Education, Social Reform Leader James Comer Named Visiting Professor at UMaine

Kay Hyatt
College of Education, University of Maine

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/univ_publications

Part of the Higher Education Commons, and the History Commons

Repository Citation
General University of Maine Publications. 1808.
https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/univ_publications/1808

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UMaine. It has been accepted for inclusion in General University of Maine Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UMaine. For more information, please contact um.library.technical.services@maine.edu.
Education, Social Reform Leader James Comer Named Visiting Professor at UMaine

ORONO, Maine -- The creator of the innovative program that is leveling the playing field for poor minority children in inner-city schools will bring his experience and expertise to the University of Maine. Noted educational reformer and child psychiatrist James P. Comer will work with students, faculty, and educators and policymakers statewide over the next 18 months following his appointment as Shibles Distinguished Visiting Professor in the College of Education and Human Development.

As designer and director of the School Development Program, which strives to change the "winner-loser" mentality he sees as pervading American culture, Comer has been instrumental in shaping how educators, administrators and parents view their respective roles in improving the quality of the nation's schools. His appointment was approved by the University of Maine System Board of Trustees at its Jan. 26 meeting.

Comer, Maurice Falk Professor of Child Psychiatry at the Yale University Child Study Center and an associate dean at the Yale Medical School, is best known for his educational reform program designed to improve life and learning for poor children in the nation's inner-city schools. The developmental and behavioral needs of students are at the center of the Comer Model, which seeks to improve a school's climate for learning by creating an atmosphere of cooperation and mutual trust. It targets the entire school for change and involves parents, teachers, administrators and support staff working as a team in planning and managing school activities.

A pioneer in the promotion and establishment of service integration, or what today is referred to as "full service" schools, Comer contends that providing a caring environment and providing basic needs are essential to learning. It is the erosion of society as a social, political and economic process, not individuals or the schools that have led to the deterioration of urban communities and ties between families and schools, according to Comer. Success, particularly academic success, is a remote and elusive concept when life's circumstances drive the human focus toward survival only, he explains.

Clearly, the core problem today has less to do with race than with failure to prepare young people for the economy of today and tomorrow, according to Comer. There must be more job opportunities with more upwardly mobile potential than dead-end jobs. Programs to develop communities, families and schools to bridge the gap are working; they simply need to be embraced on a nationwide scale, he says.

Attention to the needs of youth is growing in every state, but generally it is the states with smaller minority populations or unusual leadership that have moved to establish community and family-enabling programs, Comer points out. While rural states with racial homogeneity might escape the social turmoil of the cities, they still must struggle...
with the problems and needs wrought by economic chance and issues of inequity, he says.

In his latest book, "Waiting for a Miracle: Why Schools Can't Solve Our Problems -- And How We Can," Comer issues a citizens' call for a concerted commitment and effort to improve schools. He also calls for a new cultural mind-set -- that all children can learn and succeed. He notes that the traditional cultural view that anyone with good intelligence can learn, and teach, if only they make the effort has contributed to the nation's under-investment in the preparation and support of educators, and to an educational approach that does not adequately prepare most students for life, particularly the most vulnerable.

During his visits to UMaine, Comer will be highly influential as he works with faculty, students, educators and policymakers, according to Robert A. Cobb, dean of the College of Education and Human Development. "Here is a person who just doesn't make observations about education, but who has involved himself in the work of schools and their connections to their communities over his entire career," he says.

Comer can offer invaluable guidance for building community support for the expanding role of schools, for the myriad of personal, community and leadership challenges involved in school reform, and for the College as it continues to develop partnerships with area schools for collaborative teacher preparation programs, according to Cobb. "Dr. Comer is an outstanding example of citizenship and acknowledgment that education is everyone's concern," says Cobb. He notes that UMaine students and the entire community will have the opportunity to meet with and hear Comer in informal settings, as well as at lectures on and off campus.

Comer says he is looking forward to participating in a broad range of University and statewide initiatives addressing educational and societal needs and reform. "I am delighted by this opportunity to work with the University of Maine," he says.

Raised in a working class family in East Chicago, Ind., Comer credits his parents with leaving no doubt as to the importance of education. He attended Howard University Medical Schools and decided on psychiatry as his specialty following military service. He did his psychiatric training at the Yale School of Medicine. Early on, he began to envision ways to create a family-like atmosphere in schools in order to motivate learning. The Comer Model was established in 1968 in two elementary schools as a collaborative effort between the Yale Child Study Center and the New Haven public schools.

Change is neither easy nor quick, Comer cautions. It took three years for his team to develop a good school climate at his original two school reform sites and seven years for significant academic improvement. The students, 99 percent of whom were African-American and more than 70 percent on welfare, had been the lowest-achieving groups in the city's 33 schools, and by fourth grade were 18 and 19 months behind in mathematics and language arts respectively. By 1984, they were tied for the third and fourth highest levels of achievement on nationally standardized tests, had the best attendance in the city, and serious behavior problems had been eliminated. Today, the Comer Model has been adopted by more than 650 schools in 28 states.

In receiving the 1996 Heinz Award in the Human Condition for his profound influence on the lives of thousands of disadvantaged children through his visionary approach to public education, Comer was described as "an ideal advocate for children who brings an extraordinary mix of passion and patience to his work."
Comer will visit and work at UMaine for three-day intervals during his appointment. The Shibles Distinguished Visiting Professorship is named for Mark R. Shibles who served as dean of the College of Education from 1947-71. Shibles professors -- all renown for their scholarship and research -- bring intellectual and professional stimulation to students and faculty, and national perspective and experience to the college's professional programs, as well as to its response to state educational issues and needs.

Released: January 26, 1998
Contact: Kay Hyatt, (207) 581-2761

Back to the College of Education Home Page
Back to Recent Press Releases

This is an official publication of the University of Maine. If you have questions or comments, please contact the Web Master.