

Coming Back &
Moving Forward

A PRINCETON UNIVERSITY CONFERENCE
FOR BLACK PRINCETON ALUMNI



October 23, 2009

My interest in this conference dates back to the fall of 1967 when, as a sophomore reporter for the Daily Princetonian, I interviewed some of the handful of black students then at Princeton and wrote an article about their experience that ended up being selected as the best college newspaper story of that year. The article was reprinted four years later in a book titled *Black Hands on a White Face*, with a footnote that spoke to significant changes that had occurred in the few years since the article had been first published.

The purpose of this conference is not to reflect on Princeton's history; it is to take stock of where we are now, and to talk about moving forward. But it may be helpful to begin with a very brief summary of some of the things that have changed over these past 42 years, and especially over the three years since the transformative Coming Back and Looking Forward conference of 2006.

In 1967 there were about 60 black students at Princeton, and that number far exceeded the total number of black alumni. The University had just appointed its second black administrator, with Carl Fields having been the first. There was little in the curriculum that spoke to the black experience in this country or the world, and except for the Association of Black Collegians, little extracurricular activity or cultural expression to suggest that this was a multi-racial campus.

Four years later, there were about 250 black students at Princeton; two black alums had been elected to the Board of Trustees (including one of the first two young alumni trustees); a

black junior had been elected president of the student government; an African-American studies program had been established; the Third World Center had been created; and it began to take more than the fingers of one hand to count the number of black faculty and administrators.

Forty years later, in many ways Princeton is a very different place. This year's freshman class is our largest ever; 37.4% of the class comes from minority backgrounds; and 7.3% identify as African American. More than 60% of the class is on financial aid; the average award is almost \$38,000; and no one is required to take out a loan. The three-year-old Center for African American Studies stands proudly on the front campus with a core faculty that has grown from 2 to 17, with an additional 18 faculty from other departments serving as associated and affiliated members. The center has increased courses by more than 40%, offering 36 this year, and has doubled the number of certificate students; with 41 students last year, it ranked in the top five out of Princeton's 42 certificate programs. The center has, quite simply, become the gold standard in its field – the leading resource for understanding race in America. As the center's director, Professor Eddie Glaude '97, has said, "We believe that what we're doing here at Princeton will set the path for the field of African American studies in the next century."

Outside the classroom, there has also been significant progress, which you can see in a broad range of student organizations and cultural events, and perhaps most prominently in the dramatic transformation in the physical location and space of what is now the Carl Fields Center for Equality and Cultural Understanding and Community House. These two programs have come out from behind the Olden Street wall into a beautifully designed and appointed building on Prospect Avenue that we all will have an opportunity to experience and celebrate tomorrow. Beyond student artistic and cultural activity – some of which you will see tonight – McCarter Theatre, under the leadership of Emily Mann, has brought talented young black playwrights to its

stages and workshops, along with established productions that speak directly to the African American experience, including Emily's own *Having Our Say* that opened this year's fall season after debuting at McCarter and moving to Broadway 14 years ago.

Beginning with Brent Henry, there have been 42 young alumni elected to the Board of Trustees; 17 of them have been alumni of color, and of them 11 have been African American. Other African Americans have also served on the Board and in many other leadership positions, and in recent years there have been concerted efforts to increase the diversity of the graduate student body, the faculty, and the staff. Since the 2006 conference, we have added a new office of diversity in the Graduate School, headed by Karen Jackson Weaver '94, and under the leadership of vice provost for institutional equity and diversity Terri Harris Reed we have appointed both a new manager for diversity and inclusion and a new director for equal opportunity programs, and we have created both a Diversity Council and a website on institutional equity and diversity so that all who are interested can remain up to date on new and ongoing initiatives. I commend it to you at www.princeton.edu/diversity/. There were some questions at the last conference about the diversity of our suppliers and vendors, and here too significant strides have been taken. Our Purchasing department is an active and valued member of the Metropolitan Trenton African American Chamber of Commerce and has begun to develop a mentoring program for small and disadvantaged businesses. The University's Martin Luther King Day program regularly attracts a full house to this auditorium from campus and community, and each year honors young people in the surrounding area who enter its essay, poster, and video contests.

