

IT'S NEVER TOO LATE TO FIND YOUR HOME ON THE HILL

WITH AN EMPHASIS ON DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION, JAMES A. FELTON III '95, M.S. '98
WANTS TO HELP ALUMNI CREATE A COMMUNITY OF CARE AT MCDANIEL

By Lindsay Sherman

When you ask James A. Felton III '95, M.S. '98 what McDaniel College was like in the 1990s, he'll tell you it was nowhere near as diverse as it is today. He estimates the college had fewer than 100 students of color out of about 1,200 students at the time.

"And probably only about 30 or so were African American students on campus," he says. "We came in at an interesting time. It was during the resurgence of the Malcolm X movement, so we were thinking about Black identity and Black male identity. It was the time of the Rodney King incident, the O. J. Simpson trial, and the end of apartheid in South Africa."

Felton says that all those national and international movements helped shape his experience not only as a first-generation college student but also as an African American male at a predominantly white institution.

"We made a pact as Black students: we were going to change the face of the institution," Felton says, noting that they decided to do that by getting involved in a number of leadership positions and campus organizations.

"We decided that we wanted to be active and present and vocal," he says. "We wanted to make a difference on the campus for the things that were not available to us as students of color at the time."

Nearly 25 years after he graduated, McDaniel welcomed its most diverse first-year class in history in 2019. Felton says it's a good first step, but there is still work to be done.



“I WASN’T EXPECTING TO BE THE CAMPUS ACTIVIST THAT I BECAME, BUT I RECOGNIZED THE LACK OF DIVERSITY IN THE STUDENT BODY AND SOME OF THE EXPERIENCES THAT WE ALL WENT THROUGH.”

BUILDING A FOUNDATION ON A PASSION FOR INCLUSION

Felton’s passion for inclusion began before he even set foot on the Hill. In high school in Vineland, New Jersey, Felton had a classmate in his homeroom that he calls Ryan to protect his privacy.

“Ryan is Deaf, and I saw him in homeroom for 20 minutes a day and then didn’t see him again the rest of the day, solely because of his Deafness,” Felton recalls. “At the time, there were no support services in the Vineland Public School district to pay for interpreting services, so he was sent to special education courses. Something about that just didn’t sit well with me.”

Felton developed a friendship with Ryan by passing notes back and forth in homeroom. One day, he decided he wanted to learn sign language, and Ryan began teaching him some simple signs. That interest in Deaf studies drew Felton’s attention to then-Western Maryland College, which at the time was second in Deaf education only to Gallaudet University.

He enrolled and declared a major in Psychology and a minor in Deaf Studies. “But diversity was one of my trepidations coming to Western Maryland,” Felton says. “It was really an eye-opening experience, a culture shock once I actually moved on campus.”

Felton recalls that growing up, his paternal grandmother was very active in the local community and she first introduced him to the idea that “it takes a village. She viewed all the children in the neighborhood as her children and my grandfather’s children. They treated everyone equally,” he says.

When he started creating his own village on the Hill, Felton started thinking about devoting himself to a career that was going to make a positive impact in people’s lives and lead social change.

“I wasn’t expecting to be the campus activist that I became, but I recognized the lack of diversity in the student body and some of the experiences that we all went through,” he says. “It was eye-opening to study Psychology and understand some of the pathologies that go along with behavioral patterns and people’s psyches, as well as the importance of acceptance and inclusion through my Deaf Studies courses.

“That was a really formative philosophy that was always instilled in me through my family, but I actually got to enact it on campus and in the local community.”

For Felton, that looked like becoming an RA, joining student government, becoming an Ambassador in the Office of Admissions, and working as a student with the Alumni Association. “I tried to help usher or promote a sense of belonging and inclusion for everyone,” he says. “I wanted to help identify what the institution was thinking about — or was not thinking about — in terms of policies, practices, and procedures.”

