

THREE CHEERS FOR THE MELLON MAYS PROGRAM—BUT MUCH WORK REMAINS

The same year, 1992, that Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences James McLeod approached me about becoming the faculty director of the Mellon Minority Undergraduate Fellowship (before it changed its name to the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship), The *New York Times* reported that the number of black PhDs was rising after a decade of decline. Yet despite this, 1982, the year I received my PhD in English from Cornell University, remained the watershed for the number of blacks earning the doctorate: 1,047 did so that year. Nine hundred and ninety three African Americans earned PhDs in 1991, the year before the Mellon program began at Washington University. The percentage climbed as the number declined: that seemed a bit counterintuitive. At any rate, the number was so small that something needed to be done, especially because most blacks who earned PhDs would not become scholars or college professors but rather professional administrators in public school districts. And there was a crying need for more underrepresented minority students generally to be on American university faculty rosters. Maybe this new Mellon Program can make a difference, I thought back in 1992, so I took Jim's offer.

In 2012, the Council of Graduate Schools enrollment report for the 2010-2011 academic year showed that African Americans made up 8.7 percent of all students entering graduate school that year. On the whole, blacks make up 12.4 percent the American graduate school population, nearly identical to their percentage in the overall population, a first in the history of American higher education. This is a notable achievement; and while all of these students are not in PhD programs, there has been a steady increase in those that are. In 2012, African Americans earned well over 2,000 PhDs, double the number of 1982 and nearly doubling the percentage.

Overall, this is a sign that the PhD has become an important, even desirable, career option for many black undergraduates, and no doubt reflects a bit of the impact of the Mellon Mays program, which, since the late 1980s, has been encouraging select cadres of African American students at a particular number of colleges and universities to pursue graduate study. Mellon not only increased awareness of the PhD among minority students, it created a consciousness, a culture of academic research. It made the degree seem both a practical and powerful credential to obtain. It changed minority students profoundly.

Gerald Early
Merle Kling Professor of Modern Letters



The Fall 2013 Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellows (from top left clockwise): Margaret Abbey, Danielle Wu, Zachary Hernandez, Gabriella Alvarez, Daniel Kennedy, Christian Gordon, Chelsea Whitaker, Vinita Chaudhry, Lauren Henley, and Davida Farhat.



MELLON MAYS
NEWSLETTER, SPRING 2014

By Dr. Bret Gustafson



What does it mean to transform the academy? Well, it depends on who is doing the transforming and what they are trying to achieve.

From the top-down, universities across the country are being radically transformed. Legislatures, governors, corporate donors, boards of trustees, and upper administration,

often with little public, faculty, or student input, are transforming universities into institutions that are run like businesses. Proponents of this shift see universities primarily through the lens of economics. It is said that the primary role of universities should be contributing to economic growth and responding to the logic of cost-benefit analysis. Because some university money comes from private donors, donors claim to have a right to say what should be emphasized. Not surprisingly, the emphasis is often on their interests and ways of seeing the world, i.e., as businesses. Some university money also comes from tuition-paying students. So, if seen as businesses, universities have an incentive to admit mostly students who can pay their way. These students also increasingly represent a narrow slice of society. Costs rise as universities offer a first-class experience – from posh residence halls to alcohol tolerance to manicured quads and locavore gourmet food. So, as ‘businesses,’ universities, both public and private, are transformed into a kind of privatizing institution. They respond to the viewpoints and interests of certain donors and on the marketing of skills, credentials, and campus comfort to high-paying students.

Keeping revenues high and costs low – the hallmark of business thinking – has all sorts of implications for how we think about what goes on in universities. If our task is to think about economic growth, then why should students study racism, history, or art? Or are these topics only important if we can show they are good for growth? Should we mostly admit and prepare students who want to get high-paying jobs in medicine, science, and technology? And who have the money to pay for it? Should we cut ‘less’ valuable majors, from gender studies to history and literature? Throw out the applications of students who want to study these things? Get rid of the professors who might teach them? Should we reduce costs by using on-line education? Adjunct professors? Larger class sizes? And so on.

