Dr. Clark and the CCNY Years

Professor Kenneth B. Clark’s 35-year teaching career at the City College of New York was acknowledged by the City College Alumni Association with the presentation of the John W. Finley Medal at the annual dinner in November 1992. This award, named for the third president of City College and presented by former New York City Mayor David Dinkins, salutes those who exemplify dedicated service to the community. Professor Clark joined the City College community in 1942, joining his graduate studies mentor at Columbia University, Professor Gardner Murphy, as an Instructor in the Psychology Department. The department had recently separated from the Philosophy Department and moved into new quarters in Harris Hall.

Since his time at the Office of War Information, Professor Clark was especially interested in perception theory, extra-sensory perception, racial bias and self-image. He earned tenure in 1960, the first African-American to earn this achievement. He became known to generations of City College students through introductory psychology courses including Social Psychology and Physiological Psychology for many years as well as Developmental Psychology, Personality in Childhood and Adolescence and Developmental Psychology and Adult Personality. He occasionally interrupted his time in the City College classroom with visiting professorships at Queens College, Columbia University, and the University of California at Berkeley, and two sabbaticals, one in 1954 as he was preparing his findings on the effects of racial segregation on African American children for the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, and another about 20 years later.

In 1964 he established the Social Dynamics Research Institute with Professor Larry Plotkin, a research group at CCNY whose primary function was to study the processes of social change as they manifest themselves in actual community problems. As Professor Clark began to reflect on his retirement from the College in February 1975 he remembered with fondness his time in the classroom and commented:

"I think I was pretty rigid as a teacher. I had the responsibility of determining how we go about understanding this area. It was difficult for me to learn and it would be for my students. I didn’t have much tolerance for fads. I didn’t believe something was good just because a student said it was good.

On the other hand I have had some students in recent years who are going to think. Last year a student got onto a point and went to the library, studied and we had knock-down drag-out arguments. It was wonderful. He got an A.¹"