A WINDING JOURNEY THROUGH THE WORLD OF DIVERSITY IN HIGHER ED

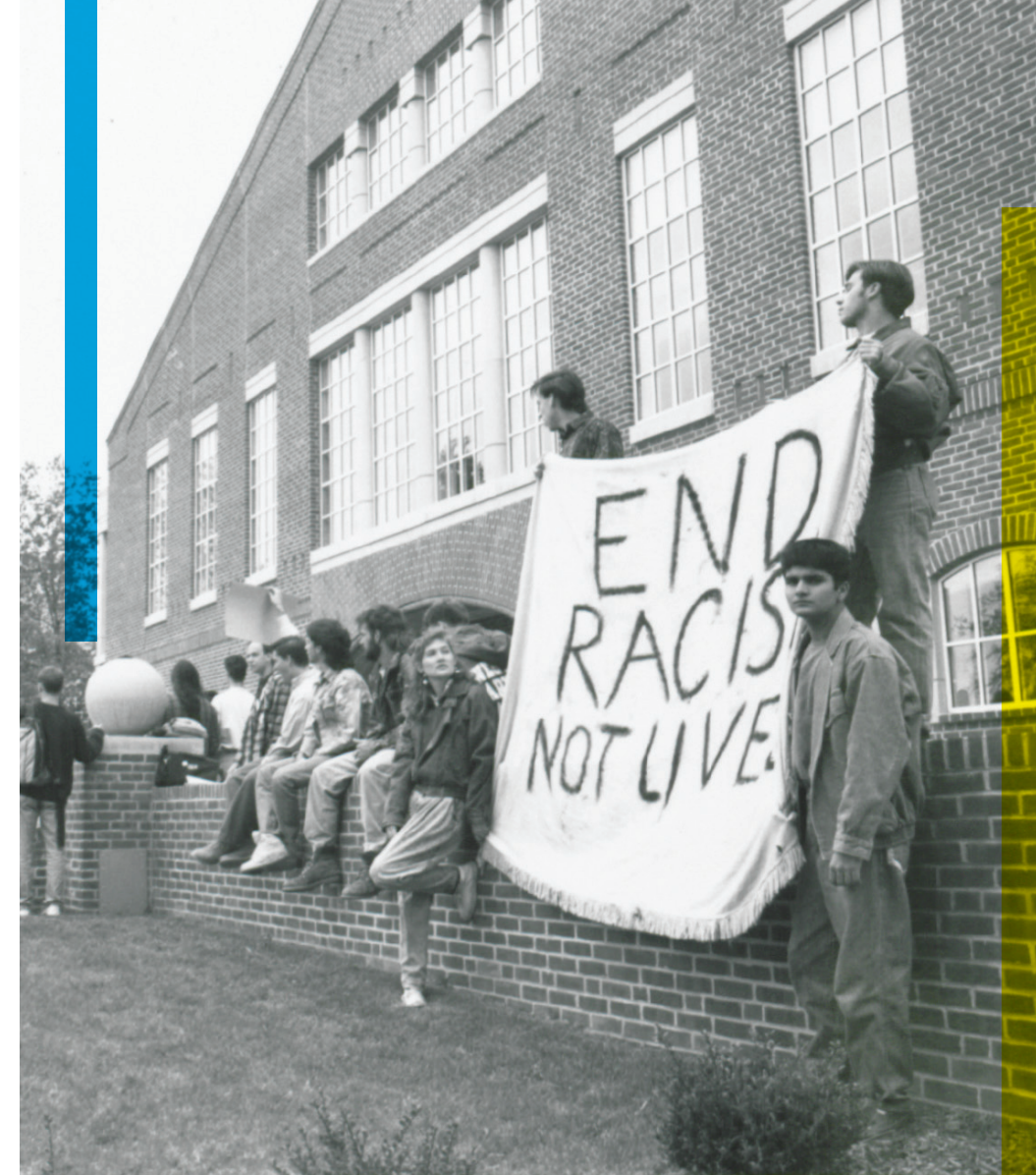
Despite their efforts to create their own community of care on campus, Felton says that many of his peers who were students of color were simply focused on the finish line of graduation by the end.

