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## 2010-03-30: New link in “Chain of Change”

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## New link in "Chain of Change"



Joan Fitzgerald speaks as part of a panel discussion during a recent conference at the John D. O'Bryant African-American Institute. Photo by Lauren McFalls.

**March 30, 2010**

Northeastern University scholars, visiting professors, and community leaders convened on Friday to examine the challenges facing urban communities, identify innovative solutions, and shed light on the role that government agencies and universities can play.

The conference, "Twenty-First Century Chain of Change," was co-sponsored by the **John D. O'Bryant African-American Institute** and the **Humanities Center**, as part of Northeastern's ongoing mission to transform the ways that universities and communities collaborate to solve problems and develop opportunities. The event was in the spirit of Northeastern's **Stony Brook Initiative**, which facilitates community partnerships in Boston.

The title "Chain of Change" references a book written by Mel King — a former state representative and longtime community activist — that chronicles the development of Boston's African-American community from the 1950s through the 1970s.

Richard O'Bryant, director of the institute and a political science professor at Northeastern, said the conference helped identify how academics and community members view these issues, and the goal is now to find the best way to link them together.

"We really need to work at coming closer together on these solutions, and the dialogue we had today was very rich and very interesting," O'Bryant said. The next step, he added, is to compile a list of the key issues highlighted at the meeting, to be the focus of potential follow-up sessions.

Panelists discussed a wide range of topics including job and housing availability, empowering neighborhoods, and the effects of health disparities in urban neighborhoods. During more than five hours of discussion, they offered a variety of solutions, including heightened support for cultural centers, small businesses and nonprofits, and an increased community voice in neighborhood development. Ronald Marlow, assistant secretary for access and opportunity under Gov. Deval Patrick, challenged people to identify a role they can each play in those solutions.

Professor Joan Fitzgerald, director of the Law, Policy & Society program at Northeastern, highlighted her new book, "Emerald Cities: Urban Sustainability and Economic Development." The book identifies cities' efforts to promote sustainability and create linkages to economic development and social and environmental justice.

The conference also examined urban engagement on a national level and the prospects for change under President Barack Obama. Thomas Vicino, an assistant political science professor at Northeastern, suggested the White House hasn't had a strong urban policy in three decades. But he said there are indications one is forming under President Obama, noting that a director of urban affairs has been named and the U.S. Census currently underway could help in determining areas of urban investment.

"There is a window of opportunity here, and there might be a window for change, and I think it's going to be very difficult to do but it's an important step for the future in terms of trying to move forward," Vicino said.

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Michael Lake, executive director of the World Class Cities Partnership at Northeastern's School of Public Policy and Urban Affairs, said universities such as Northeastern should be a "strong anchor" in their communities.

"As we see businesses and people going more and more mobile," Lake said, "universities are a stable asset for the community."

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