

Crystal Williams is determined to change more than the numbers. She wants to embed diversity and inclusion in every facet of the University.

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Crystal Williams is  
guiding BU toward a  
more diverse future

## Leads

BY SARA RIMER

Crystal Williams is listening.

In BU's chandeliered Metcalf Trustee Ballroom, some 140 faculty and staff are gathered at a sea of round tables for the first of Williams' many "thematic listening sessions," aimed at helping her understand BU and learn "where people see opportunities for moving forward with equity, inclusiveness, and justice."

Williams, BU's first associate provost for diversity and inclusion and its senior diversity officer, poses two questions: How should the University change to better support faculty and staff who are underrepresented racially and ethnically? What programs and resources are needed?

She asks for one or two takeaways from each table. "I want to harness the power of your collective thinking," she says.

Judging from the back-and-forth among junior and senior faculty, postdocs, administrators, and administrative assistants, it's a conversation that people are eager to have.

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Bostonia  
Summer 2018

Photograph by Brian Fitzgerald

"The fact that they created this position, and that they've hired someone of Crystal Williams' caliber, means they're serious," says Malika Jeffries-EL, a CAS associate professor of chemistry.



The microphone is passed around as a speaker from each table shares the takeaways:

*Train search committee members in unconscious bias.*

*Establish formal mentorships for faculty of color.*

*Hire more faculty of color.*

The faculty remains strikingly white, the proportion of those of color troublingly low. BU's peers are also struggling.

Williams asks for one final thought.

Malika Jeffries-EL rises to her feet. A College of Arts & Sciences associate professor of chemistry with a joint appointment at the College of Engineering in materials science and engineering, she arrived at BU

in 2015 from Iowa State University.

"When I came here for my first interview," Jeffries-EL tells the group, "I didn't meet a single person of color."

Her words get to the crux of BU's problem—a problem that Williams has begun to probe with her listening sessions. While the University's leadership has declared that racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity is imperative for excellence in a 21st-century educational institution, the reality of today's

BU falls short. The faculty remains strikingly white, the proportion of those of color troublingly low. The students are increasingly diverse, but relatively few are African American. BU's peers—and, indeed, the vast majority of American colleges and universities—are also struggling to

build communities that better reflect the country's evolving demographics.

BU has set out not just to change the numbers, but to embed the ideals of diversity, inclusion, and equity at its core, so that they inform every facet of the University, from faculty searches and hiring to curriculum and programming for students. That's why the University has brought in Williams, a nationally recognized higher education leader, one who helped two other colleges transform the student experience and faculty hiring and develop a stronger culture of inclusion.

She is also a celebrated poet.

"A poet is exactly what we need right now," says Kenneth Elmore (Wheelock '87), associate provost and dean of students, who is leading the current expansion of BU's Howard Thurman Center for Common Ground, which brings together students from different backgrounds.

# T a k i n g S t e p s

“So much of this is about articulating how we feel and how we want to be with each other.”

Indeed, Williams’ poetry wrestles with race, class, and gender. She writes of crossing borders—from Detroit, where she was raised, to Bessemer, Ala., where her father was born; between her white mother and her black father; between her intellectual self and the stereotypical images of a black woman that some people see in her. On the surface, poetry may seem unrelated to the work of a diversity leader. To Williams, they are halves of the same vision.

“All my work—creative and administrative—has been about shifting people’s ideas around issues to do with identity, trying to get them to change, to be more compassionate, more loving, more forgiving of others and themselves,” she says. “In my estimation, that’s what good chief diversity officers do. We change institutions by changing the circumstances on the ground. We shift culture so that more people are able to bring their full brilliance to bear on behalf of the common endeavor.”

Of course, BU hired Williams not for her poetry, but because of her achievements in higher education, starting with 13 years at Reed College, where she was inaugural dean for institutional diversity, and more recently at Bates College, where she was associate vice president for strategic initiatives and led inclusion and diversity efforts. She started at Bates in 2013 and from 2015 to 2017, 13 of 25 new tenure-track faculty and long-term lecturer hires were people of color.

