

# HISTORIC “WOMEN OF COLOR” LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE

## *Launches a New Frontier of Leadership*

BY DENISE MCFALL

**D**rawing more than a thousand of the nation’s best and brightest “women of color” to the campus of Spelman College and Georgia World Congress Center, by all accounts, the first-ever leadership conference for women of diverse ethnic backgrounds to be held at a historically Black college or university met with unprecedented success. Hosted by the College’s Center for Leadership & Civic Engagement, affectionately known as LEADS, the **Women of Color—Leadership for the 21st Century: It’s Our Turn** conference, held on May 12-13, 2004, convened an impressive roster of world-class thought leaders from throughout

the public and private sectors to forge new areas of inquiry about the ways in which the issues of race and gender resonate in the workplace and society-at-large.

torium of the Camille Olivia Hanks Cosby Center on the first day of the conference, there was also something intimate and elemental about this large gathering of women coming together on common ground to share their insights about the trials and tribulations of racism and genderism. Prominent among the conference presenters was Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum, president of Spelman College, whose LEADS initiative formed the basis for the conference organized by the Center’s founding co-directors, Kimberly Browne Davis, C’81, a managing director of JPMorgan-Chase, and Pamela G. Carlton, president and co-founder of the New York-based leadership development firm Springboard, Inc.



*“We [African American women] often have a difficult time talking about gender because we are so dedicated and committed to talking about leadership within the race. We need to continue to address the opportunities and challenges that relate to gender without feeling we have abandoned the race discussion.”*

**Dr. Jane E. Smith, C’68**

*Chief Executive Officer*

*Business and Professional Women/USA*

the public and private sectors to forge new areas of inquiry about the ways in which the issues of race and gender resonate in the workplace and society-at-large.

With “women of color” as the fastest growing and most influential demographic group in the nation, developing leadership acumen among minority women remains a top priority at Spelman. Held during Reunion 2004, the two-day leadership symposium, summit and conference provided an informative and educational “value added” experience for visiting alumnae and a rare opportunity for faculty, administrators, students and other women of diverse professional and ethnic backgrounds to immerse themselves in Spelman’s extraordinary brand of sisterhood. While the magnitude of the occasion was evident among the classmates, colleagues, and friends who filled the audi-

Addressing the symposium plenary session, Drs. Kumea Shorter-Gooden and Katherine Giscombe, noted researchers in the field of women’s studies, spoke to “The State of Women of Color.” Their respective research findings dispel many of the myths most often associated with women of ethnic minority backgrounds. For example, despite popular belief, “women of color” *do not* earn more than “men of color.” “While we [“women of color”] have heightened visibility in rarified, senior-level positions, we are also subject to more intense scrutiny, making us more vulnerable to criticism and discrimination,” says Dr. Gis-

combe. “Our research findings give qualitative validity to the fact that “women of color” are both grossly under represented *and* grossly under paid at the highest reaches of the corporate America where only 1.2% of corporate officers are minority women,” she adds.

### Salary Disparities

#### *White Men as Compared to Women of Color*

White Men	\$1.00
Asian Women	.75
White Women	.70
African American Women	.63
Native American Women	.58
Latina Women	.53

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor

Dr. Giscombe provides further insight when speaking to the unique challenges of Latina and Asian women: “While equally disturbing, the challenges may be quite different from those experienced by African American women. Although skin color may not be the focal point of the more subtle forms of discrimination heaped upon Latin American and Asian women in the workplace, these women may often deal with the language barriers inherent in having English as a second language, or dispelling the “hot Latina” or “china doll” stereotypes. And, because of the ability of some lighter-skinned Latinas to “pass,” some Hispanic women must also deal with negotiating their true identities in the white world.”

Exploring the workplace and beyond, Dr. Shorter-Gooden echoes the chorus of survey responses of African American women to her research on the cultural realities of relationships and community as well as those of beauty, body image and “colorism” in the context of society’s devaluation of African physical features, even within the Black community. In her book, *Shifting: The Double Lives of Black Women in America*, Dr. Shorter-Gooden exposes the internal and external manifestations of genderism and bigotry, the significant emotional energy “women of color” expend in responding to bias, and the negative impact “fitting in” has on our overall well being.



