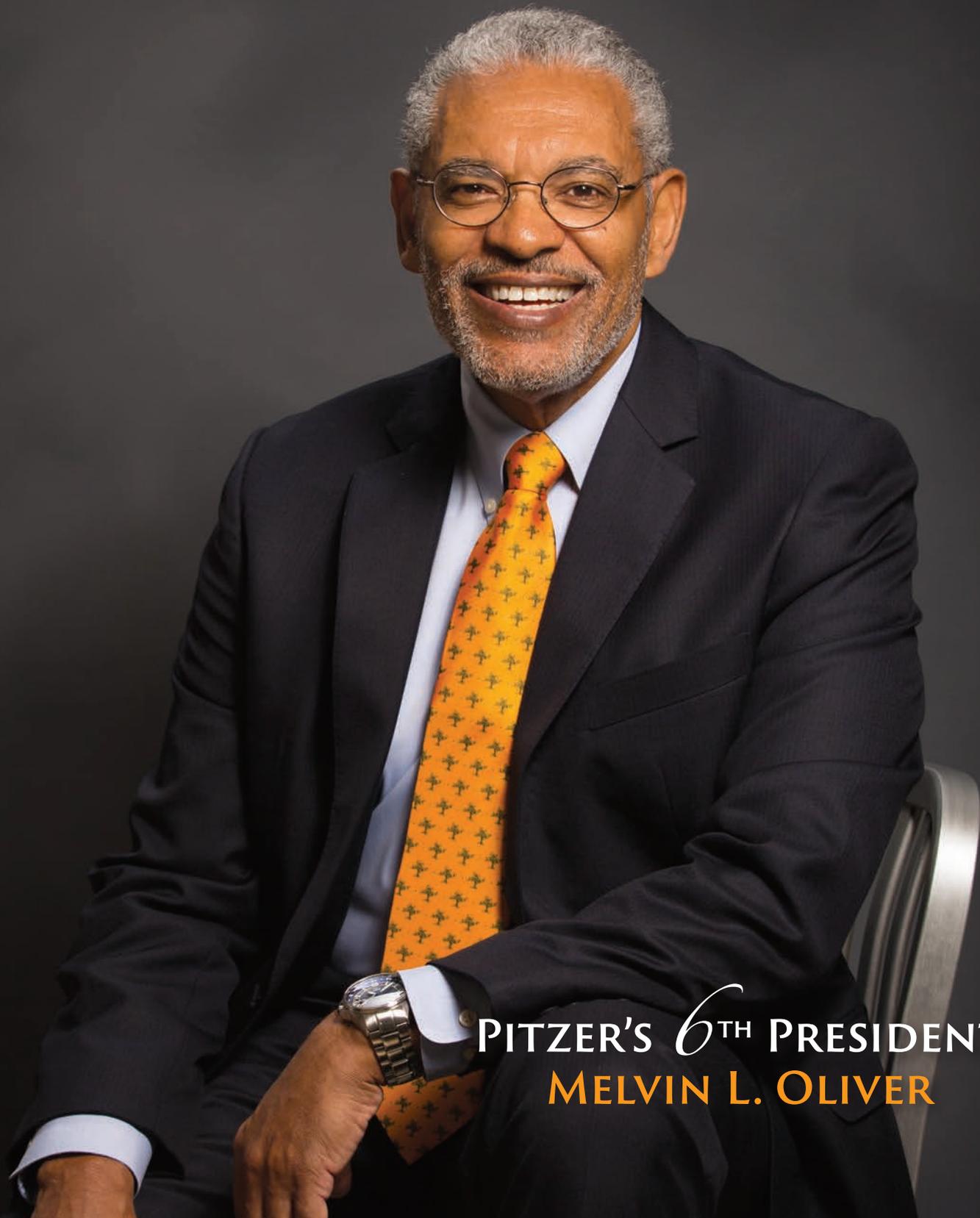


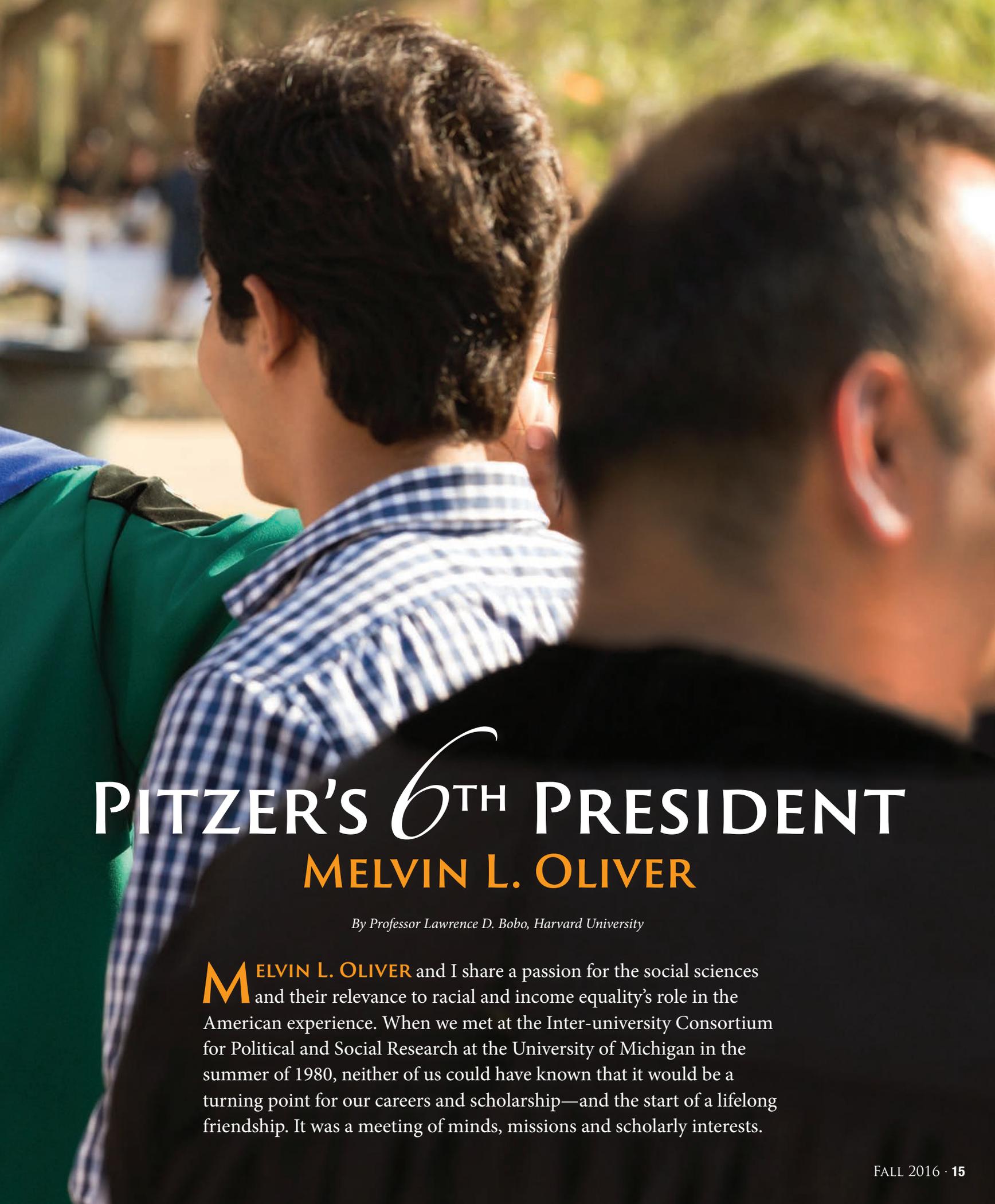
PITZER COLLEGE  
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PITZER'S 6<sup>TH</sup> PRESIDENT  
**MELVIN L. OLIVER**



# PITZER'S 6<sup>TH</sup> PRESIDENT

## MELVIN L. OLIVER

*By Professor Lawrence D. Bobo, Harvard University*

**M**ELVIN L. OLIVER and I share a passion for the social sciences and their relevance to racial and income equality's role in the American experience. When we met at the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research at the University of Michigan in the summer of 1980, neither of us could have known that it would be a turning point for our careers and scholarship—and the start of a lifelong friendship. It was a meeting of minds, missions and scholarly interests.