Williams arrived at BU in October 2017. Here, as a member of the University provost’s senior leadership team, she will build on the existing momentum “to provide vision, leadership, management, and strategic planning for diversity and inclusion initiatives across both campuses,” says Jean Morrison, BU provost.

Williams reports to Morrison, who describes the associate provost as “a deeply collaborative leader who brings a data-informed approach and has an impressive history of work-

ing effectively with a broad range of constituents, including faculty, staff, and students.”

Williams’ wide range of responsibilities includes helping to develop and strengthen programs to attract—and keep—underrepresented undergraduate and graduate students. Her initial focus will be leading the effort to recruit and retain more faculty from underrepresented groups, in particular those of color.

“I’m fundamentally an educator,” says Williams. “I believe the knowledge that universities create, steward, and advance is better, bigger, and more interesting when there is a diverse set of people asking questions and investigating it.”

### **“A Great Sense of Justice and Sense of Humor”**

Part of her job is to make sure that that conviction is manifested in the University’s policies and practices. To do that, she says, administrators, faculty, and staff must buy in—and pitch in. She has to work to ensure that departmental search committees have the training and support to succeed at finding, evaluating, and attracting scholars of color. This means, among

**Last year, BU increased its proportion of low-income students—those who qualify for federal Pell grants—in the Class of 2021 to 18 percent from 14 percent the previous year, by replacing all loan funds with additional BU scholarships for Pell grant-eligible students. The program, made possible initially with a gift from BU trustee Richard D. Cohen (CGS’67, Questrom’69), has been extended for the foreseeable future.**

**The University also provides financial assistance to Boston public high school graduates through its Thomas M. Menino Scholarship program and its Community Service Awards.**

**The University is expanding the Howard Thurman Center for Common Ground, hoping to encourage more and larger discussions involving people of different backgrounds—not just of color, but LGBTQ-identified, differently abled, and people of different religions.**

**And BU’s new University-wide general education program, the BU Hub (see page 12), requires that all undergraduates develop skills in diversity, civic engagement, and global citizenship.**

other things, that when potential applicants come to campus for an interview, they should be routinely introduced to other faculty of color. Williams has to strengthen efforts to make BU a place where faculty, staff, and students from all backgrounds feel that they belong and are supported.

Ann Cudd, dean of Arts & Sciences, where Williams has an appointment as a professor of English, says the new senior diversity officer brings the expertise and experience to lead BU’s efforts to change, along with “a great sense of justice and sense of humor.” Williams’ success, says Cudd, will require the entire BU community to acknowledge and address “the discrimination, underrepresentation, bias, and exclusionary practices that are endemic in society and built into all our institutions and our personal habits and ways of thinking.

“We cannot just decide that all those things will end one day and hope that we can wake up the next day on a level playing field for all,” Cudd says.

In the Metcalf Trustee Ballroom, Williams listens carefully to Jeffries-EL’s disheartening recounting of her

first visit to BU. It used to be that way at Iowa State, too, Jeffries-EL says. But then she and a group of colleagues of color began making themselves available for any candidate of color who wanted to meet with them when they came for interviews. That was when candidates got to find out about the campus climate:

Williams' listening sessions are already changing the way some faculty think about the task ahead.

*Is there subtle racism? Is it overt? Are people "chill"?*

"We saw a spike over seven years in our ability to recruit faculty of color," says Jeffries-EL.

Williams asks her, "How would you think about implementing this at BU, considering how few faculty of color we have?"

Williams is acknowledging a reality at BU and elsewhere: faculty of color often end up serving on more than their share of search committees and

mentoring new arrivals. "We often conflate a person's ethnicity and race with skills you need on a search committee. It does not harness the power of the collective," she says.