“Most students of color who attended Western Maryland when I did were so ambivalent,” recalls Felton. “We had great experiences with our peers, and we obviously had some friendships with students who were in the majority as well. But there were a lot of incidents that happened to us racially that were hurtful.

“A number of students during that era walked away and didn’t really have — or want — much involvement with the college after graduation.”

Felton didn’t walk away as quickly as many of his peers did; his first job after graduating with his bachelor’s degree was right back on the Hill. He was initially hired for two part-time positions: senior minority recruiter in the Office of Admissions and coordinator for multicultural student services.

Felton recalls that he was on the road during the day visiting high schools and coming back to campus at night to put on programs for current students. “I was loving the work, but I was at a crossroads,” he says. “I went to lunch with then-President Bob Chambers, then-Provost Joan Coley, and then-Dean of Admissions Marty O’Connell, and we had a long discussion about where I saw myself in the next two to five years. I said I loved doing



Above: Students hold a “March Against Racism” on campus during following the 1992 Los Angeles riots. [Sherri Diegel, McDaniel College Archives]

■ James A. Felton III
 ■ Western Maryland/McDaniel College
 ■ United States

DEC. 4, 1972
 James A. Felton III is born and raised in New Jersey, attending school in the Vineland Public School district.

JULY 26, 1990
 The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is signed into law, guaranteeing those with disabilities equal opportunity in employment and equal access to government services.

FALL 1991
 Felton enrolls at Western Maryland College as a Psychology major, minoring in Deaf Studies, joining several student-led groups on campus.

APRIL 29 - MAY 4, 1992
 Riots and civil disturbances occur in LA following the acquittal of all three officers involved in the brutal beating of Rodney King.

MAY 1992
 Western Maryland College students lead a rally for racial injustice after the LA riots, drawing over 100 students, faculty, staff, and local residents. (Photos above)



“IT’S VITALLY IMPORTANT FOR PEOPLE TO SEE THEMSELVES IN OTHERS AND TO BE ABLE TO SEE POSITIVE ROLE MODELS AND TO HAVE OPPORTUNITIES FOR CONNECTION CULTURALLY AND SOCIALLY.”

both of the jobs, but there was a huge burnout factor of doing two part-time jobs that should really be two full-time jobs.”

Chambers then made the decision to appoint Felton as the first full-time director of multicultural student services in July 1997. That also gave Felton the push to pursue his master’s in Education Administration. But after a little while, Felton began to wonder what was next.

“I had it really great at McDaniel, so I wanted to test the waters because I always felt like I was kind of the prodigal son,” he says. “Were people telling me I was doing a good job because of our relationships and me being a two-time alum? Or did I really have the skill set and the acumen to do the work?”

So, Felton walked away from the Hill to go prove himself — to himself more than anyone else. He ended up in Green Bay, Wisconsin, as the coordinator for the American Intercultural Center at the University of Wisconsin – Green Bay.

“I probably grew the most professionally and culturally in that role,” Felton says. “I got to work with 11 different tribal affiliations and a number of Southeast Asian populations.”

While at McDaniel, Felton was a one-man shop; at Green Bay, he had a staff and a physical space to supervise where students were invited to come in to use the lounge and computer area and be in community with faculty, staff, and other students.

“I was able to understand or be a little more empathetic as a professional and a person of color more than I had been during my days at McDaniel,” Felton says. “That solidified for me that, one, I was capable of doing the work, and two, I really enjoyed it and I was making a difference in the lives of students.”

Since then, stops on his career journey have included colleges in southeast Pennsylvania, the mountains of North Carolina, Maryland, New York, and finally back to his home state of New Jersey. Throughout that career, he’s made a lot of history: from first full-time director of multicultural student services at McDaniel to inaugural director of intercultural affairs at Western Carolina University, inaugural chief diversity officer at Anne Arundel Community College, and now inaugural vice president for inclusive excellence at The College of New Jersey since 2020.

“I think it’s safe to say that I will have a long career in higher education, and all of it has been in the field of diversity, equity, and inclusion,” Felton says.