Higher education is challenged as never before. We have dislocations attendant to rapid technological change and computerization. We have the most globally, densely interdependent economy humans have ever known. Human action and now inaction threatens upheavals attendant to climate change. Inequality between rich and poor in the US and many other nations exceeds even that experienced before the Great Depression. The movement of people around the globe due to both voluntary and involuntary immigration is creating situations of great humanitarian need and political turmoil.

In this context, the world yearns for practical advice, for cogently articulated perspectives on our times and for thoughtful leadership. Colleges and universities, perhaps especially our liberal arts colleges, are increasingly pressed to establish their relevance to these challenges. The dilemmas of citizenship, of human meaning, and of how to cultivate self-reflective engagement in the world around us—the stuff of general liberal education from its earliest days—endure into the present. It is in times such as these that the academy needs leaders of special accomplishment and capacity; individuals who both know how to speak to the practical needs of the world around them and how to draw sustenance and inspiration from the great ideals of the liberal arts education tradition. In selecting Melvin L. Oliver as its sixth president, Pitzer College—one of the prestigious Claremont Colleges—has found just such a practical idealist, communicator and institution builder.

### TRIPLE THREAT: TEACHER, SCHOLAR, LEADER

In the most robust sense of the term, Melvin Oliver is a triple threat. He is, first of all, an outstanding, award-winning teacher. He is a communicator of surpassing skill and achievement. Great teachers exude several qualities—an immense capacity to connect with students, communicating instantly an interest in them as individuals as well as faith in their capacity to grasp and make use of the subject matter at hand. Add to this a flair for sparking the curiosity and engagement of others and a deep, passionate subject-matter expertise, and you have the powerful mix of qualities of great teaching one finds in Oliver. Thus, he became the first University of California professor to receive the California Professor of the Year Award from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and was





## IN SELECTING MELVIN L. OLIVER AS ITS SIXTH PRESIDENT, PITZER COLLEGE HAS FOUND A PRACTICAL IDEALIST, COMMUNICATOR, AND INSTITUTION BUILDER.

honored with the University of California, Los Angeles' Harriet and Charles Luckman Distinguished Teaching Award.

Melvin Oliver is, secondly, a scholar of rare distinction and accomplishment. He has long been recognized as one of the nation's leading students of race and ethnic relations and matters of socioeconomic inequality. He's done important research on the organization and dynamics of interpersonal networks among African Americans. He has done significant work illuminating the face of poverty in Southern California. In particular, his work shone a bright light on how job loss and related economic dislocations paved the way for tensions among African American and Latino communities that became an explosive precondition of the 1992 LA uprisings.

### WEALTH DISPARITY AND INEQUALITY

Melvin Oliver's signal contribution comes in his book *Black Wealth/White Wealth: A New Perspective on Racial Inequality* (1995, with Thomas Shapiro). It is a groundbreaking work and will easily go down as one of the top books in sociology produced during the 1990s and among the top two or three in the subfield of race and ethnic relations.

Why is the book so important? It immediately challenged scholars working on racial inequality in a strong and lasting fashion. That is, research on social stratification is arguably the core of sociological research. What *Black Wealth/White Wealth* did was to show how fundamentally important to overall life chances and circumstances accumulated assets—not just individual human capital (i.e., education and training), job titles and workplace attributes—were to long-term material well-being. Of course, researchers “knew” that wealth mattered. But it is entirely fair to say that before *Black Wealth/White*



*Wealth*, the subject was rarely the focus of research. That is no longer the case. This book changed how core stratification researchers must conceive and execute their work.

