1920-2020: A Century of Mathematics at Spelman College

Colm Mulcahy
@CardColm

Department of Mathematics,
Spelman College, Atlanta, GA
www.cardcolm.org

23 Jul 2017
“The first” math major at Spelman College graduated in 1929. She went on to do a masters at the U Wisconsin (Madison).

We’ve graduated 900+ math majors so far, most of those since 1960. Many of these achieved excellence in teaching and in academia—with several serving in leadership roles in schools, colleges and universities—as well as in stats, tech and engineering fields, medicine, law, industry and government.
About 50% of them earned grad degrees.

Over 111 earned doctoral degrees.

About 25 earned MD or JD degrees.

We’ll highlight some of these remarkable women, as well as the history of Spelman’s department of mathematics, whose teaching, mentoring, and special programs laid the foundation which made all of this possible.
Founded in April 1881, as Atlanta Baptist Female Seminary with 2 teachers and 11 students, by April 1884, there were 16 teachers and 600 students. That same year, John D. Rockefeller settled the debt on the 9-acre site the institution was located at, and it was renamed Spelman Seminary (honoring Rockefeller’s wife Laura Spelman, of whom he said “Her judgment was always better than mine.”)
In the first few decades the focus was largely on home economics and preparing future teachers.

In time, Spelman evolved to offer a “normal school with an Eight-Grade Practice School; a High School; College Work in connection with Morehouse College; a Nurse-Training Course.”
Early graduates known to have later taught math in various schools include: Helen E. Buchanan S’08, Olea Littlejohn Barbour HS’16, Maude Estelle Jackson HS’17, and Lillie B. Wilson HS’19.
Spelman College opened for classes on 16 Sep 1924. The first circular stated that they planned to offer:

“algebra, physiology, essays, Latin, rhetoric, geometry, political economy, mental philosophy (psychology), chemistry, botany, Constitution of the United States, astronomy, zoology, geology, moral philosophy, and evidences of Christianity”
Tapley Hall ("the science building") opened in 1925

“Founded in 1881, by and for women, Spelman College epitomizes the best that women’s colleges can provide.”
—Alma Ferguson Crockett, C’29

Alma was our “first” math major! From Pine Bluff (AR).
Alma Ferguson (later Crockett, C’29, 1908-2001).

U Wisconsin (Madison) MSc (1931).

“I owe the world a woman, I shall earnestly strive to pay my debt”—from her HS yearbook in Arkansas.

She wasn’t really the first, before her were Edna Hill C’27 and Lillie Sirmans (later Weatherspool) C’28.
Upon finishing her masters, Alma Ferguson returned to teach at Spelman for one semester. She then taught and served as chair of the math dept at Atlanta U Laboratory High School, 1932-1939.


Later in life, she lived in Atlanta once more.
In 1929, Spelman and Morehouse forged an alliance with Atlanta U (which in 1988 merged with Clark College to become CAU), and soon Spelman grads started doing masters at AU.

Lillie Mae Weatherspool C’28 (née Sirmans) did her masters there in 1936, Carrie Moore C’32 (née Wilder) did likewise in 1947, Inez Gay Johnson (née Gay) in 1946, Alice Brown (née Hutchinson) C’35 in 1940, Madelyn Cornelia Golightly (née Gray) C’36 did so in 1938 (and earned her PhD in math ed from GSU in 1976).

Dr. Georgia Smith (1909-1961, née Caldwell).  
U Kansas BSc & MSc (1928 & 1929).  
U Pittsburg PhD (1961,  
“Some Results of the Anticenter of a Group”).


Ran Quality Education for Minorities (QEM) program in Washington, DC, 1990-2016.
The current Spelman Dept of Math (from 1975 on) is built on Four Strong Pillars


Very active in issues related to education.

Served Spelman 1965 to 2002. Chair, dean, etc.

AWM-MAA MathFest Lecture now named after her. Spelman’s annual Falconer lecture predates that.
Served Spelman 1972-2014.
Co-founder of StatFest; co-founder of Infinite Possibilities Conference (IPC).
INTERLUDE: Hidden Studies

Georgia Alberta Lee Caldwell studied summer 1930 & 1931 U Wisconsin (Madison), and 1934-1935 U Chicago (for a doctorate).