Which is exactly what has brought him back into the fold at McDaniel.

Top Left: Student portrait of James Felton [Mark Swisher, McDaniel College Archives]

Top Right: 1993 photo of Western Maryland’s Black Student Union; Felton pictured back row, far right [McDaniel College Archives]

Left: Heidi M. S. Reigel '97 (back right) and Felton (far right) first worked together as part of the college Admissions staff in 1997. [C. Kurt Holter, McDaniel College Archives]

SEPTEMBER 1994

The College establishes its first international campus in Budapest, Hungary.

1994-1995

O. J. Simpson is tried for the murders of his ex-wife and friend, becoming the most publicized criminal trial in history.

MAY 1995

Felton graduates from Western Maryland College with his undergraduate degree in Psychology and a minor in Deaf Studies.

JULY 1997

Felton becomes the first full-time director of multicultural student services at Western Maryland College.

MAY 1998

Felton receives his M.S. in Education Administration from Western Maryland College.

2000

Dr. Joan Develin Coley becomes the first female president of the college.

JULY 2002

Western Maryland College changes its name to McDaniel College.

SEPT. 25, 2008

The ADA Amendments Act of 2008 changes how “disability” is defined, favoring an inclusive interpretation.

JAN. 20, 2009

Barack Obama is inaugurated as the 44th president of the United States, the first African American to hold this office.



Above: The McDaniel community gathers in August 2020 for a candlelight vigil, mourning the tragic death of George Floyd.



Left: National NAACP President Cornell William Brooks addresses the campus community in 2016 with his talk, “Unless Black Lives Matter, All Lives Can’t Matter.”

Below: Students, faculty, and staff join together for a peaceful Black Lives Matter rally in April 2015 after the death of Freddie Gray.

“FOLKS WHO DIDN’T FEEL LIKE THE COLLEGE WAS THEIR HOME ... THEY CAN COME BACK, FIND THAT SENSE OF BELONGING,



ACCEPTING AN INVITATION FOR A LONG-OVERDUE HOMECOMING

Since the summer of 2020, in the wake of the killing of George Floyd, there has been increased pressure on the college to address issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion, from alumni, students, and other community members. Heidi M. S. Reigel ’97, associate vice president of alumni and admissions, was talking with Alumni Association President Chuck Sullivan ’72 one day when Sullivan asked why there weren’t many BIPOC alumni involved with the Graduates of the Last Decade (GOLD).

Sullivan, who is a member of the Board of Trustees’ Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Taskforce, emphasized to Reigel that it was important to align the Alumni Council with the strategic work that was being done at the board and administrative levels. Reigel and Sullivan began thinking about how McDaniel could garner more participation and involvement from underrepresented alumni.

“I had been talking with James to tell him what Chuck wanted to do and how I needed someone who knew the ins and outs of higher ed but could also chair the team,” Reigel says. “James replied, ‘You need someone like me.’ I said, ‘Yes.’

“And, of course, James says to me, ‘Heidi, I’m serious — I’ll do it.’”

Reigel says that she had never thought of asking Felton because he hadn’t really been involved with the college since he left to go to Green Bay. “I assumed he was too busy,” she says. “He told me he had never been asked. So, I officially asked him.”

Since then, Felton has connected with current students of color, met with college leadership a handful of times to put on workshops and trainings, and begun the process of helping Reigel, Sullivan, and the Alumni Council identify alumni who can help create a new community of care on campus for students of color.

In the time that he’s been engaged with former colleagues, friends, and fellow alumni at McDaniel, Felton has noticed some key areas that need improvement. “Like most colleges and universities, representation matters. It’s not simply enrolling more underrepresented or historically marginalized students, which McDaniel has done a great job of in recent years,” he says. “What resources are available to them once they actually get to campus?”

Most importantly, he says the faculty and staff composition has to mirror the student population. “It’s vitally important for people to see themselves in others and to be able to see positive role models and to have opportunities for connection culturally and socially,” Felton says. “It’s also important for majority students to see people of color teaching them in the front of the classroom.”

