

DARE Q & A with: Beverly Daniel Tatum



Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum has served as president of Spelman College since 2002. Recognized as a race relations expert, she is the author of several books, including Can We Talk About Race? And Other Conversations in an Era of School Resegregation (2007) and Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations About Race (1997). In 2005, she was awarded the Brock International Prize for Innovation in Education.

Prior to coming to Spelman, Dr. Tatum spent thirteen years at Mount Holyoke College as a professor, dean, and acting president. Dr. Tatum holds a B.A. degree in psychology from Wesleyan University, M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in clinical psychology from University of Michigan, and an M.A. in Religious

Studies from Hartford Seminary. A member of local and national non-profit boards, she is also a corporate director for Georgia Power. She is married to Dr. Travis Tatum, and they have two adult sons.

Q: What is the most challenging thing you have ever had to do?

A: The most challenging thing I ever had to do was to make the decision to become the president of Spelman College. In the spring of 2002, when I was considering this opportunity, I had been working at Mount Holyoke College for thirteen years and was very happy there. I had been a professor of psychology and chair of my department, was promoted to dean of the college, and then had the wonderful opportunity to serve as acting president while the sitting president, Joanne Creighton, was away on a six-month sabbatical. I felt appreciated and valued as a member of the Mount Holyoke community, and I believed that my career would continue to flourish there. I was not eager to leave.

At the same time, my husband was a well-established professor of education at Westfield State College. As a dual career couple, we had been very fortunate to both find jobs within a short commuting distance from our home in Northampton, Massachusetts. For my husband, moving would mean interrupting his career just as he was approaching eligibility for retirement from the state higher education system. Our oldest son, Travis Jonathan, had already made a successful transition to college (he was then a sophomore at Wesleyan University), but our youngest son, David, was a sophomore in high school. For David, my decision to become the president of Spelman College in Atlanta might mean moving away from the only community he had ever known at a critical juncture in his adolescence. For all of us, it would mean relocating from a small town, where we had a large network of friends and family nearby, to a large city in an unfamiliar region, where we would be amongst strangers. I also knew that taking this position (*cont.*)

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A: (cont.) would require me, an introvert by nature, to be in a highly visible role as the public face of Spelman—a role that would have not only regional but national significance. There were many good reasons to just stay put in Massachusetts, and I did not make my decision to even pursue the opportunity at Spelman easily.

To help me decide, I made an unannounced visit to the Spelman campus, just to see what it felt like to be there. It was part of my process of discernment about whether I was meant to be at Spelman. I flew down to Atlanta for the sole purpose of walking around the campus, unescorted and unnoticed. I found the answer I was looking for when I stepped into the admissions office and requested a brochure. On the back of the brochure, I read this paragraph:

“When you are inducted into the Spelman sisterhood in a candlelight ceremony, you are given the power to change your life and to light the world. When you graduate, you walk into the Oval and through the Arch, the same path past graduates have taken. For 120 years now, Spelman has sought to develop the total person: to instill in our students a sense of responsibility for bringing about positive change in the world. This is our heritage and our calling.”

Then I read the mission statement: *An outstanding historically Black college for women, Spelman promotes academic excellence in the liberal arts, and develops the intellectual, ethical, and leadership potential of its students. Spelman seeks to empower the total person, who appreciates the many cultures of the world and commits to positive social change.*

Excellence, leadership, empowerment, appreciation, and respect for others: these five values have been at the core of my personal and professional work for my entire career. I could not imagine a better or more concise statement of what is important to me. When I read these words, I knew what I should do.

Back at home, I shared the brochure with my husband, who responded by saying, “If you don’t pursue it, you will always regret it.” We then agreed as a family that if indeed I was selected as president, Travis and David would remain in Massachusetts for two years, the time it would take for David to finish high school and for Travis to become eligible for his state retirement benefits. The prospect of the separation was daunting, but we decided to move ahead.

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Q: Where did you get the courage and confidence to do it?

A: The confidence I needed came from two places. First was my sense of calling. In addition to my training as a psychologist, I have a degree from Hartford Seminary in Religious Studies. As a student at Hartford Seminary in the 1990s, I had been actively exploring the question of vocation and asking myself what would be the best use of my particular talents. Should I continue in my role as a professor of psychology, teaching undergraduate students, or should I pursue college administration in my role as dean or even as a college president? Where could I make the most meaningful impact? What I learned on that visit to Spelman College convinced me that I could make a unique and meaningful contribution to higher

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education and the world by leading this institution which has such a powerful mission. For all the reasons that made me initially hesitant, I felt nervous about my choice, but at the same time, I reflected on the words of a pastor friend who told me, “God will not lead you where God cannot keep you.”

Second was my experience. I had learned a lot about the industry of higher education and the specifics of leading a residential liberal arts college from my years as a professor and particularly as a dean. The time I spent as a member of the senior administration at Mount Holyoke College had given me a broad view of what it takes to run a college, and my six months as acting president had introduced me to the challenges of engaging with multiple constituencies—students, faculty, staff, alumnae, trustees, donors and other community stakeholders—as the leader of the institution. I had navigated new and difficult situations successfully before, and those life experiences helped me feel confident that I could do it again at Spelman.

Q: What is the biggest mistake you have ever made? What did you learn and how did you recover?