"Creating a more diverse and inclusive environment has to be the work of the whole, and in particular, the work of people who haven't historically understood the work to be 'theirs,'" she says. "If the people perpetuating—consciously or unconsciously—unhealthy or unhelpful climates and cultures aren't charged in large part with changing it, who should be?"

And, she says, in her experience, "some of the most effective advocates for diversity and inclusivity, for justice, are not people of color."

Williams' listening sessions, each addressing a different theme, from support for LGBTQ-identified faculty and staff to inclusive pedagogy for the 21st century, are already changing the way some faculty think about the task ahead. After session

one, Jeffries-EL says, "The fact that they created this position, and that they've hired someone of Crystal Williams' caliber, means they're serious."

The work ahead for Williams, and for BU, goes to the soul of a university that prides itself on its history of inclusion, starting with its founding, in 1839, when it admitted everyone, regardless of race, religion, or gender. That history is embodied by BU's most renowned graduate, Martin Luther King, Jr. (GRS'55, Hon.'59), who was mentored here by Marsh Chapel Dean Howard Thurman (Hon.'67), the first black dean of a largely white university.

Yet many faculty, staff, and students of color feel a disconnect between BU's history and their own experience. What they see is a city with a lingering reputation for being unfriendly to African Americans, as the *Boston Globe* described it in a Spotlight series in December 2017. They also see an institution whose faculty in the academic year 2017–2018 is only 3.5 percent black. When compared to its national-level

Jean Morrison, BU provost, has made ensuring the faculty and staff reflect the principles in the University's diversity statement a key metric of performance reviews of deans and department heads.



# Faculty of Color

## BU FACULTY COUNT

Academic Year 2017–2018



Faculty of Color: **7.8** percent



Black: **3.5** percent



Hispanic: **3.6** percent



Multiracial: **0.8** percent

SOURCE: FALL 2017 ANNUAL REPORT TO THE UNIVERSITY COUNCIL ON INSTITUTIONAL DIVERSITY

## HOW BU COMPARES

*Rank Relative to BU's National-Level Peer Group in Fall 2015*

Peer schools are University of Miami, New York University, Emory University, University of Southern California, George Washington University, Columbia University, Brown University, Syracuse University, University of Pennsylvania, Tufts University, Northwestern University, Northeastern University, Johns Hopkins University, Case Western Reserve University, Boston College, and University of Rochester.

**12** of **17**

in percentage of faculty of color

**14** of **17**

in percentage of black faculty

**8** of **17**

in percentage of Hispanic faculty

**4** of **17**

in percentage of multiracial faculty

*Rank Relative to BU's Local Peer Group in Fall 2015*

Local peer schools are Harvard University, MIT, Tufts University, Northeastern University, Brandeis University, and Boston College.

**4** of **7**

in percentage of faculty of color

**5** of **7**

in percentage of black faculty

**3** of **7**

in percentage of Hispanic faculty

**4** of **7**

in percentage of multiracial faculty

SOURCE: FALL 2017 ANNUAL REPORT TO THE UNIVERSITY COUNCIL ON INSTITUTIONAL DIVERSITY

peer group, BU ranked 14 out of 17 in percentage of black faculty in 2015, the last year for which those numbers are available. And they see a student body where just 5.6 percent of domestic freshman students in 2017 were black, according to federal data.

“We have a lot of collective work to do,” says Williams. “But I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t think the senior leadership was serious about getting it done.” She credits the University’s top brass with candor, pointing out that since 2015, Morrison has been

**ONLINE:** Watch a video of Crystal Williams reading her poem “Year after Year We Visited Alabama,” listen to her read her poem “At the Water,” and read a selection of her poetry at [bu.edu/bostonia](http://bu.edu/bostonia).

making annual presentations to the Faculty Council about the data on faculty of color, with comparison to BU’s peers in Boston and nationally. The provost has also made ensuring BU’s faculty and staff reflect the principles in the University’s diversity statement a key metric of performance reviews of deans, department heads, and other faculty leaders. The statement reads, in part, “We strive to create environments for learning, working, and living that are enriched by racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity.”