Looking at the student population on the Hill now, Felton can’t help but recall what he and his peers worked so hard for. “Back in the day, we fought so hard as students to try to help folks understand that there are multiple ways of looking at an issue and addressing it from a cultural perspective,” Felton says. “We can’t claim to be inclusive when we have policies and practices and procedures of exclusion.”

Reigel is deeply appreciative of the time that Felton has given to his alma mater, and hopes that he can show others that even if you stepped away for a while, it’s never too late to find your home on the Hill. “James is a dear friend, and I am thrilled to get to work with him again to re-engage our alumni,” Reigel says.

“One of my goals is to identify opportunities to bring those folks back into the fold,” Felton says. “There are so many ways we can participate as alums in terms of mentoring and offering internship and job opportunities to current students. I’m trying to communicate to our underrepresented alumni that the college doesn’t just need your money; there are other ways to serve that are vitally important.

“Folks who didn’t feel like the college was their home or community, they can come back, find that sense of belonging, and perhaps more importantly, create that sense of belonging for current and prospective students.”

AND PERHAPS MORE IMPORTANTLY, CREATE THAT SENSE OF BELONGING FOR CURRENT AND PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS.”

2020-2021: A YEAR OF PROGRESS

Since June 2020, McDaniel’s renewed commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) has been at the forefront of the minds of faculty, staff, and administration. Over the past year, there have been many accomplishments to be proud of. While the work is not done and continued efforts are planned, the commitment to making the Hill a home for all has never been stronger.

- Finalized a new **DEI statement** that was recommended by McDaniel faculty, staff, and students and was endorsed by the Board of Trustees
- Since Aug. 1, 2020, **23% of new hires identify as BIPOC** based on race and **7% identify as Hispanic** based on ethnicity
- Improved institutional **bias education** response and support process
- Created the **Cultural Leadership Council** to promote increased communication for student leaders of multicultural organizations among themselves and with administration and the board
- Renamed the Office of Diversity and Inclusion to the **Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (ODEI)**
- Collected and analyzed more than **35 data sets related to DEI** over the last five years
- Created a **DEI committee** with Graduate and Professional Studies
- Revised tenure** and promotion criteria to highlight unique challenges sometimes faced by BIPOC faculty
- Hiring search committees now required to complete implicit **bias training**
- Linked the college’s **DEI statement** to all job searches
- Updated **chosen name policy** and **all-gender restrooms**

In addition to those administrative and policy changes, the follow trainings were offered to the community:

- August 2020:** The college hired University of Maryland Director of Diversity Training and Education Dr. Carlton E. Green to lead “Narratives of Racism at McDaniel: Racial Trauma, Racial Anxiety, & Racial Empathy,” which was attended by more than 150 employees
- October 2020:** Seventy members of the community completed a series of Equity Now! trainings
- October 2020:** Award-winning higher education diversity expert James A. Felton III ’95, M.S. ’98 conducted a DEI training for the Board of Trustees
- January 2021:** Special Assistant to the Provost Richard Smith ’00 led a retreat for 101 members of the community focusing on increasing diversity in the curriculum
- February 2021:** Felton ran an intercultural competence assessment with trustees

JULY 13, 2013

#BlackLivesMatter appears on Twitter as high-profile cases involving the deaths of Black civilians create renewed outrage.

APRIL 2015

After the death of Freddie Gray while in Baltimore police custody, protests and vigils are held around Maryland, including on the Hill.

JAN. 25, 2016

The Chosen Name Policy is enacted for students who wish to go by a name other than their legal one.

OCT. 24, 2016

The president of the NAACP visits McDaniel and speaks to over 500 students and community members.

2020

The unlawful deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor spark a new wave of Black Lives Matter protests, the human rights campaign against violence and racism.

JULY 20, 2020

Felton becomes the Vice President for Inclusive Excellence at the College of New Jersey.

JAN. 20, 2021

Kamala Harris becomes the first woman and first woman of color vice president of the United States.

JUNE 2021

Felton is named one of New Jersey’s most influential DEI leaders.