A: The biggest mistakes I have ever made all occurred when I ignored my intuition. When I was young and single, it was in the context of a romantic relationship. As a professional, it was in the context of an important hiring decision. In both cases, I learned that if you have the wrong person on your team, it is best to cut your losses and take corrective action as quickly as possible. I believe in investing in people and helping good employees become better. But character flaws such as dishonesty or inflated ego are not likely to change. As the writer Maya Angelou said, “The first time someone shows you who they are, (*cont.*)

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A: (*cont.*) believe them.” Otherwise, you are likely to have to learn the same lesson repeatedly. I have learned to make time daily to listen to that “still, small voice” within. Meditation time helps me manage daily stress and stay centered. It is always easier to make the right decisions when operating from a place of inner calm.

Q: If you had a young woman you cared deeply about entering the workforce today, what single piece of advice would you have for her?

A: In January 2012, I read a New York Times op-ed column by Thomas Friedman, “Average Is Over.” Highlighting the impact of globalization and rapid technological advances, Friedman explained that, in today’s world, being just average is not enough to get by. Anyone who is just average is likely to be replaced by offshore cheap labor or a cutting-edge software solution. My advice to a young woman, therefore, would be to get the best education you can—one focused on critical thinking and problem solving—because it is knowing how to learn that will keep your skills on the growing edge of our economy. Then, as you enter the workforce, make sure that you always show up ready to add extra value. You may not know exactly where you want your career to take you or what your next steps should be, but if you are demonstrating right where you are that you are someone with integrity and a personal commitment to excellence, doors will open, and there will be guides willing to help you. Character and attitude matter.

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Q: How did you make the leap from middle to senior management?

A: In the early stages of my academic career, I never imagined that I would be, or would want to be, a college administrator—and certainly not a college president. As a faculty member, I progressed steadily through the academic ranks. I started my first tenure-track position as an assistant professor in 1983. By 1996, I had a publishing contract for my second book, “Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?” and I was promoted to full professor. A year later, I became chair of my department. Simply put, in a context where the responsibility of chair rotates amongst the faculty members, it was my turn. I loved teaching, but I was getting restless and looking for a new career challenge. I sought out a senior colleague in my department for some career advice. She suggested that I consider applying for the position of Dean of the College at Mount Holyoke, the chief student affairs position, which included (*continued*)

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A: (cont.) responsibility for undergraduate studies as well as all co-curricular areas of student life. I instantly replied, “Who in her right mind would want that job?” I imagined endless days of boring meetings. She said, “You are not using your imagination. If you were the dean, you could take the ideas that you have been writing about and put them into practice. You could really impact the student experience here. And what you do here will influence practice at other schools, too.”

She was right. From that vantage point, campus leadership began to have new appeal. A year later, in 1998, I assumed the role of Dean, cautiously agreeing to an initial three-year term. I found the job to be full of creative possibility and opportunity for positive impact, both on campus and off. The learning curve was just the challenge I needed. When the first three-year term ended, I eagerly agreed to do another.

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As Dean of the College, I was a member of the President’s senior management team, and sitting in weekly staff meetings taught me more about the executive role than I ever would have learned as a faculty member. I started to see the way the institution worked with all of its component parts.

While serving as dean, I attended the Harvard Institute for Educational Management, began attending professional meetings designed for college administrators, and wrote articles and gave presentations about some of the innovative programs my team and I initiated at Mount Holyoke. These attracted the attention of executive search firms.

At Mount Holyoke, I was given two important pieces of advice. The first came from a college trustee, who, seeing my potential to be a president, suggested I apply at least once—just for the experience of going through a presidential search process. The second piece of advice came from the president of Hartford Seminary, Barbara Brown Zikmund, who was my advisor when I was studying there. As I was finishing my master’s in 2000, she asked me if I wanted to be a president. When I replied that I wasn’t sure, she said, “Well, a lot of people think you can just go out and find a presidency. It doesn’t work that way. Presidencies find you. And you can’t be president of just any institution. The job is too demanding. It has to be someplace you truly love. After all, you will do a lot for your lover.” I put both pieces of advice together and, in 2002, found the job that was the perfect match for me.

Q: What advice do you have for building self-confidence?

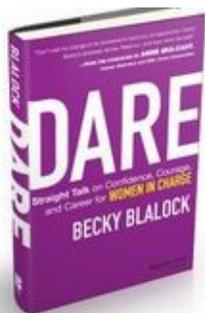
A: Look for opportunities to learn or do new things, especially things you think you can’t do, (continued)

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A: (cont.) whether it is giving a speech or hiking up a challenging trail. When you are faced with a difficult situation, you can always remind yourself of the other things you did that were challenging, and that gives you confidence to push forward.

Q: What is your greatest fear today?

A: Letting my ego get the best of me and staying in my position too long. To be effective as a servant-leader, the kind I strive to be, you have to “kill your ego,” even though there are plenty of people around you willing to feed it. As president, you become the “living logo,” the symbol of the institution, and to the extent that the institution is revered, you are revered. Every now and then you have to say to yourself, “Beverly, this is not about you.” That attention, that deference, is about the symbol, not the ordinary person you are. I never want to let it go to my head. The job can be all-encompassing, but it is not who I am. I won’t always be the president of Spelman College. I want to be able to recognize myself when it is time to turn the keys over to someone else, and I want to be humble enough to know when it is time to let someone else to take the lead.



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