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Black Alumni Collective Conference at Rutgers a Groundbreaking Event



Photo by AJ Shorter

By Sam Starnes GSN'04

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National conference for Black alumni held at Rutgers marks two firsts: The first time the organization has been hosted by a Big Ten university and the first time members gathered in the Northeast.

Black alumni representing colleges and universities across the country converged on the banks of the Raritan River for the Black Alumni Collective (BAC) 2024 National Conference at Rutgers University–New Brunswick.

“Today we are here to celebrate our heritage, our resilience, and our collective journey toward a brighter future,” Simone Mack-Bright RC’96, president of the [Rutgers African-American Alumni Alliance](https://rutgersblackalumni.org/) (<https://rutgersblackalumni.org/>), told the audience gathered in Jersey Mike’s Arena in Piscataway on Friday, May 31. “It’s truly a joy to have each and every one of you at Rutgers University where history and excellence intersect.”



Simone Mack-Bright RC'96 and Anthony C. Culpepper Jr. LC'85 of the Rutgers African-American Alumni Alliance. Photo by Nick Romanenko.



Rutgers President Jonathan Holloway and Rutgers-Camden Senior Vice Chancellor Nyeema C. Watson. Photo by Nick Romanenko.

who opened Holloway's session and welcomed attendees, and Rutgers University-Newark Provost Jeffrey A. Robinson RC'95, ENG'95, a Rutgers alumnus who will serve as interim chancellor at Rutgers-Newark in the 2024-2025 academic year. Robinson was joined by fellow Rutgers alumnus Randal Pinkett ENG'94 on a panel, *Black Faces in High Places: 10 Game-Changing Strategies to Achieve Success and Find Greatness* (Robinson and Pinkett have coauthored two books that inspired that title). On Saturday afternoon, Rutgers alumnus Alfred A. Edmond Jr. RC'93, executive editor of *Black Enterprise* magazine, delivered the concluding address, *Collective Call to Action—'Til Victory Is Won: Recommitting the Fight for Black Freedom*.

Two sessions during the conference focused on the legacy of Rutgers alumnus Paul Robeson RC'1919, whose name stands prominent at university locations in New Brunswick, Piscataway, Newark, and Camden. On Thursday, a group of attendees visited [Paul Robeson Plaza on Voorhees Mall](https://www.rutgers.edu/news/rutgers-dedicates-plaza-paul-robeson-renaissance-man-ages#.XLSQbJNKiLg) (<https://www.rutgers.edu/news/rutgers-dedicates-plaza-paul-robeson-renaissance-man-ages#.XLSQbJNKiLg>).

She was joined by Anthony C. Culpepper Jr. LC'85, one of the founders of the RAAA, whose enthusiastic welcome included leading attendees in the Rutgers chant ending with the line "Rutgers Rah!"

The Black Alumni Collective, which was founded in 2018 and held its first conference in 2019 at Georgia Tech, is a growing partnership of alumni from more than 40 schools, including Rutgers, Duke, and Florida State universities, among other leading institutions. This year, which was the first time it has been hosted at a Big Ten university, more than 300 participated in activities that ran from Thursday, May 30, through Sunday, June 2.

Allyson Reaves, an alumna of Clemson University and Boston University who is a co-founder of the BAC, said Rutgers' support is a significant step in growing the six-year-old organization. "We are so incredibly happy and excited to be in the Northeast for the very first time, because that gives extra momentum to the work that got started in Atlanta," she said.

Speakers for more than 25 individual sessions included Rutgers University President Jonathan Holloway, who was interviewed by Rutgers alumna Nyeema C. Watson CCAS'02, GSC'15, senior vice chancellor of Rutgers-Camden, in a fireside chat format. Holloway applauded the work of the BAC, and said it supports the university's mission. "One of the goals of the Black Alumni Collective is making connections and building networks," he said. "Universities need to do the work of recognizing all of their alumni."

Holloway, who noted that the Rutgers community encompasses a combination of about 100,000 students, faculty, and staff, said the university can be a positive example. "If we can make a difference in a community of this size, imagine what great things can happen," he said. "Higher education can be a model for the world."

H. Qawi Austin GSBC'18, a member of the BAC Board, said he found Holloway's remarks inspiring. "I felt actual synergy—I felt connectedness—not just with him, but in the room as we continuously look forward to how we can continue to support each other."

Additional speakers during the conference's robust agenda included Rutgers-New Brunswick Chancellor Francine Conway,

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Saturday morning sessions included a presentation celebrating Robeson as an alumni trailblazer. Debra A. Holston O’Neal LC’87, a RAAA member and past Chair of the Rutgers University Alumni Association, introduced Susan Robeson, his granddaughter. “Paul Robeson was one of us,” O’Neal said. “He achieved worldwide acclaim as a vocalist and an actor on stage and screen as a towering figure in the African American struggle for human dignity and democratic rights. Robeson connected this struggle with people around the world who also were fighting for political rights, cultural recognition, and economic justice.” (O’Neal, an alumna of Rutgers–New Brunswick, and Austin, an alumnus of Rutgers–Camden, were joined by Rutgers–Newark alumna Sharon Stroye GSN’06, RBSN’16 in serving as conference co-chairs who represented all three Rutgers’ locations.)

Susan Robeson shared her grandfather’s story through a documentary and remarks. “He was the quintessential global citizen,” she said, noting that the ideals of a citizen of the world have ancient roots. “These ideals of a citizen of the world fused everything about Paul—personally, politically, and especially in his music. A citizen of the world has an expansive self-identity that goes beyond one’s own cultural, ethnic, national, or religious identity without minimizing it, a sense of responsibility to benefit a global community and a commitment to action.”

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WTW (<https://careers.wtco.com/>) and Chase (<https://www.chase.com/>) sponsored the 2024 Black Alumni Collective National Conference, which was hosted by The Rutgers African-American Alumni Alliance and the Rutgers University Foundation.

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