From the bottom-up, another kind of transformation is possible. It is a transformation that recognizes and defends the public obligations and role of the university, whether public or private. Universities, even private ones, are deeply subsidized by government, a.k.a. the American people. This comes in the form of financial aid to students. It comes as government-financed research and training grants, to the tune of millions of dollars yearly. It comes as Medicaid, which pays for patients in university medical centers. It comes as tax breaks. Universities are “non-profits.” They pay no property taxes. So, struggling

cities also subsidize universities. Universities may not pay state sales taxes. Corporate and individual donors get huge tax write-offs, often dollar for dollar. None of this is necessarily bad. But it means that universities are propped up by public money. So should universities be seen as businesses or as public goods?

How then, to transform the academy to defend its obligation to the public good? We must reject business-speak as empirically and ethically contradictory. Universities should embody, teach, and promote actions and values that make society better for the public, that is, all people and all citizens, not just for high-paying students and donors. What might this imply? For starters we live in a world whose primary ills, among many, are inequality and environmental degradation. If anything, universities should be transformed to address these ills, which cannot be solved by economic growth alone. In fact, certain patterns of growth and business-think are causal drivers of these problems. Universities are also responsible for expanding the cultural richness of humanity, which is invaluable, though it may not create economic growth. So, reasonable people might conclude that the university should not reduce itself to talk of economic value. And in fact universities do profess to have other values, though they often fall far short in demonstrating them in practice. To name a few: One would hope for real leadership to deepen diversity -- economic, sexuality, gender, racial, intellectual, and otherwise. Or, real leadership for public health and sustainability, rather than the hypocritical embrace of unsustainable, unhealthy industries like coal or tobacco. Or, real leadership on inequality, rather than self-interested strategies to control the urban spaces and bodies of color that surround the islands of privilege we call universities. And so on.

If the academy really holds these values and recognizes its obligations to and for the public good, then it should be coherent and transform itself. But, since this transformation is not likely to come from the top-down, it will probably have to come, if it is to come at all, from the bottom-up.

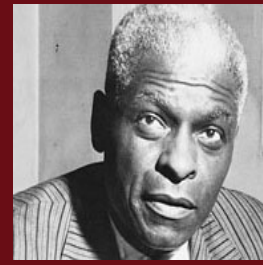
“Whatever you do, strive to do it so well that no man living and no man dead, and no man yet to be born can do it any better.”

— Benjamin Elijah Mays

LETTER FROM OUR EDITORS

The academy is changing, and so is the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship. Compiled here is a selection of pieces offering unique perspectives not only on the inclusion of minorities in academia, but on the state of the profession as a whole. We challenge our readers, potential fellows and curious onlookers alike, to critically examine the role of the academy in fostering knowledge which is simultaneously instructive and constructive. As the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship becomes even more relevant in today’s individualistic, multiethnic, technology-connected world, it is important to remember, that, as Dean James McLeod always said, “this is a teachable moment.”

— Margaret Abbey & Lauren Henley



ADVANTAGEOUS ADVICE

As both a fellow and teaching assistant for the Mellon Mays Fellowship Program, I learned valuable lessons about the academy and being an academic including exploring and developing my interdisciplinary research interests and skills in education, history, and African American studies; crafting an argument and thinking through the counter argument; giving constructive criticism on others' writing and receiving criticism on my writing; and being mentored and offering mentorship. Additionally, exposure to varied research interests, the national Mellon Fellow network, and the candid conversations during seminar about life in the academy as a person of color have proven invaluable.

