORE Dean of Students Irvin Clark proudly donned Radford University red ball caps and T-shirts, he suited up in helmets and padding.

The Florida native is a former defensive lineman with the NFL's Tampa Bay Buccaneers.

Before that, Clark packed his suitcases with pressed navy blue and white uniforms as he traveled the country with the United States Navy.

A half decade prior, he dressed in weathered clothing to harvest the tobacco fields farmed by his grandfather.



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Colby Bender, Student Government Association President

CLARK, 49, has carved out a colorful career path, one that eventually led to Radford in fall 2013, where, as a dean and associate vice president for Student Affairs, he is making a lasting impact on students’ lives.

As a mentor, Clark often gives “carte blanche” to his students, granting them complete freedom to act as they think is best.

“His door is always open,” said Student Government Association (SGA) President Colby Bender. “I’ll walk into his office, and even if he’s working on the computer or on the phone, he’ll stop everything and talk to me. And he’d do that for anyone.”

Clark’s open-door philosophy is just one method he has adopted to change the way his office is viewed.

“The perception from students is that coming to the Dean of Students Office is like coming to the principal’s office,” Clark said. “Instead, I think that this office should be a place where people feel good about coming.”

Students’ attitudes are also changing, Clark said, evident in an encounter he had last semester.

One fall afternoon, as the frigid wind whipped through campus, Clark hurried into his office after a meeting. Another event would soon follow, but he allowed enough time in his busy schedule for an interview. Halfway through the list of questions, a student appeared at his door.

She needed to talk.

So the interview was halted and rescheduled, and the student was ushered into his office. Clark makes students his first priority.

DR. IRVIN R. CLARK grew up on the outskirts of Quincy, Florida, a small city about 25 miles northwest of Tallahassee.



In the rural, “sawdust” community, he found solace on the back of a motorcycle winding down country roads. The bike rides were a much-needed break from the 65 acres of farmland on which his grandfather raised tobacco, tomatoes, sugarcane, squash and “pretty much anything that grew up out of the ground,” Clark said.

“I hated the summers because there was always something you had to do,” he said. “In fact, one of the local farmers said ‘Irvin, you gonna give me one more summer?’ And I said ‘No way.’”

He meant what he said.

Clark graduated from high school that week, and the following Monday, he enlisted in the U.S. Navy.

Clark’s four-year service was highlighted with duties on the Navy Drill Team and the Navy Presidential Honor Guard.

In 1987, the 6-foot-2, 275-pound veteran, enrolled at Florida A&M University, where he excelled in the classroom and on the football field. Upon graduating in 1991, he was drafted as a free agent by the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. During preseason play, the linebacker’s football career was cut short following an ACL injury. He spent the entire regular season on injured reserve and would never play professionally again.

Clark carried on and coached football at Florida A&M University and later at Savannah State University where, thus far, he has spent the majority of his higher education career.

At Savannah State, Clark climbed the ranks for 20 years, from residence director to vice president of student affairs.

During his tenure, he championed better living conditions for students. His efforts resulted in new on-campus apartments, renovated dormitories, new and updated athletic facilities and a transit operation.

His resume chronicles a long list of additional accolades and degrees. But it was more than the lengthy list of qualifications that attracted RU administrators to Clark.

Clark has a vision for the Dean of Students Office that impressed the group. He says that the office should be centered on the three concepts of “Awareness, Advocacy, Accountability!”

The office provides information and education to students and their family members to make them aware of university policies, happenings and opportunities

Courtesy photo



“He is always looking out for everyone’s best interest, especially the students’.”

Senior Nathan Pool

for students to succeed from pre-matriculation through graduation.

The Dean of Students Office is an advocate for students and supports students in developing their self-advocacy skills.

Clark also encourages students to take responsibility for their behavior and decisions. He says personal accountability is an essential component of the growth and development of RU students in preparing them to achieve their life goals.

UPON ARRIVAL at Radford University, Clark immediately made his presence known.

During lunchtime, you can find him dining with students or chatting with colleagues. After hours, he’s lifting weights at the gym. In between, he’s in his office with the door flung open.

“Irvin acts with integrity,” said Mark Shanley, vice president for Student Affairs. “He has established his office as a safe place for students.”

You can’t miss him seated in the stands at athletic events because Clark strongly believes in supporting all student organizations.

“You have to go to their programs to see how they’re doing and to show that high level of support,” Clark said.

Senior Nathan Pool of Reston, Virginia, met Clark

while training to become a residential advisor. A double major in music and biology, Pool would often invite Clark to his concerts.

“He would always try to be there,” Pool said. “He is always looking out for everyone’s best interest, especially the students.”

Clark is also looking out for students’ well-being and academic opportunities.

As an advisor to the SGA, he has headed multiple campus safety, sexual assault awareness and suicide prevention campaigns to shine light on important initiatives.

He was instrumental in launching a residential learning community, “Biology Connections,” at the beginning of the fall 2014 semester.

He is approachable at all hours. “He’s there for us, day and night,” said Bender, recalling an urgent late-night text he sent to his advisor. “And he texted right back.”

Clark believes in getting to work early and “staying as long as possible, until the job is done,” he said.

But maybe his most poignant belief:

“I’ve always been willing to go above and beyond to help people,” Clark said. “I’m going to see the best in someone before I see the worst.” ■