Carrie Wilder C’32 studied at Columbia U & Tuskegee. Elnora S. Hayes C’33 (later Johnson) studied at Colorado U. Harriet Elizabeth Williams C’39 studied at Columbia U.

Julia F. Williams C’39 earned her masters at U Chicago 1943. as did Grace McKivey C’46 (later Scipio) circa 1948.

Shirley McBay started her doctoratal studies at U Chicago 1963-1964, before switching to UGA.

Etta Falconer studied at U Illinois (Urbana Champaign) 1964-1965. Others studied at Berkeley, Cornell, etc.
Other key figures


Current faculty includes Colm Mulcahy, Yewande Olubummo, and Jeffrey Ehme, all of whom have served for 25+ years. Each has also served as chair.

21st century arrivals: Monica Stephens (C’91 and the current chair), Tasha Inniss, Mohammed Tesemma, Joycelyn Wilson, Viveka Brown, Kiandra Johnson, Bhikhari Tharu, Anisah Nu’Man (C’2009) and Naiomi Cameron.
Dr. Josephine Davis (C’64), Rutgers PhD (1973, “Functions of a real variable: part of a mathematics curriculum for capable but poorly prepared college freshman”); career Albany State (dean) / York College CUNY (president) / Saint Cloud State (VP) / Fort Valley State (dean)
Dr. Roselyn Williams (C’72), FSU PhD (1988, “Finite dimensional Hopf algebras”); career Florida A&M (chair).

Dr. Denise Stephenson-Hawk (née Stephenson, aka Graves, C’76), Princeton PhD (1986, fluid dyn); career Bell Labs / CAU / Spelman / NCAR.

Career WellPoint / CVS / Alere Health.

Has served as President NAASC and Spelman trustee to Board.
Select other success stories (1980s)

Shelly Monique Jones (C’86)

Dr. Karen King (1971-2019, C’91), U Maryland (College Park) PhD (1997, math ed); career San Diego State / Michigan State / NSF / NYU / NCTM / NSF.
Dr. Monica Stephens (C’91), Brown PhD (1998, fluid dyn); career mostly at Spelman (dept chair).

Dr. Angela Beauford (1969-2014, C’92), U Pittsburgh (2009, EE); career included Spelman.
Select other success stories (1990s)

Dr. Ulrica Wilson (C’92), Emory PhD (2004, algebra); career mostly at Morehouse. Co-director of EDGE program.

Dr. Afi Harrington (née Davis, C’93), NC State PhD (1997, OR); career Center for Naval Analyses / life coach
The Spelman Korean Conspiracy

Dr. Kim Barnette (née Woodson, C’92), NC State PhD (2000, OR); career in Delta Decisions.

Dr. Kim Bennekin (née Rice, C’93), UGA PhD (2013, math ed); career Valdosta State / Spelman / GA Perimeter.

Dr. Kim Weems (C’93), U Maryland (College Park) PhD (2000, stats); career NC State.
Dr. Leona Harris (C’95), NC State PhD (2001, DE); career EPA / Bennett / College of NJ. Co-founder of Infinite Possibilities Conference (IPC).

Dr. Tanya Moore (née Henneman, C’95), Berkeley PhD (2000, biostats); career UCLA / education policy advisor (San Francisco). Co-founder of Infinite Possibilities Conference (IPC).
Select other success stories (1990s)

Dr. Talitha Washington (née Wangerin, C’96), U Conn PhD (2001, PDE); career Duke / College of New Rochelle / U Evansville / Howard.

Dr. Ayana Moore (C’97), U Washington PhD (2005, biophysics); career Family Health Int.
Dr. Valerie Jones (C’2000), Columbia PhD (2011, math ed); career APS / Ron Clark Academy.