During my PhD Program in Educational Studies at Emory University, I drew on my Mellon experience in multiple ways, including participating in and leading the Educational Studies graduate student research roundtable—a space for graduate students to share works in progress and practice conference and departmental presentations. As an assistant professor from 2011 to 2013 at Michigan State University in the College of Education's Department of Teacher Education, I relied on skills honed in Mellon, in particular I taught the first semester proseminar for the doctoral students. This course both introduced students to seminal educational research and focused on developing scholarly writing, reading, and discussion skills. Through class discussions and indi-

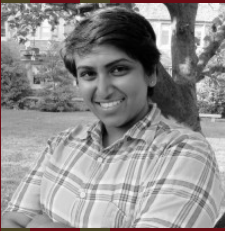
vidual meetings, I engaged students, many former K-12 educators, in the process of scholarly writing, which hopefully began to help to demystify the academic experience. In my current position, assistant professor in Wash U's Department of Education, I find myself often returning to lessons learned in Mellon, especially as I advance my own research and writing, focused on historically white elite K-12 schools and the politics of race in the mid-twentieth century.

I encourage Mellon Fellows to take full advantage of the Program. As an undergraduate (and even a master's student), the idea of attending an academic conference was daunting, but I suggest that you go to academic conferences and interact with those scholars who influence your research and thinking. Further, I encourage you to reflect on the many skills and experiences, including the keen development of our critical thinking, writing, reading, and discussion skills, afforded by Mellon and be ambassadors for the importance of liberal arts in higher education and our larger society.



By Dr. Michelle Purdy

MEET OUR FELLOWS



Vinita Chaudhry is a senior studying Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies and Anthropology. Vinita's project focuses on SALGA, a South Asian queer organization in New York City, specifically looking at the organization's place in the larger South Asian queer community, as well how it fits within a larger political economy of queer organizing and within theoretical ideas of queer diaspora.



Davida Farhat is a senior majoring in Anthropology, with minors in Public Health and Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. Her project is entitled, "Outsiders to the System?: Exploring the Obstacles and Tensions Faced by Immigrant Populations Seeking Medical Care in St. Louis."



Zach Hernandez is a senior majoring in Cultural Anthropology. His project examines the construction of urban mobility in Bogotá, Colombia by specifically examining the practices and uses of private bus-based travel among middle-class residents in the city. He is broadly interested in exploring the intersection between the urban experience and mobility in Latin American cities.



Danielle Wu is a senior Art History and Archaeology major with minors in studio arts and Chinese. Her research focuses on Beijing-based contemporary fashion photographer Chen Man and the artist's use of the female body as a national symbol of social progress and changing beauty ideals arising from China's massive socioeconomic overhaul in the twentieth century.

Margaret Abbey is a junior majoring in Anthropology: Global Health and Environment, with a Medical Anthropology focus. Her project is currently titled "Anatomy of an Epidemic: Critically Mapping the Nature, Construction, and Manifestation of the Purported Food-Allergy Epidemic in America."



Gabriella Alvarez is a junior majoring in Psychology and Anthropology. Her research explores the Afro-Latina identity in the United States and how experiences of having a mixed identity impact the individual psychologically.



Christian Gordon is a junior majoring in Educational Studies and Psychology. His research focuses on the educational experiences of middle school black boys, and examines how the intersecting identities of race, class, and gender shape their experiences in the classroom.



Lauren Henley is a junior majoring in History and African & African American Studies with a minor in Spanish. Her research focuses on the construction of black female juvenile delinquency in the Progressive Era by examining three segregated reformatory schools for girls in the South during the 1920s and 1930s.



Daniel Kennedy is a junior studying Anthropology: Global Health and Environment and Latin American Studies. His project looks at the ways in which Guatemalan development workers reinterpret global ideas of sponsorship and reproduce unequal relations of power.



Chelsea Whitaker is a Theater and African & African American Studies major. Her research discipline is in Black performance theory, and her research project is entitled "Black Gladiators: The Construction of Olivia Pope as The Black Female Subject."



ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

National Mellon Mays website: www.mmuf.org

Washington University Mellon website:
http://college.artsci.wustl.edu/mellon_mays

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