*“Like chameleons, we move in and out of our private lives in ways that cause problematic shifts leading to high rates of depression, emotional overeating, hypertension, sleep disorders, abusive relationships and manifestations of the “Sisterella Complex”—the proverbial strong Black woman who refuses to acknowledge her needs by wearing a mask of hyperfunctionalism.”*

#### **Dr. Kumea Shorter-Gooden**

*Professor of Psychology  
Alliant International University*

In panel discussions moderated by Dr. Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Anna J. Cooper Professor of Women’s Studies and director of Spelman’s Women’s Research and Resource Center; clinical/organizational psychologist Dr. Patricia Romney, president, Romney Associates; Dr. Jane E. Smith, C’68, chief executive officer, Business and Professional Women/USA; and Dr. Tatum, some of the nation’s most distinguished womanist scholars and social activists engaged in spirited discourses about the never-ending quest to seek a delicate balance between the responsibilities of demanding careers and equally demanding personal lives. “Regardless of the existence of financial and other resources, the lives of “women of color” tend to be fraught with concerns and considerations that are relatively absent from the lives of our majority peers,” says Dr. Romney.

*We need to develop strategies to penetrate the essential, informal networks of business and industry, strategies that will enable us to reach the highest levels of corporate authority. As “women of color,” we need to address the issues of under-employment, salary inequity, stereotypical charac-*





*terizations, and the absence of an adequate pool of “men of color” to serve as companions, help-mates, husbands and fathers.”*

**Dr. Patricia Romney**

*Clinical/Organizational Psychologist and President  
Romney Associates, Inc.*

The statistics and testimonies brought forth in the “Mentoring and Sponsorship for Women of Color” discussion reinforces the need to establish broad-based mentoring relationships. “There is an undeniable correlation between supportive alliances and career advancement,” says Dr. Becky Wai-Ling Packard, assistant professor of psychology and education, Mt. Holyoke College. Speaking to the importance of developing one’s own “board of directors” for professional support and guidance, the experts also stress the difficulty “women of color,” often experience in gaining mentors, given the tendency of many corporate cultures to be less than supportive of mentoring relationships across race and gender.

The purpose of the conference, however, was not simply to note the current state of affairs facing “women of color,” but also to provide strategies and solutions to address these unique obstacles. Led by Dr. Tatum, the intergroup dialogue, “The Call to Lead: Strategies for Collaborative Leadership Models and Initiatives,” provided a thought-provoking synthesis of Day One of the conference that culminated with a festive Women of Color Networking Reception for participants, presenters and corporate sponsors.

Building on the excitement and momentum of the previous day, Day Two of the conference featured noted economist, author and syndicated columnist Dr. Julianne Malveaux who “brought down the house” with a rousing keynote address that spoke to the concept of “voice” in a hostile society—the voice we are denied, and the voice we deny ourselves. “Our lives would be transformed if we ever got to the table,” Dr. Malveaux suggests, “but if we ever get to the table, what will we say? What will we do?” She urges us to embrace the notion that leadership is not merely a ministry of presence, but one of action—that we must be willing to “talk-the-talk” and walk-the-walk” if we are to

make a qualitative difference in our lives and in the lives of others, and that we have a responsibility to lift up our voices in opposition to the widespread abuses of power that negate leadership opportunities for “women of color.”

Dr. Malveaux goes on to enumerate some of the ways in which “women of color” often enslave themselves. Peering out over the multigenerational audience of fashionably dressed, well-heeled women, she cautions us to watch carefully what we spend, and where we spend it. “If there’s one place we have equality, it’s in the amount of money we owe through credit card debt. Worse yet, 12% of Black folks own absolutely nothing!” Taking a hefty swat at the so-called “Queen Bees”—Black women who, regrettably, wear their unique positions as the one and only “sistah” in the house [within their organizations] as badges of honor—she admonishes their inflated egos: “If you think you’re leadin’ and nobody is followin’,” she cautions, “you’re not leadin’, you’re just trippin’!”

