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From the Selected Works of Frank Shushok Jr.

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About Campus Executive Editor,  
Frank Shushok, Jr. visits with  
Beverly Daniel Tatum, President  
Emerita of Spelman College, about  
leadership, her college presidency,  
and the contemporary challenges  
that face all our students

Frank Shushok, Jr.

Beverly Daniel Tatum shares her perspective on leadership as service  
and the power to inspire.

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# *About Campus* Executive Editor, Frank Shushok, Jr. Visits with Beverly Daniel Tatum, President Emerita of Spelman College, about Leadership, Her College Presidency, and the Contemporary Challenges That Face All Our Students

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**Beverly Daniel Tatum**, President Emerita of Spelman College, is a scholar, teacher, author, administrator, licensed clinical psychologist, and nationally recog-

nized authority on racial issues in America. Among other scholarly work, Dr. Tatum is the author of the critically acclaimed and national bestselling book *Why*

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BEVERLY DANIEL TATUM

*Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations About Race*, which was revised and updated in 2017.

**Shushok:** *I'd like to begin our conversation with a more personal angle. I'm asking people I interview how they've changed. I'd value you reflecting about the ways the 20-year-old Beverly is different than the 40-year-old Beverly and the Beverly I'm interviewing today. What are the most salient lessons growing older has taught you?*

**Tatum:** Let me start by saying that I think this is a great question. In 1974, I was 20 and just getting ready to graduate from college. I finished my degree a semester early, and I was definitely a person I'd describe as a planner. I remember having conversations with my friends about my plan, which is a little embarrassing to repeat now because it was so specific. I was going to graduate from Wesleyan, which I did. I was going to graduate school and earn a PhD in Psychology. I was planning to get married by the time I was 25 and have

two children by the time I was 30. Did I mention my plan was for my two children to be four years apart? I'm telling you, I was a planner! I'm still a planner.

## Life Lessons

**FAST FORWARD TO 40.** I had done pretty much what I had said I was going to do. I was almost 25 when I got married, I have two children who are four years apart, and I became a psychologist. Yet I did not anticipate many of the things I'm doing today. At 20, I didn't anticipate teaching about racism. I didn't anticipate being a professor (my plan was to work as a therapist). I certainly never anticipated becoming a college president. By the time I was 40, I had learned through the hard knocks of life that I couldn't plan everything. One of the things that changed me most profoundly was becoming a parent. I developed a sense of urgency that I didn't have at 20 when I was only responsible for myself. The desire to make a better world for my children was a part of my evolution as a mom. I also had a much deeper understanding of my spirituality, as well as a sense of calling about my work.

Fast forward to 63, almost 20 years later, and I think that I have a much deeper awareness of the importance of leadership, much of this is as result of my experience as a campus leader. In the last two years, both of my parents have died, and I have learned a lot by going through the process of their illnesses and subsequent passing. My mother died at 89 and my father died at 90, so they both lived long and meaningful lives. I really appreciated the opportunity to be with them as they were dying. I learned from them how to exit gracefully. Not that you have control over what happens to your body biologically or medically, but I learned the value of being able to look back over your life and have a sense of integrity about it and not suffer from regret—to make your contribution, make it count, and feel good about what you've done.

**Shushok:** *I'd appreciate you going back to something you said about the "hard knocks of life" that no doubt confronts all of us. Will you talk about one of these moments and how you got up from it, recalibrated, and turned a difficult time into one that created growth and learning?*

## The Best Laid Plans...

**TATUM: I'M GOING TO BE** quite specific because you heard my plan, right? As I mentioned, I got married at 24. At 26, my husband and I had been married for two years, and I had this "two kids before 30" plan. As a result, I announced that it was time for us to have a child. I was fortunate to get pregnant right away. Then, I had a miscarriage—something I never anticipated. I

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know now that it is common for women to have a miscarriage, especially during their first pregnancy, but I didn't know that then and was devastated. Part of my pain was not just losing an anticipated pregnancy but also because it was the first time in my life that one of my plans didn't go the way I anticipated. I had to really step back and recognize that I'm not in control of everything. This was an important and powerful moment in my life. When I was celebrating my 25th anniversary of graduating from Wesleyan, we were all asked to write something about what we had learned in the last 25 years, and I told this story. I wrote an essay about my miscarriage experience as being perhaps the most significant learning I'd had since leaving college. Unless you are a planner like me, this may seem odd. Yet at 26, it was simply startling that one of my plans did not go as expected. Of course, today, at 63, it seems silly to say this, but it was a very important lesson for me.