Dr. Talithia Williams (née Daniels, C’2000), Rice PhD (2008, stats); career mostly at Harvey Mudd.
More Spelman grads with doctorates

Monette Mclver (née Coleman, C’86), Kristen Lollis (née Charles, C’91), Alison Graves-Calhoun (née Graves, C’91), Carlotta Johnson (C’93), LaTondra Murray (C’93), Gail Jefferson (C’97), Jaclyn Conner (née Branner, C’99), Emile Lawrence (née Davie, C2001), Kiya Hamilton (C2001), Joyelle Harris (née Jones, C2001), Jamie Chatman (C2003), Evelyn Thomas (C2003), Michelle Guinn (née Craddock, C2004), Jamila Mathias (C2004), Aminah Perkins (C2004), Ché Smith (C2005), Shelby Wilson (C2006), Julia Anderson-Lee (C2010), . . .
Other avenues explored

Math majors are very versatile—and employable—being quick-thinking, and rational and logical problem solvers, both by nature and training.

Our grads have gone on have careers in a great variety of arenas using their primary degrees, often in conjunction with master’s degrees in related fields. Many others have pursued medicine or law.

Spelman math grads can be found teaching, at middle and high school, or colleges, or working in statistics, bioinformatics, analytics, computer science, IT, engineering, business, and government.
Althea Althea Ginn DeLisser (C’74) is President at Komatzu Software.

Dr. Deborah Prothrow-Stith (C’76) has had a very impressive career in public health. She has authored 4 books and received 10 honorary degrees.

Sarah Yeary (C’83) is an air traffic control expert.

Wynne Stovall-Johnson (C’88) teaches math at Chestnut Hill College and has a 2009 article “I’ve Never Been Good At Reading.”
Adrienne Nasir (née Baucom, C’91) is Assistant Principal at Howard County Public School System (D.C. Metro Area).

Dionne Ferguson (C’92) worked US Peace Corps 1994-2001, then at Good Journey Development Foundation, greater St. Louis area.

Mary Randle (C’93) went from math to acting and singing. Her stage credits include “The Lion King” and “Hollow Man.”
Spelman math majors can do anything

Alia Jones (C’95) is a distinguished and successful Broadway & West End producer.

Malaika Mitchell (née Moses, C’97), daughter of Bob Moses, is now at Pearson Education.


Jeanne Johnson (née Roberts, C’2001) has dual careers in law and jewelry design.

Danielle Tillman (C’2003) is an expert at infusing architecture with social consciousness.
Spelman math majors can do anything

Brittany Sanders (C’2006) has Carnegie Mellon MBA and is now back in her native Detroit making a difference.

La’Nita Ward (C’2006) is Director of Admissions and Marketing at Kindred Healthcare.

Lola Bolarinwa-Keita (C’2006) now works in banking in London.

Jamaica Pouncy (C’2010) is University Scholars program coordinator for Honors & Undergrad Research (and National Fellowships Coordinator) for Texas A&M.
A century of mathematical excellence

The coming decades of Spelman women in math will be led by some of the above, as well as recent grads, and current and future math majors—some of them in this room.

They will all go forth and make their mark.

By 2024, many more of them will have doctorates in mathematics and related areas, and/or will make valuable contributions.
Spelman women are born leaders

Please step aside—we don’t want you to get hurt—and make way for the next generation of Spelman women making a difference!

Expect to see more Spleman women in leadership roles at MAA, AMS, SIAM, ASA, AWM, NAM, and beyond.
Let no Spelman woman be a “hidden figure”!

Ensure that all relevant Spelman grads are fully represented at the Math Genealogy website https://www.mathgenealogy.org.

1. Check if YOU are documented there.
2. Check if your appropriate students are.
3. Submit information for all missing people!

The same applies to grads of any AUC school, and any HBCU, and . . . .
It’s (almost) all on the web!

Please follow @Spelmath on Twitter and help to popularize www.spelmath.academy.

Big thanks to Spelman’s Archives and Kassandra Ware in that office. Online AUC Woodruff Library documents have also been invaluable.

Thanks to Dr. Edray Goins for the invitation to make this presentation and for sharing some key (hidden) biographical information.