

DIVERSITY AND RACIAL INEQUITY ISSUES SWEEPING ACROSS U.S. COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

TEACHERS COLLEGE, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY'S POSTDOCTORAL FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM CELEBRATES 20 YEARS AS PIPELINE OF DIVERSITY IN ACADEMIA



SIGNATURE PROGRAM ALUMNI GATHER TO DISCUSS ONGOING NEEDS AND CHALLENGES

As the nation's attention increasingly focuses on the need for greater diversity in higher education, alumni of Columbia University's Teachers College Minority Postdoctoral Fellowship gathered recently to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the program and discuss the ongoing need to promote opportunities for underrepresented scholars of color in academia.

Fellows attended the event over several days to celebrate and reflect with their colleagues on how the program influenced their careers, and to consider directions for the future. In discussing the history of the program, its impact on higher education and what is needed for the future, fellows joined the Teachers College to explore issues arising from racism and prejudice that are as old as the country and as contemporary as today's headlines.

The celebration comes at a critical time, as students of color have held demonstrations at colleges and universities across the nation to call attention to racial inequity and marginalization on college campuses and in American society at large.

Discussion focused on the ongoing

Khalil Gibran Muhammad, Director of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York City, addresses the Minority Postdoctoral Fellowship 20th anniversary event at Teachers College, Columbia University. (Photo Credit: J.D. Closser)

challenges of racial inequality and ways that college and alumni can collectively continue the effort to promote diversity and widen the discourse in higher education.

FILLING THE GAPS

Keynote speaker Dr. Khalil Gibran Muhammad, Director of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York City, described a continuing "power gap" that has largely excluded people of color from positions of leadership in contemporary America. He argued that improving access alone would fail to fill the gap unless institutions were ready to move beyond mere "cosmetic diversity" and change their culture to address systemic issues of inequality.

Muhammad posed two distinct, yet interrelated questions: "Does diversity simply mean giving the best African American or Latino a shot, or does it mean pushing that opportunity downstream?" Can elite institutions change if all they really want is black and brown students in white face?"

"The future is no longer about firsts," he said. "It is instead about the content of the character of the institutions our new leaders will help us to carry forward."

The Teachers College Minority Postdoctoral Fellowship was created in 1996 to advance the careers of individuals from groups historically underrepresented in the academic profession; to advance scholarship on issues affecting underrepresented groups; and to increase the diversity of scholars and those who prepare them nationwide.

"For all that the Fellowship has helped our postdocs, they've also had a considerable impact on Teachers College. New funds of knowledge have been brought into the institution, new questions have been asked, new disciplinary perspectives have been seeded. There's still a need for that, just as much as there was 20 years ago," said Teachers College Provost & Dean Thomas James.

RACIAL REPRESENTATION

Minority Postdoctoral Fellows served as panelists on two panels: the first exploring the purpose of a minority postdoctoral program in 2016 and the second responding to Dr. Muhammad's keynote. The former was moderated by Teachers College's Michelle Knight-Manuel, Professor of Education; and the latter by Ernest Morrell, Macy Professor of

Education and Director of Teachers College's Institute for Urban Minority Education (IUME).

"If our goal is merely racial representation, that is a failed goal," said Arshad Ali, Assistant Professor of Educational Research at the Graduate School of Education and Human Development at The George Washington University.

Eric Hurley, Associate Professor in the Departments of Psychology and Africana Studies at Pomona College, believes programs that nurture and support scholars of color are doubly important today. "The Internet is rife with narratives about how it's not worth it to go to graduate school and how difficult it is to make a living as a professor. I have a worry that it is landing most on people of color. This work is absolutely essential and urgent, because just as we're starting to open our eyes to its importance, this broad narrative is saying 'don't do it, you'll work up a lot of debt,'" she said.

One of the Program's two inaugural Fellows, Paul Green, expressed the importance of cultivating scholars who have "culturally relevant knowledge" of the history and contemporary issues of minorities in the United States.

"You can't teach what you don't know; you can't teach what you don't value," said Green, a faculty member in the Department of Ethnic Studies in the College of Humanities, Art and Social Sciences at the University of California, Riverside.

DIVERSE SCHOLARS

Teachers College's long history of promoting racially diverse scholars and scholarship dates to the era of segregation, when the College enrolled black teachers and administrators from Southern states that had restricted admission to their graduate schools to white students only. In 1974, Teachers College established the Institute for Urban and



Alumni of Teachers College's Minority Postdoctoral Fellows gathered for a group photo at Columbia University during a celebration of the program's 20th anniversary. (Photo Credit: J.D. Closser)

Minority Education (IUME); and in 1987, it created the Summer Scholars Program for aspiring teachers from historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs).

Since 1996, a total of 30 scholars of color from across the country have spent a year or more as Minority Postdoctoral Fellows at Teachers College, doing research after receiving their doctoral degrees. Their ranks include two current college deans and several department heads; the holder of an endowed chair at a major public university; a policy analyst at the World Bank; the owner of a leading communications company; and four current Teachers College faculty members. For more information and a complete list of the Teachers College Minority Postdoctoral Fellows, visit tc.columbia.edu/minority-post-doctoral-fellows.

THE PANEL DISCUSSION

The celebration included a Panel Discussion on "What is the Purpose of a Minority Post-Doctoral Program in 2016?" – moderated by Teachers College Professor of Education Michelle Knight, Milbank Chapel;

Keynote Address, "Power Gap: An Historian's Take on Leadership Challenges in Post Obama America," by Dr. Khalil Gibran Muhammad, director of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture,

New York City.

A presentation by Gregory Pardlo, an American poet, writer, and professor, whose book *Digest* won the 2015 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, and who is a member of the creative writing faculty at Rutgers University-Camden.

The Teachers College Minority Postdoctoral Fellowship was created in 1996 to advance the careers of individuals from groups in U.S. society that have been historically underrepresented in the academic profession, to advance scholarship on issues affecting such underrepresented groups, and to increase the diversity of scholars and those who prepare them nationwide. Twenty years later, the program's alumni include college deans, department heads, policy analysts, entrepreneurs and four current Columbia Teachers College faculty members.

"New funds of knowledge have been brought into the institution, new questions have been asked, new disciplinary perspectives have been seeded. That's what an academic community is all about," said Columbia Teachers College Provost and Dean Thomas James. **PDJ**

Background Photo: A panel of former Minority Postdoctoral Fellows at Teachers College discuss the ongoing need to promote opportunities for scholars of color in higher education. (Photo Credit: J.D. Closser)