**Shushok:** *I know you retired from the presidency at Spelman College in July 2015 after 13 years in that role. As you have had some time to reflect on that experience, what did it teach you about life, leadership, and higher education in general?*

**Tatum:** It was a great experience. Spelman is a wonderful institution, and I feel honored and quite privileged to have served in the role as president for as long as I did. After 13 years, however, I was tired and needed a break. If there is one thing I learned in a tangible and powerful way was just how much leadership matters. Leaders set the tone for organizations; one should never underestimate the power of what it is possible to inspire with other people. At the same time, it is important to recognize that a lot of that leadership is not about the individual as much as it is about the role. The two things go together. Whether it be the president of a college or a nation, we can see that the role is an important role, and who occupies it makes a difference. Some of what happens, however, has as much to do with the role as it does with the person holding it. It is therefore critically important for a leader to leave one's ego behind. Every now and then, I had to step back and remind myself that some behavior had little to do with me.

When I first became president of Spelman College, one of the things that routinely happened was for alumnae, students, or parents to stop and request a picture with me. I had to understand that it wasn't really "can I take a picture with Beverly Tatum?" but "can I take a picture of the President of Spelman College?" If you allow the response that people have to the occupant of the role to feed your ego, your ego could get quite out of control. I had to take a step back and say "it's not about me, it's about the role." I had to try to preserve a certain humility, for lack of a better word, so

that I didn't get carried away. When I have read about or observed leaders falling into difficulty in their organizations, I think it can almost always be traced back to an ego out of control.

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**Shushok:** *That's incredibly insightful. I'm curious to know how you discerned that it was time for you to exit the president's role and do something different with your life?*

## When to Pass the Baton

**TATUM: THAT'S A GREAT QUESTION.** In my higher education career prior to becoming a president, I observed presidents who stayed in their roles too long. I've been places where you got a sense that the community was "starting to look at its watch." It is unfortunate when you see that happening, particularly if someone has been successful and then became stale by staying in the role too long. In these instances, leaders missed moments when they could have left at the peak of what they were doing as opposed to having people get restless and look for or desire a new leader. So, having observed that, I promised myself that I would try to avoid such a scenario. After I announced my retirement, someone said something I thought was so wise. The person said, "it is better [for a leader] to leave five years too early than five minutes too late." It is an important thing to keep in mind for anyone who is starting down the road of leadership. Figuring out when to exit is as important as deciding when to stay.

I had certain goals for the institution—things I hoped to accomplish—and when I started the position at Spelman, I told the board in my interview that I imagined it to be a 10-year project. And so, when I got to the end of my tenth year, I felt like I wasn't finished. When I got to the end of my second five-year contract, the board was kind enough to offer me a third five-year contract. I knew there was a little more to do; for example, we were in the middle of a capital campaign. Yet I was fairly certain that I would not complete five more years—my energy was beginning to wane. These jobs

require lots of energy, and if you don't have it, you're at risk of making the mistake of occupying a role and not giving it your best. That's when people start to wonder if it's time for you to go. I felt in my spirit that it was important to finish that campaign, but as soon as the campaign was over, and we had achieved the goals and succeeded, I was clear that we wanted an orderly exit, and I should spend a year thanking our supporters and giving the board time to find a good successor. I had done what I came to do, and it was time for somebody else to have a turn—to pass the baton so to speak.

**Shushok:** *I suspect a lot of About Campus readers wonder about the best way to align their gifts and talents with particular kinds of roles. You've used the word "calling" a couple of times, so I hope you will share your insight about discerning what kind of roles to pursue.*

## Ministry as Service

**TATUM: ONE OF THE THINGS** you might not know is that I have a master's degree in religious studies from Hartford Seminary. I didn't start out to pursue a degree, but I wanted to take some classes. Over the course of time, I got to the end of what turned into a master's program. When I started taking classes at Hartford Seminary, many people would ask me "Do you want to be a minister?" I would say no—meaning I didn't want to be an ordained pastor of a church. But what I learned at Hartford Seminary was that the Greek word for ministry translates best as service. The question should not be "Are you a minister?" or "Do you want to be a minister?" Instead, the question should be "What is your ministry or service?" I assume everyone has a ministry, and therefore, the question is "What's yours?" For me, as I learned more and thought more about the work that I was doing, I came to understand

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that my work in higher education is a ministry. One question that I ask myself is "What is the best use of my time and talent at this moment in time?" When I was teaching, I would ask, "Is teaching the best use

of my time and talent?" When I started getting nominated to be a president, I would ask this same question of myself. When the opportunity to be president of Spelman College presented itself, after a period of reflection and meditation, and all the things we do to try to discern the answers to those questions, I concluded it was the thing that I should be doing. I was very grateful for the opportunity. When it was time to stop, I was very clear about that too and have no regrets.

