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Leading by Example

Dean of the College Karlene Burrell-McRae '94 applies her personal experiences to her work on behalf of women and others on Mayflower Hill

By Kardelen Koldas '15

If you ask Dean of the College Karlene Burrell-McRae '94 about womanhood, she will likely tell you a story from her childhood growing up in Jamaica. She and her mother, a teacher, had to wear uniforms to school, but her mother's approach to the outfit was quite uncommon.

Burrell-McRae's mother bought the required red-and-white-polka-dot uniform fabric, but she asked the seamstress for a custom-made design. Going against the norm of wearing a dress, she opted for a two-piece uniform: bell-bottom pants and a matching top.

"It raised all kinds of issues at the school," said Burrell-McRae, who was a student at her mother's school. "I was in awe of how [much] she was willing to

take on. She understood that there was value in using your mind to think and then your voice to stand up for what you believed was right.”

This spirit carried over when the Burrells moved from Jamaica to New York City. “My mom would always be the one to speak up,” Burrell-McRae said, but she always voiced her thoughts with respect. “She understood that people were always watching how she negotiated and interacted because she was a working-class Black woman.”

Despite working long hours as a clerk and an almost four-hour daily commute, her mother stayed active in her four kids’ lives and schooling. She embodied an extraordinary commitment to ideals, values, and family. She set an example for her kids, including Burrell-McRae, the eldest.

“Her actions and commitment to us and her belief that one never gives up, even in the face of constant challenges because of who you are, have informed how I live and interact with others, how I fight for justice, how I think about what it means to be a woman, which, of course, isn’t far from what it also means to be a Black woman,” said Burrell-McRae, the first in her family to attend college in the United States. She enrolled at Colby as a Bunche Scholar.

Following her time at Colby, Burrell-McRae earned two master’s degrees—one in education and another in social work—and a doctorate in higher education from the University of Pennsylvania. Burrell-McRae, a former Colby trustee, worked at the University of Pennsylvania, Swarthmore College, and the University of Chicago before returning to Mayflower Hill to become dean of the college in 2016.

■ What was it like to be a woman at Colby in the early ’90s?

Honestly, at the time, I’m not sure I was very focused on what it meant to be a woman as much as I experienced what it meant to be Black and from a very working-class family. I have memories of being in some classes where the men were always called on first. It seemed like many of the guys had an interest in business and got more support in advancing their goals and aspirations, particularly for those with interest in heading off to Wall Street.

■ How did your experience as a Colby student shape you for your current position?

This experience (as a Colby student) did help me become more confident as I found the value of my voice. It helped me better appreciate that I have a seat at the table, no matter the location or type of table. My college experiences cemented the important role of my voice as a leader. I always say that Colby was willing to hear my voice even when I offered ideas or experiences at the time that might have been different from my peers. And over time, I got to experience how being part of something larger than myself helped me as an individual to grow and be much more creative, open, accepting, and patient.

■ How does it feel to be in your position now?

There’s something to be said about the positionality of this role, what it means to be a Black woman with such authority, and the importance of speaking up and out. I love that my responsibility to help

elevate student success is tied into the innovative work of my colleagues—and stretches the gamut from creating new programs and initiatives, to developing better infrastructure, to supporting the campaign that ultimately informs the experience of our very multiracial, multicultural student population. It feels good to know that my experiences, expertise, and voice matter and that I'm able to both lead and participate in conversations that lead to progress.

■ How do you think the conversations have been changing as a result?

We're willing to talk more openly about the different experiences that people are having, some based on structure and others based on our identities. I think that's huge. The fact that we're questioning issues of equity and inclusion and acknowledging that we have a responsibility to educate the best and brightest all while advancing change so that everyone sees themselves as vital members of this community is monumental.

As a woman and as a Black woman, there are needs and challenges that I experience that others wouldn't even consider. What does it mean for someone like me to walk across campus, to enter certain spaces? What does it mean to experience Waterville and Maine in general? What perceptions do people have of me based on my race and gender? What does it mean for young women and women of color in disciplines that are traditionally occupied by men, and how do we help them to be successful inside and outside the classroom?

People are asking these questions and being more open to having honest and direct conversations about these issues. I believe such dialogue allows us to engage more thoughtfully with our community and expands our thinking and engagement with each other—and to me, it helps us to become better versions of ourselves. I'd like to believe I have played an important leadership role in fostering an environment that encourages conversations that lead to positive changes.

■ What positive changes have occurred at Colby during your time as dean of the College?

When I think about our intention to expand access to this first-rate education, we know how important it is to increase the diversity of our campus community. And so we embarked on the opportunity to enroll a more diverse student population. We know that when we make these changes, we have to be willing to accept that other changes must happen to ensure students feel like this is "their place." Many of us have had to review our structures and policies to do and to be better. And I'm proud of how much we have done in such a short period of time. There are new programs for faculty members to learn about inclusive teaching. We have an ever-growing First-Generation-to-College/Low-Income Program; we enhanced our financial aid programs, which have been recognized for their generosity to meet the needs of our diverse and highly accomplished student population; we have a new robust fund for student emergencies, and the president recently announced

the Weiland Welcome Grant for eligible students in the entering class (Class of 2026); and of course, DavisConnects is meant to be a game-changer for our students. These and many more of our initiatives are integral to supporting some of our best students and making visible the invisible challenges. And we also understand that we have much more to do.

■ **As you continue in this role, what brings you strength?**

I keep front and center my history and role models. I get strength from leading by example, never forgetting my values. And there is something to be said about having an insightful leader in President Greene, who has an appreciation for different voices and understands the importance of women being at the table. With such inclusion, my experience as a woman leader at Colby has been made easier by many inspiring women who are leading and supporting Colby's efforts, including deans, coaches, trustees, directors, staff, administrative assistants, and professors. So many women—Margaret McFadden, Jane Powers, Barbara Moore, Jackie Terrassa, Chandra Bhimull, Cheryl Townsend-Gilkes, Kimlie Heng, Teresa McKinney, Wendy Morrison, Chenel Harris-Smith, Lynn Hannum, Judy Whyte, Rosalie Meunier, Nancy Downey, Nikky Singh and so many others. These women are change agents who lead with integrity and they inspire me each and every day. That's been a gift for me—a gift that I will never take for granted and one that inspires me to try and do my best each and every day.



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The Weiland Welcome Grant, endowed by Nancy Greer Weiland '65, P'93, GP'24 and her husband, Andrew '64, P'93, GP'24, will award \$1,250 in addition to financial aid for expenses associated with necessary school items to eligible first year-students.