Reed College

Mary B. James

Dean for Institutional Diversity & A.A. Knowlton Professor of Physics

The following is from the Reed College press release from April 2014 announcing her appointment to the position:

Reed Appoints Mary James as Dean for Institutional Diversity

Reed College has appointed Mary James, A.A. Knowlton Professor of Physics, as dean for institutional diversity. James began her post January 1 (2014). She replaces Crystal Ann Williams, who left Reed to become associate vice president and chief diversity officer, and professor of English at Bates College in Lewiston, Maine.

Prior to joining Reed as a physics professor in 1988, James worked on the design and construction of high-energy particle accelerators, which cause the most elementary particles of matter to collide at high speeds. Scientists then examine the "debris" from the collisions to understand how the fundamental constituents of matter interact.

Physics, James says, is the study of how things, on any level, move through time. "You run a clock and look at the motion of something in time," she says.

As Reed College's new dean for institutional diversity, she is poised to accelerate inclusion on campus, creating the institutional vision and strategy that supports Reed's commitment to a diverse and inclusive learning, teaching, and working environment.

"In science there is the notion that we scientists live outside of stories—which is totally untrue. The myth that scientists pass from one generation to the next is that science merely pulls back a curtain and describes phenomena in nature. But scientists choose to ask questions and build areas of theoretical and practical competence that reflect things the broader culture values," James says. "The laser and the atomic bomb were not observed in nature; they, and the knowledge to create them, were constructed. There has to be a culturally infused way of looking at natural phenomena in order to organize them in a particular way."

The corollary relevant to her new position, she says, is that diversity results from the way we construct our institutions. There is power in just assembling a class. Teaching begins the moment the students enter a classroom, beginning with who gets to sit at the conference table, she says.

She illustrates using the example of a Yale classroom in 1950 where all 17 students are white males taught by a white professor.

"Despite the fact that at the time perhaps 70 percent of the population was not white males, we've already told the assembled students, 'This is who matters in a conversation. This is whom

you educate,'" James says. "And this is before anybody has uttered a word or the teacher has presented a syllabus."

"When students come to Reed we tell them, 'This is an honor and a privilege; we're highly selective,'" she says. "So whom do we select? What are we telling everyone in that room about what it looks like to have the right stuff? The institution cannot opt out of making a statement when it assembles a class. We send a strong message by who is present and who is not."

James acknowledges that the college is already at work to increase diversity and argues that it is important not to avoid the enterprise because it may be difficult. "We never say of our academic endeavors: 'That's important, but we're not going to think about it because it's hard.'"

In her new role, James will work strategically with the vice president for admissions and financial aid, a position that has yet to be filled. She will also work with a wide spectrum of Reed constituencies: faculty, staff, alumni, and parents of current and prospective students.

"All of these constituencies are eager to help," she says. "We will find ways to better leverage their energy and expertise towards our diversity goals."

James credits her predecessor with starting the conversation about how to attract a wider diversity of candidates into the faculty search process. She believes it involves getting candidates interested in Reed before there are openings.

"We need to think about what departments are going to be hiring in the next five years," she says. "Can we get young scholars of color to come to campus now as guests and know we're here, so that when we actually have a job opening, there are already teacher/scholars of color who are going to be really interested?"

James, who is African American, first came to campus to give a talk while she was a still a graduate student at Stanford University. Years later, she was invited to apply for a job. "I remembered those incredibly bright and eager students at my seminar; they sold me on Reed."

She says the college's various constituencies are remarkably well intentioned about the issue of diversity, but she cautions that as diversity increases on campus, levels of discomfort will also increase.

"People's natural reaction is to avoid discomfort," she says. "But that comes with the territory, with the challenge. We don't shy away from appropriate levels of discomfort if we think it's important for learning. That's what our classes at Reed are all about—you challenge people without overwhelming them. We have to give people permission to endure some discomfort as they learn to live and study in a more diverse setting. Sooner or later all of us will offend unintentionally. We have to be gracious and generous with one another, whether in any given situation we are the offender or wronged party. We have to maintain open minds and generous hearts if we're going to grow into a more complex and culturally richer community. It's worth the effort."

Always the teacher, James explained her transition in terms of electromagnetic theory. If you take electrons and shake them at a certain rate you get radio waves, she explains, but then if you take the same electrons and shake them at a different rate you get visible light. They are the same electrons; they are just acting differently.

It is fair to say James will be shaking the status quo at Reed.

James has been teaching at Reed since 1988. She has a BA in physics from Hampshire College in Amherst, Mass. and a PhD in applied physics from Stanford University.