At CAS, Cudd is making similar moves. The school, by far BU’s largest, issued its own report on diversity and inclusion in December 2017; Cudd is implementing many of its recommendations, including the creation of the position of associate

dean for diversity, and “changing our search and hiring strategies to encourage more diverse applicants, more intentional searching, and better outcomes.” Such change, she says, is necessary for equity as well as for intellectual excellence.

“There’s a lot we need to do,” Cudd says. “But I believe that we are taking the right steps to make a significant and positive difference.”

### Growing Up in Detroit—and Madrid

When Williams speaks of getting people to rethink assumptions about what it takes to succeed in higher education, she points to her own story.

“Who I am is the result of some genetics and a lot of loving and nurturing and access to privilege, which was the luck of the draw,” she says.

She is talking in her eighth floor office at One Silber Way, with its sweeping views of the Charles River Campus. Had she not been raised in a family with resources, she says, “the likelihood that I would be sitting where I am now, in 2018, in Boston, Mass., is almost nil.”

Her parents adopted her as a baby. Her father had come to Detroit in the Great Migration, the mass movement of blacks from the South to the North during the middle of the 20th centu-

dance. The two of them went each week to the library, where Williams started with Judy Blume and Nancy Drew and moved on to the poets Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, and Lucille Clifton, and to James Baldwin.

When she was eight, her mother took her to Madrid to live for two and a half years to learn Spanish. She was 11 when her father died.

At Detroit’s Cass Technical High School, Williams wrote her first poem. Her English teacher, Arthuree Leach, read it aloud. “You know how kids are,” Williams says. “You really don’t have to give them more than one little pat on the head and they are all in.”

Her drama teacher, Marilyn McCormick, sparked Williams’ dreams of becoming an actress. She went to Wayne State University on an acting scholarship, transferred to Howard University, worked at a bookstore, dropped out, moved to New York City, struggled as an actress, worked double shifts at a Fuddruckers—and blossomed as a poet.

In 1995, her performance poem, “In Search of Aunt Jemima,” was the only one awarded a perfect score in a national slam competition and since has been widely performed and published. Williams has authored four collections of poetry to national acclaim, including the 2009 Naomi Long Madgett Poetry Award.

McCormick and Williams have remained close. “If you want to know Crystal Williams,” says McCormick, “read ‘In Search of Aunt Jemima.’”

*...I've read more fiction, non-fiction, biographies, poetry, magazines, essays, and bullshit than imaginable, possible, or even practical. I am beyond well read, am somewhat of a bibliophile. Still*

*I'm gawked at by white girls on subways who want to know why and how I'm reading T. S. Eliot.... I am not your convenient Black friend...*

*I am not your Aunt Jemima.*

Williams earned a BA in English from New York University, went on to Cornell for an MFA, and then to Reed College, where she was an assistant professor of English and joined other faculty in pushing Reed to become more inclusive. Reed’s response was to make her the first dean for institutional diversity.

Poet Elizabeth Alexander (GRS’87), who heads the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, says Williams is not only “a brilliant artist,” but also “a visionary administrator.” Alexander chose Williams and nine other poets to write verse for the 2015 exhibition of Jacob Lawrence’s paintings of the Great Migration at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City.

At Bates, in addition to her leadership role, Williams was a senior advisor to the president, Clayton Spencer. “Crystal understands that she’s about culture change and that if you’re going to be effective, you need to bring others along with you. It’s really important to establish forums in which you can understand where people are coming from and then figure out how to meet them where they are,” says Spencer.

“She’s a big thinker. She has great ideas, she motivates people, and she makes the work compelling.”

Williams was instrumental in designing and securing a \$1 million Mellon Foundation grant focused on diversifying the faculty. She also played a key role in enabling Bates to join the Creating Connections Consortium, a group of liberal arts colleges and research universities, which helped faculty broaden their networks and expand their pool of potential candidates from underrepresented groups.