The book has several qualities that mark it as paradigm establishing. It is a model of clear conceptualization. The case made for looking at assets, its distinction of different types of assets (gross versus net) for example, is very convincing. It tackles a number of important questions concerning the black-white wealth gap, such as the role of family structure, of education and of type of work. Furthermore, the book has strong public policy relevance. This is established, in part, by the careful way in which it develops the historical case and, critically, via the analytical framework—racialization of the state (e.g., bias in home mortgage lending policies), the great economic detour (e.g., the sometimes violently destructive response to successful black entrepreneurship at key stages in the American past), and the sedimentation of inequality (i.e., the role of inheritance and the cumulative nature of inequality).

Melvin Oliver has received a number of highly competitive and extremely prestigious awards. For *Black Wealth/White Wealth*, he received the Distinguished Scholarly Publication Award from the American Sociological Association, the highest honor the association confers. He also received the coveted C. Wright Mills Award from the Society for the Study of Social Problems and the Outstanding Book Award from the Gustavus Myers Center for the Study of Human Rights.





## TO MEET MELVIN OLIVER IS TO AT ONCE BE STRUCK BY HIS STEADINESS, INTELLIGENCE AND THE GENUINE WARMTH OF HIS SMILE.

### A VISIONARY

In having selected Melvin Oliver, Pitzer College is not just bringing on board a talented teacher and paradigm-changing scholar, Pitzer is also entrusting its future to a visionary institution builder. Oliver is an experienced and innovative administrator. He was a founding co-director of the Center for the Study of Urban Poverty at UCLA. Under his leadership, the center helped train a generation of young scholars who are changing and diversifying the academy and its approach to issues of inequality.

In 1996, the Ford Foundation tapped Oliver to become its vice president for Asset Building and Community Development Program, a position he held until 2004. He restructured and directed the activity of a large international staff with a diverse portfolio of projects and initiatives, and an annual budget in the \$150 to \$250 million range. He restructured a major branch of the foundation, and he made the single largest award, of over \$50 million, ever given by the Ford Foundation. In the light of his many scholarly contributions and his continued presence as a thought

leader on issues of wealth and inequality, he received the 2016 ASSET Builder Champion Award from the Center for Global Policy Solutions.

He returned to the academy in 2004 to become dean of the social sciences and professor of sociology at the University of California, Santa Barbara, where he later became executive dean of the college. He was instrumental in fundraising, restoring faculty morale and enhancing the academic prominence of the division, and his tenure is widely regarded as an enormous success. From

deftly handling internal departmental conflicts to recruiting and retaining top-notch faculty, through sustaining an environment of intellectual challenge, learning and the highest academic standards, Dr. Melvin Oliver led with distinction.

For all his skills in the classroom, achievements as a scholar and effectiveness as an administrator, Oliver is also marvelously human and remarkably personable. To meet Melvin Oliver is to at once be struck by his steadiness, intelligence and the genuine warmth of

his smile. He is neither haughty nor bookish nor in any measure the aloof academic. Those of us lucky enough to fall into his orbit of friendship relish his wisdom, company and companionship. He has taught and inspired countless students. His work has altered how the discipline of sociology thinks about basic questions and processes of social inequality. He has a proven track record as an administrator and builder of rare breadth of experience and success. He is the practical idealist, the skilled communicator and the steady institution builder that higher education needs as we move to address the challenges of the new millennium.

Recently, when I called to congratulate Dr. Oliver on his appointment to the Pitzer presidency, he picked up on the first ring and, after some catching up, said, "There is something that some of our students are wrestling with that I'd like to get your thoughts on..." Decades of personal and professional history evaporated, and our more than 30-year conversation picked up again. Two tenacious intellects striving for insight and understanding for the benefit of our students.

Successful fulfillment of this mission requires the selection of leaders able to apply those qualities of pragmatic idealism, of effective communication and institution building. Pitzer College has risen to this challenge in the appointment of Dr. Melvin L. Oliver as its sixth president.

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**Lawrence D. Bobo** is the W. E. B. Du Bois Professor of the Social Sciences at Harvard University. Founding editor of the *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race*, Bobo is also co-author of the award-winning book *Racial Attitudes in America: Trends and Interpretations*.

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