One of the things that Ken Bruce says in Mel McCray's newest video, which you will be able to see in its entirety later this afternoon, is that Princeton is a place where alumni can, and

do, make a difference by showing up and asking questions. They also make a difference by pitching in to help. Since the 2006 conference the opportunities for black alumni to become involved have increased, partly with the support of two new positions in the Alumni Association (including Marguerite Vera's appointment as associate director for affiliated groups) and partly under the auspices of the Association of Black Princeton Alumni, led by Catherine Toppin and Ken Bruce, which has established regional leadership in major metropolitan areas across the country and held over 30 events in the past three years. Black alumni have become much more involved in Alumni Faculty Forums at Reunions and more than 100 black engineering alumni returned to campus two years ago for a conference on "Leading Change" sponsored by the Engineering School. Almost 200 black alumni and guests came back two years ago for a special reception in connection with the Princeton/Hampton football game.

One other major development of these past few years is the remarkable expansion of the Princeton Prize in Race Relations. The Prize is now offered in 23 cities or regions and over 200 alumni are actively engaged in identifying and recognizing high school students who have promoted harmony, understanding, and respect among people of different races and have improved race relations in their schools and communities. The remarkably diverse national committee that oversees the Prize devotes a portion of each meeting to a strikingly candid and thoughtful discussion of some topic related to race relations, and regional committees sponsor award ceremonies that bring the work of prize winners to their communities, and frequently the press. For the past two years all of the regional winners have been brought to campus in the spring to meet with, learn from, and inspire each other, and you will meet at least one of those winners tonight when he performs on this stage.

I do hope that one of the messages you take from this conference is that Princeton continues to change and progress has been made. Princeton surely has become a more diverse and welcoming place and it has staked out a leadership position in placing an understanding of race and the African American experience among its highest priorities. One of my most poignant memories over my many years on this campus is a well-attended gathering some years ago that was called to discuss issues of race. Various initiatives to address the needs and concerns of minority students were outlined, and redoubled efforts were pledged. At one point in the meeting a young African American woman student stood up and said, “I truly appreciate that you have invited me into your house, but it still feels like your house. I’d like to get to the point where it feels like my house as well.”

My own sense is that we are closer to that goal than we have ever been, but we are not there yet. We still need to do a better job of attracting people of color – students, including graduate students, faculty and staff – especially at the most senior levels. We need to keep building on the academic and cultural initiatives of recent years; we need to improve the residential and social experience of all students; and we need to make further progress in bringing back into the fold alumni who had complicated experiences here. There were alumni at the 2006 conference who said that was the first time they had ever felt good about Princeton. I’m sure there are others who have not had that feeling yet. I hope that in coming back you will find that there is good reason to feel good about today’s Princeton; I hope that in moving forward you will help convey that sentiment to others.

Over the course of today you will have opportunities to engage directly with some of the new faculty at the Center for African American Studies, with students, and with key administrators, beginning with the dean of admission and the director of financial aid, with

Karen Jackson Weaver, and Makeba Clay, who directs the Fields Center, and concluding this afternoon with President Tilghman, or Sister President as she was described at the last conference, whose vision and leadership have helped diversify this campus in multiple respects and whose commitment has helped propel the progress we have made over the eight years of her presidency. At the end of the afternoon you will have a chance to see Mel McCray's latest video, much of which grows out of the 2006 conference, and this evening we'll get to hear Cornel West Living and Loving Out Loud before returning to this auditorium for artistic performances of various kinds.

Tomorrow the focus of the conference shifts to "moving forward," first in opportunities to engage with and learn from each other – catching up with old friends and meeting new ones – and then in a discussion led by Dennis Brownlee and Brent Henry about ways in which all of you can become more engaged with Princeton and with each other. The evening will end at the new Fields Center, which seems symbolically fitting. For many of you, that center, like the Third World Center before it, is one of the key places to which you come back. But its recent expansion and liberation from the shadows to the Street are emblematic of the arrival of a new day, a day of enhanced visibility, engagement, and, I hope, pride. And just to make sure our sights are raised high enough, Professor Eddie Glaude will challenge us to think not just about how Princeton moves forward, but how America moves forward.

I want to thank all of you for being here. I hope over these next two days you will take pride in what has been accomplished, and press us hard to keep moving forward – with your help.

Robert K. Durkee '69
Vice President and Secretary
Princeton University