November 17, 2021

Dear Campus Community,

In fall 2019, to honor and celebrate the historic contributions of our Black faculty, students, staff and alumni, I asked three members of our extended university community to identify actions we could take to substantially advance our strategic goal to "Establish UMass Amherst as a community of choice for students, staff and faculty that exemplifies the power of diverse perspectives and mutual respect."

The group consisted of John H. Bracey, Jr., Professor, W.E.B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies; Esther Terry, former Professor, W.E.B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies and former Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs and Campus Life; and Sidonio Ferreira, Special Assistant to the Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs and Campus Life. They presented their "UMass Black Presence" recommended actions in December 2019 and we moved forward with implementation.

I am writing today to report on the progress of "UMass Black Presence" and to share our latest milestone.

We have a remarkable history of notable Black faculty, staff, alumni and students who have contributed to our international reputation for excellence, and a key recommendation of the "UMass Black Presence" initiative is development of a website to provide a living history of the significant role that African Americans have played on the UMass campus from its earliest days until today. Our campus is home to one of the first departments of Afro-American Studies in the country and only the second to offer a doctoral degree. Our excellence attracted luminaries such as the writer and activist James Baldwin who taught here for several years, while Betty Shabazz, the activist and wife of Malcolm X, earned a doctorate in education. We are also home to the archives of both Horace Mann Bond and W.E.B. Du Bois, with our Department of Afro-American studies and library named for the latter.

To chronicle the depth and breadth of our rich history, over the past several semesters, oral history interviews have been conducted, led by Professor Bracey with assistance from Afro-American doctoral candidate Erika Slocumb and students enrolled in AfroAm 397N and 597P, Black Presence at UMass, Part I and Part II. With over 40 – and still growing – interviews and profiles, the UMass Black Presence website is now a reality. It acknowledges and celebrates
our Black faculty, alumni, students and staff and the significant impact they have had throughout our nearly 160-year history, and I encourage you to take some time to explore this exceptional campus resource.

Another recommendation from the “UMass Black Presence” initiative is the naming of the “Randolph W. Bromery Center for the Arts” in recognition of Chancellor Randolph W. “Bill” Bromery who led the campus from 1971 to 1979. His appointment as chancellor made him the second African American ever to lead UMass Amherst. Chancellor Bromery’s vision of the arts as fundamentally inclusive is a defining feature of his legacy. Under his leadership, when the opportunity arose for the university to recruit innovative Black artists, including jazz drummer Max Roach; jazz saxophonist Archie Schepp; playwright Paul Carter Harrison; and the artists Nelson Stevens and Raymond Miles – Chancellor Bromery used his position to bring them to campus as faculty without regard to Ph.D. credentials. While today recruiting an expert without consideration of a terminal degree is not at all unheard of, at the time it was controversial, and Chancellor Bromery was criticized.

Chancellor Bromery’s vision for the arts as a vehicle for inclusion was shared by Dr. Frederick “Fred” C. Tillis. During his long tenure at the university, Dr. Tillis shaped our concentration in Jazz & African American Music – one of the first in the country – into an internationally renowned program. And as one of the first directors of the Fine Arts Center, he defined the future trajectory of the center by presenting both Western and non-Western artists and artforms, thereby establishing the university as a national leader in inclusive programming. Having waited until we could gather in-person, on October 26, 2021, members of the extended university community convened on campus to celebrate the contributions of Chancellor Bromery and Dr. Tillis with the naming of the “Randolph W. Bromery Center for the Arts” and the “Frederick C. Tillis Performance Hall.” We remain indebted to both of them for their legacy of excellence and inclusivity.

Just as we celebrate our past, so must we look to the future. As many of you know, in October 2020 we implemented the “UMass Black Presence” recommendation to support the 50th anniversary celebration of the Department of Afro-American Studies. As part of that three-day symposium, “Conscious to Woke: Fifty Years of Revolutionary Black Thought,” we also launched “The John H. Bracey, Jr. Fellowship Fund.” Named in honor of Professor John Bracey, the fund fosters the next generation of scholars dedicated to Black people in the Americas and the African Diaspora by supporting Afro-American doctoral students working on their dissertations. The university is exceedingly proud of the pioneering excellence of our Department of Afro-American Studies and we look forward to following the future success of these scholars.

In the months ahead, the Office of Equity and Inclusion will be sharing additional “UMass Black Presence” events and initiatives. They will also continue curating the website, for this living history is dynamic: Just as the university evolves and changes, so will we build on this foundation and expand the voices that tell the story of our community. Your input and suggestions are welcomed.
On behalf of the university community, I would like to thank John Bracey, Esther Terry and Sidonio Ferreira for their commitment and vision. I also thank the faculty, students and staff who implemented the “UMass Black Presence” initiatives. And, with much gratitude, I thank all who lent their voices to exemplify the excellence of our university as we continue our efforts to foster a community defined by the power of diverse perspectives and mutual respect.

Sincerely,

Chancellor Kumble R. Subbaswamy

University of Massachusetts Amherst