“Her strategies were really ingenious,” says Kathryn Low, a Bates professor of psychology and interim dean of the faculty. “She’d say, ‘You’re not familiar with the scholars in your field? Let’s bring some of them in and learn what’s going on. It will inform your search, diversify your pool.’”

Before long, Williams says, “What I heard from multiple faculty was, ‘Omigod, I didn’t realize there

Williams has authored four collections of poetry to national acclaim, including the 2009 Naomi Long Madgett Poetry Award.

ry. He was a jazz pianist who worked at the Ford foundry. He met Williams’ mother, a school psychologist, when she walked into the club where he was playing piano.

“She was almost 30 years his junior,” Williams says. “He was black—and a dark-skinned black man. And they met in the ’60s. I remember asking her one day, ‘What were you *thinking* when you married Dad?’”

Her mother’s answer is found in Williams’ poem “The Masked Woman.”

*...I just loved him.  
Race didn't enter the equation,  
only age.  
She weighed the 30-year-fault &  
concluded  
She loved him enough to lose him.*

Her parents’ marriage helped prepare her for her work in diversity, says Williams.

“Nobody thought my parents should get married in 1967,” says Williams. “My parents decided to love each other quite outside the norms of the society they were living in. The lesson I extracted from that is that love is the most powerful of endeavors, and it can supersede everything.”

She was raised in Lafayette Park, an integrated, middle-class Detroit neighborhood. Her mother sent her to a private elementary school—and to classes in etiquette, skating, and

were candidates of this caliber in the pool.”

At BU, Williams has begun meeting with groups of people from academic and other institutions in the city in an effort to build stronger ties between the University and Boston’s communities of color.

In the first week of February, she hosts a networking evening for Women of Color in the Academy, a Boston-based group started at Northeastern University. Some 170 women from colleges across the region circulate in the Metcalf Ballroom, talking over wine and cheese.

Yvette Cozier (SPH’94,04), a BU School of Public Health assistant professor of epidemiology and associate dean for diversity and inclusion, is in the crowd. Cozier was a member of the search committee for the new associate provost for diversity position. “Her personality, her words, her spirit, her ideas, her experience—it was everything combined,” says Cozier. “There’s nothing easy about diversity. In this job, you’re going to have to stand up to a lot of people. She knew exactly who she was and where she was coming from.”

At the podium, Williams leads a rousing call and response:

“Northeastern’s in the House!” A cheer goes up.

“MIT! MIT’s in the house!” Another cheer.

“We got Harvard—Harvard’s in the house!”

She calls out Emerson, Brandeis, Wellesley, Lesley, Tufts...

“Can I say BU?”

A shout goes up: “BU!”

Williams looks around the ballroom and says, “Look how beautiful you all are.”

Later, at a lunch she is hosting for faculty and staff of color at the Questrom School of Business, Roscoe Giles stands to welcome her. Giles, a College of Engineering professor of electrical and computer engineering, who arrived from MIT in 1985, was a member of the provost’s 2015 Committee on Faculty Diversity and In-



Ann Cudd, dean of Arts & Sciences, is making a number of changes, including the college’s search and hiring strategies to encourage more diverse applications.

clusion, which recommended, among other things, creating the position Williams holds.

“I’ve been waiting a long time for you to appear and for these conversations to become more institutionalized,” Giles says. He remembers when barely more than a dozen faculty on the Charles River Campus looked like him.

“This is such an improvement,” Giles says, looking around a room filled with more than 100 faculty and staff.

Williams tells her audience why she has come to BU. She tells them

that retention is a priority. “You can recruit talent and if there is a chilly environment, it’s hard to get people to stay, and then they scoot.”

She tells them that diversity is one of the pillars of the University’s new strategic plan and that part of her role is helping leadership think about how to put that into practice in a meaningful way. She repeats what has become her mantra: she needs everyone’s help—and their patience. Changing institutions takes time. “It has to be done step by step—with vision, strategy, creativity, and perseverance.”