**Shushok:** *Before we move on to your book, I wanted to offer a moment for you to discuss the important role historically black colleges and universities play in the industry of higher education and the overall progress of our nation.*

## Historically Black Colleges and Universities

**TATUM: HBCUS HAVE A LONG** and distinguished history in terms of preparing generations of leaders. Certainly, I can point to my own family—my parents were both educated at Howard University and my grandparents at places like Tuskegee and Morris College. That history provides evidence that we wouldn't have the leadership we have today in government, law, medicine, engineering, pick your field, without the contribution of HBCUs. Even though there are many more educational options available to young black people in the 21st century, the fact of the matter is that these schools continue to contribute mightily, particularly in rural communities or other places where educational options are sometimes limited. I'm sure you read recently about Ruth Simmons, former Brown University President, becoming President at Prairie View A&M. In an interview about Prairie View, she emphasized the impact Prairie View had on her own family history. HBCUs have a long and important history, and in 2017, they continue to have great importance. The challenge is that the students HBCUs are serving don't have the resources they need. The median African American family income is about \$40k a year. It's hard to pay for any institution's tuition on \$40k a year if you're supporting a family. If you're dependent on financial aid and you're attending a school that has limited financial resources, then it becomes difficult for the student and the institution. Certainly, when I was leading Spelman, one of my top priorities was to expand our capacity to provide financial aid for the many talented students who wanted to come to Spelman but who couldn't afford to be there without significant aid. When I read about small liberal arts colleges increasing the number of Pell Grant-eligible students from single to double digit percentages, that

is all good. But HBCUs are serving 80–90 percent Pell-eligible students and that is important work. But these institutions need more support.

**Shushok:** *You recently revised your book Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Questions About Race. As you revisited what you wrote 20 years ago, what stood out to you? What was important for you to share that you didn't offer back in 1997?*

## Twenty Years Later

**TATUM: I WAS INTERESTED IN** reflecting on the social context we're in 20 years later. In 1997, President Clinton was just launching his initiative on race and announced he was hosting town hall meetings around the country. I remember being at one of those town hall meetings, and I was honored by the fact that President Clinton had read the book and invited me to participate. President Clinton said it was important to use this moment to talk about race because we were a nation at peace, the economy was expanding, the country was upbeat, and time had come to deal with the hard and difficult continuing saga of racism in our society. Fast forward 20 years, and we are a nation at war, multiple wars, our economy has been contracting, and there is significant fear among some people about an increasingly diverse population. We have racial resentment, perhaps fueled by the contracting economy, and there is a sense of greater competition in shifting global context where the United States is experiencing a diminished leadership role.

We have a culture increasingly shaped by social media, and it's so much more difficult to have the kind of dialogue that President Clinton said was so important in 1997. I wanted to reflect on the social and political forces that are shaping the worldview of today's 20-year-olds. In terms of the core ideas, readers will find discussion about the psychology of racism, how that impacts the way we view ourselves and other people, as well as ideas around racial identity and how it plays itself out in schools. It was clear to me that the legal landscape has changed in the last 20 years, and there's deeper understanding of psychological concepts like unconscious bias or stereotype threat. Those ideas were ideas that were not yet so visible in the social science literature in 1997. I wanted to incorporate them into this version. In the end, I have almost completely rewritten the book. For example, the chapter on Affirmative Action in the original book had to be completely redone because the legal status of Affirmative Action and how we talk about it and think about it today has shifted substantially over the last 20 years. In addition, the population has gotten more diverse.

