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15 Faculty Hot Shots: Duana Fullwiley

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It's 1 p.m. sharp on a cloudy Thursday afternoon, and room 114 of the Barker Center sits completely empty. This may be the room to which Assistant Professor of African and African American Studies Duana Fullwiley is assigned to teach African and African American Studies 199: "Delimiting Health Disparities in the African Diaspora," but instead of staying cooped up in the classroom, she and her 18 hand-picked students are out in Boston, working with various immigrant African communities and putting to work all they have learned the first half of the semester.

One of these students is African and African American Studies concentrator Tonia N. Branche '10, who describes how much she enjoyed the class, last semester's new addition to the department's curriculum. "The new thing the African and African American Studies department is trying out is 'social engagement' and we're learning to do medical anthropology research. The work we do makes an impact on the communities," she says. "We really get to know people, get to work with them, have conversations with them. I've really learned a lot about ethnographic research and its importance."

As a professor here at Harvard, Fullwiley has been active in creating a curriculum that's broad and interdisciplinary, founding and chairing "The Committee of Social Engagement" in her department. The committee emphasizes an intellectual collaboration with communities, especially African and migrant communities, concerning various health issues. "We want to give back something, and students are actually doing research and political work and coming up with ways to address the needs that different communities need," Fullwiley says.

Although Fullwiley will be on leave doing research for the 2009-2010 school year, she intends to greatly expand social engagement in the Department upon her return. "When we come back I have plans to do the health disparities course again, and second semester to do a course specifically on deliverables, and come up with projects and yield products that are deliverable directly to the communities we work with," Fullwiley says.

Students rushing to sign up for her next class should be warned, though. Fullwiley is picky when it comes to her students. "The classes I teach aren't very big and are usually limited to 18 students. There's an application process because I need kids committed to global health and I need to be able to screen students on where they've been in the world, language skills they've had, what they've been through. Our students are trained in these African languages and I needed students open to that, among other things."

Though Fullwiley does not know what the next years will bring, she hopes to stay at Harvard for the foreseeable future.

"In five or ten years it's really hard to say. I hope I'm still a professor here. We live in a very different era now where people move around so much because of their careers."

Branche, however, is quick to note Fullwiley's staying power. "She's very well versed in the material that she presents us, definitely always on top of her game and always challenging us and encouraging us to look at things from a different perspective and understand different views of a culture. I can definitely see her being tenured in the not too distant future."

Another one of her students, Chemistry concentrator Xun Zhou '10, who decided to take the junior tutorial in African and African American Studies after being inspired by Fullwiley's hands on teaching tactics, echoes Branche's sentiments. "She's incredibly intelligent and a wonderful mentor. She's also been very helpful with the fieldwork, and I couldn't help but coming back to do 91r with her. She definitely perfectly embodies the ideal of what an up and coming professor should be."

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