

Lecturer Roberta Meek Honored as Her Phased Retirement Begins



Lecturer of Media & Communication and Africana Studies Roberta Meek (left) receives the Toni Morrison Award from Emanuela Kucik, assistant professor of English and Africana studies and co-director of Africana studies.

In February, students, faculty, staff and community members gathered in the Seegers Union Event Space for a Celebration of Black Excellence Through the Ages. Roberta Meek '06 P'14 GP'20, a lecturer of media & communication and Africana studies in the first year of a phased retirement, was among those being celebrated, though she didn't yet know how.

Emanuela Kucik, assistant professor of English and Africana studies and co-director of Africana studies, presented Meek with the Toni Morrison Award to honor Meek's "commitment to academic enrichment and leading in excellence for justice, equity and inclusion," Kucik said. In her speech, Kucik recounted spending time with Meek during her first visit to campus: In the Wood Dining Commons, student after student approached Meek to catch up. It was clear Meek had gotten to know them on a deep level and that the students valued this connection.

"In that moment, I knew that I wanted to know Professor Roberta Meek and learn how to be the type of educator students trust with not only their education, but also the more difficult details of their worlds," Kucik said.

After Meek accepted the award, Director of Multicultural Life Robin Riley-Casey announced the creation of the Roberta Meek Office of Multicultural Life Scholarship.*

"When Emanuela read her speech, I can't tell you how much that meant to me," Meek says. "I was a little sobby at the table. When Robin announced they were doing a scholarship, I was absolutely speechless."

Meek's history with Muhlenberg began long before she started teaching in 2009. She took her first class at the College in 1980 to work toward finishing a degree she'd started at Yale University, but life kept interrupting. In 2004, Meek returned to the School of Continuing Education (then the Wescoe School) with a plan to finish. In 2006, she received a bachelor's degree in history.

Meanwhile, Meek's consulting work introduced her to Professor and then-Chair of Media

& Communication Lora Taub—both were involved with a youth leadership program called HYPE that connected high school students to Muhlenberg students and faculty. Meek's teaching style and experience as a historian of the civil rights movement impacted Taub. When Taub needed someone to teach Race and Representation in the summer of 2009, she asked Meek. Within a few years, Meek became a full-time lecturer, split between media & communication and history, and in 2014, she became director of Africana studies.

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—ROBERTA MEEK '06 P'14 GP'20

Outside the classroom, Meek served as advisor for the Black Students Association when students of color from several affinity groups came together in a coalition they called the Diversity Vanguard. In the spring of 2013, the group called for the creation of a diversity strategic plan. Within two years, the College had one.

"That was their baby, but I helped with thinking about how to be strategic about your ask, how you ask—those kinds of things," Meek says.

Meek also was faculty mentor and first-year seminar instructor for the Emerging Leaders Classes of 2019, 2020 and 2021. One reason Meek chose a phased retirement—teaching one class per semester over three years—was so she could see her last Emerging Leaders cohort graduate.

Two of Meek's grandchildren are young (ages 2 and 4), and she intends to help more with their care as her role at the College becomes less demanding. But even in retirement, Muhlenberg will hold a special place in her heart.

"I've been there through battling the institution, but know that I absolutely love this institution," Meek says. "This is home." —MK

*Riley-Casey and Meek are now discussing the criteria students must meet to qualify. Gifts toward endowing the Roberta Meek Scholarship can be designated in care of the Office of Multicultural Life.