**Shushok:** *As you know, our country is more diverse and more segregated than ever. So much of our segregation is built on decades of policies, laws, and practices that have tremendous inertia. I hear my students and colleagues feel hopeless and overwhelmed about the possibility of deconstructing such injustice. I'm interested in your reaction to this sentiment, as well as your counsel about the small everyday choices all of us can make that help create a new future.*

## Progress and Retrenchment

**TATUM: ONE OF THE THINGS** I say in the book, as well as when I'm talking to people, is that progress is rarely linear. If you look over the arc of our country's history, you see forward progress made on certain issues of equity, and you often see retrenchment or backward movement. Then, there's the surge forward again—two steps forward and one step back. Certainly, we are in a moment of backward movement, and that is discouraging. At the same time, it is clear to me that it is possible to move forward again, but that will require individual and collective effort. Nothing is going to happen if I sit in my house and wish for it. I

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have to roll up my sleeves and get busy. It was important to me to highlight examples in my book of places where people are doing that kind of work, making an effort on the local level to bring about change. I think those are the small everyday choices that you referenced that very much add up. The old maxim—think globally, act locally—is what I think is required of all of us if we want to see change. It can be overwhelming to think about the magnitude of social problems with

which we're dealing. There is no doubt a long history of problems persisting over generations, yet change is possible when people decide they want to make it happen.

**Shushok:** *I was encouraged by your epilogue that you optimistically titled "Signs of Hope, Sites of Progress." Can you share some of the places you're finding hope and seeing progress? What encouragement do you have for people who care deeply about issues of race in America but find themselves weary and discouraged?*

## Support Connection Across Difference

**TATUM: AN EXAMPLE I OFFER** in the book is intergroup dialogue on college campuses. We know that many of our students are coming from segregated communities and that they have not had an opportunity to engage with people whose life experiences are different from their own in more than a superficial way. Students then get to college and find diversity, yet it is often difficult or awkward for people to figure out how to connect with those whose life experiences are different from their own. How do I have what seems like an awkward conversation? What structures must the institution provide for helping students develop the skills that they need to connect across lines of difference? One strategy empirically shown to help with this issue is a structured program in intergroup dialogue as originally developed at the University of Michigan but which has spread to places like Skidmore, Northern Arizona, University of Massachusetts, and many other places, often fueled by graduate students who went to Michigan and who now teach and lead on new campuses. We know that when young people have the opportunity to engage in sustained dialogue over the course of the semester, they can get beyond discomfort to really start to understand the experiences of others and hopefully become motivated to interrupt the cycle of racism and other "isms" in our society. There are lots of places where this is happening, and I think it's really exciting to see. I want to bring it up in this conversation because it is something that any college or university can do. They have faculty and facilities; they have staff members who can facilitate; they have students who can be trained to be facilitators. Skidmore College happens to be a place that has an intergroup relations program that you can minor in.

And because it is an undergraduate institution without graduate students, all facilitation is being done by undergraduates who have been trained. I think this is building leadership capacity.

**Shushok:** *Thanks for your encouragement in this regard. There is so much work to be done, and you offer important and practical ways that we can make a difference in our own communities. My last question is about you. I know readers would love to know what else is on your mind these days and how you are using your life.*

## Continuing to Serve

**TATUM: WORKING IN HIGHER EDUCATION** is a wonderful way to spend your life. I'm still active professionally. I serve on two college boards, Smith College, and I have just agreed to join the board of Morehouse College. Besides serving as a trustee of two institutions, I have appreciated the opportunity to talk about my book and visit college campuses. I spoke at Princeton recently, and a few weeks ago, I was at Cornell and Skidmore. It has been a lot of fun to talk with people who are doing the work day in and day out and share with them some of what I've learned. I am also excited about a project I'm doing for the Council for Independent Colleges (CIC), which relates to the creation of a faculty institute that will take place in June 2018 and 2019 titled: Diversity, Civility and the Liberal Arts. Participants will work in teams of four and include colleagues from 25 different institutions interested in thinking about how to use the teaching and learning environments to address questions of diversity and civility in a time when the latter seems to be in short supply on our campuses. I think it's going to be a really exciting four days.

**Shushok:** *Well clearly, you're not taking it easy Dr. Tatum.*

**Tatum:** Well, I like to say that I decided to stop serving as president but that didn't mean that I was going to stop serving. I am fortunate to be in good health and with plenty of energy. I am not interested in pursuing another presidency, but I am interested in continuing to use the particular talents that I have in a useful way.

**Shushok:** *I think you're a marvel, and it has been a joy to spend time with you. Please know that my colleagues feel the same way. Thanks for making a difference in the world and not giving up.*