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Q&A

Karlene Burrell-McRae

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Paying It Forward/Karlene Burrell-McRae

Karlene Burrell-McRae '94, a former trustee and an innovative leader in higher education, joined Colby this summer as dean of the college. In this role she will have broad oversight of the student experience at Colby and will work to fully integrate Colby's academic and campus life programs. She will oversee the several departments that have direct responsibility for student and campus life and will be the lead officer overseeing campus-wide diversity and civic engagement efforts.

Burrell-McRae earned two master's degrees and a doctorate from the University of Pennsylvania, working there, and later at Swarthmore College, in progressively responsible roles in student and multicultural affairs. She most recently served the University of Chicago as associate dean of students and executive director of the Center for Identity + Inclusion.

The dean of the college role comes at a crucial time in the College's history. With a recent surge in applications and an increasingly generous financial aid program, Colby is attracting a historically diverse pool of the most-talented students.

Burrell-McRae sat down with Colby Magazine in July to discuss her new role.

After graduating in 1994, and serving as a trustee, why are you returning to Colby now?

I am excited by our president's vision around people really seeing how extraordinary an institution this is, and by the possibility of having students think about how they can change the world, and how to integrate all of this into one idea: that everything is connected to intellectual engagement.

I'm looking forward to seeing the College being more intentional and deliberate about diversity and inclusion, and our students being given more opportunities to better learn how to function successfully at home and globally. It's also a chance for me to pay it forward. All the opportunities that were afforded me at Colby are crystallized in this.

Reflect a little on how your Colby experience shaped you.

It was not an easy experience being here. I was an immigrant child [Burrell-McRae lived in Jamaica until age 10]. I was a first-gen [college student]. Eldest of four. I knew people were depending on me. My parents were depending on me to make the opportunities matter, because they had given up their lives in Jamaica to move to the U.S. And it was hard, socially and culturally, for me here. I knew that if I was going to navigate and manage my insecurities, I needed to get something out of the opportunity.

Burrell-McRae started taking opportunities right away. She spent her first Jan Plan in China, studying art and culture. Subsequent study-abroad programs from Colby led her to Mexico, Kenya, and London.



Dean of the College Karlene Burrell-McRae '94

At the same time, she readily owns her academic and personal struggles while a Colby student. In fact, she is quick to say that she withdrew from Introduction to Psychology—a course that fascinated her—because of her fears of the final exam. “It’s a ‘W’ on my transcript,” she said, laughing. “I tell my students, ‘I’ve been there.’”

You were a real self-advocate as a Colby student. How do you teach students to advocate for themselves?

It's just about asking what would you do, if you could. It's also understanding that we are an elite institution in higher education. No matter what our station in life, when we get here, we are in a privileged space. I want to ask my students: What will you do with that? And because of your Colby education and experiences, how will you pay it forward? How will you use the resources and the support given while on campus and beyond to make the lives of others better? These are the types of students we want to proudly continue to cultivate.

What's it like to be back?

It's a lot of excitement about the possibility of participating in a vision that creates opportunities for students in so many ways. We have a lot of students who are financially privileged, who have seen the world. We have other students who have not had this access; either way, depending on your experience, the kinds of people you engage with become more limited. How exciting to be in a place where we really want to take on this integration in thoughtful ways; different kinds of people seeing how resilient they are, simply learning about each other—not necessarily to agree, but just to learn. How do we create that space?

But I'm also an alum so there's this trepidation—there are huge expectations. And, of course, I don't want to disappoint, because this is my college.