*“You can tell who you are by looking at your calendar and your checkbook, because how you spend your time and your money is a direct reflection of your values.”*

**Dr. Julianne Malveaux**

*Economist/Author/Syndicated Columnist*

The research findings of Dr. Ella L. Bell, associate professor of business administration, Tuck School of Business, Dartmouth College, the *ESSENCE WOW Report*, and the technologically driven, on-site survey of conference participants administered by Dr. Bell, provided a colorful portrait of the attitudes and aspirations of African American women. The comparative demographic and ethnographic data reveal the insidious manner in which the authority and credibility of “women of color” are constantly being tested, resulting in blatant status and power differentials. In assessing the effects of the racial binary of white superiority and black inferiority, Dr. Bell proclaims: “It’s clear that the psychosocial effects of racism and genderism continue to devastate those who experience such disparities of opportunity. Likewise, the nation’s stake in the increasingly competitive global economy is significantly weakened by its continued failure to fully capitalize on the attributes of ‘women of color’ as an invaluable human resource.”

*“Race has always been a lynch-pin stratifier. As “women of color,” we need to expose the fiction, know the context, expand the relational framework, and develop compassionate allies to address the status and power differentials.”*

**Dr. Maureen Walker**

Faculty Member and Director of Program Development  
Jean Baker Miller Training Institute Stone Center at  
Wellesley College  
Associate Director, MBA Support Services,  
Harvard Business School

More than a dozen concurrent workshops and seminars provided additional opportunities for in-depth discussions about the significant aspects of leadership development, the political process, financial management and entrepreneurship, art and social commentary, faith and spirituality, and stress relief through health and wellness, all of which illuminated how the issues associated with race, gender, nationality, religion, language, class, culture, color, age and other dimensions of differentness serve as impediments to achievement. As one might expect, given the statistical realities of eligible and available “men of color”, among the most popular small group sessions was “Where Is My Leading Man? —Man Love and Self Love,” in which participants candidly shared their innermost feelings about loving themselves in the absence of man-centered validation.

Scheduled to coincide with conference activities, two age-appropriate Spelbound Youth Seminars were conducted for local middle and high school students and the children of Spelman reunioning alumnae. The Merrill Lynch Foundation, as part of its highly successful, national “Jump Start” initiative, presented an interactive workshop to promote financial literacy and the development of sound financial management skills, while the New York-based, public relations executive and community development specialist Terrie Williams led the older students in a series of inventive exercises geared toward youth leadership development.

The conference luncheon provided the occasion for The Honorable Shirley Clarke Franklin, the first African American woman to serve as mayor of Atlanta, to address the auspicious gathering. The mayor received the first-ever “Legacy of Leadership” award along with other award recipients Derrick A. Bell, Jr., visiting professor, New York University School of Law; Yvonne R. Jackson, senior vice president, Human Resources, Pfizer, Inc., John E. Pepper, Jr., vice president for finance and administration, Yale University. They were recognized for their exemplary contributions in shaping the destinies of past, current and future generations of leaders and their advancement of women and women’s issues in the public and private sectors.

*“While we frequently hear about personal experiences related to race and gender, many of us have not had access to the hard data. The research information provided at the conference not only*

*supports our suspicions, but serves as a foundation for meaningful dialogue and the sharing of best practices.”*

**Dr. Westina Matthews**

First Vice President, Community Leadership  
Merrill Lynch

Commenting on the focus and value of the conference, perhaps Dr. Jane Smith best expresses what is in the hearts and minds of the vast majority of alumnae participants: “Spelman is now a brand name that means leadership, service and quality. With each new president, with each graduating class, with each entering class, there are new opportunities to engage our work. We need to embrace our power and our possibilities. We simply cannot forget or ignore the significance of gender as we find new ways to contribute to business, industry and society through civic engagement . . . and through Spelman.”



**Mark your calendar...May 2005!**

Building on the enormous success of this year’s conference, next year’s event, scheduled for May 2005, promises to attract an even greater number of participants and corporate sponsors to delve even deeper into the existing and newly emerging issues and challenges that preclude the advancement of “women of color” from reaching the highest rungs of the leadership ladder. •

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