A History of the Department of Biology

It is worthwhile to start the history of the Department of Biology at North Carolina Central University (NCCU) by presenting the photograph above, which was taken during the academic year 1977-1978 at the unveiling ceremony of the commemorative painting of the late Dr. James S. Lee. Dr. Lee, for whom the main biology building was later named, served as chairman of the Department of Biology at North Carolina College at Durham, later to be known as NCCU (in 1969) and to become a constituent institution of the University of North Carolina (in 1972).

The biology faculty and graduate students standing around the painting of Dr. Lee are (from L to R): Dr. George Williams, Dr. Vernon Clark, Dr. Perry Mack, two of Dr. Lee’s graduate students (unnamed), Dr. Mary M. Townes (chair of the Department of Biology at that time), and Dr. Joseph Parker.

When Dr. Vernon Clark joined North Carolina College at Durham in 1959, Dr. James Lee was chair of the Department of Biology that was still housed with the other science departments in the Robinson Science Building. Dr. Lee was succeeded by the following chairpersons:

Dr. Walter H. Pattillo Jr. (later served as associate dean of the Undergraduate School and later became dean of the Undergraduate School)
Dr. Mary M. Townes (later served as dean of the College of Arts and Sciences)
Dr. John Ruffin (later served as dean of the College of Arts and Sciences)
Dr. Walter H. Pattillo Jr. (served again until retirement in 1993)
Dr. Charles George (interim 1993-1996)
Dr. John Mayfield (interim 1996-1998)
Dr. Sandra White (1998-2003)
Dr. Amal Abu-Shakra (interim 2003-2004)
Dr. Veronica Nwosu (interim 2004-2005)
Dr. Amal Abu-Shakra (2005-present)

In 1956, the department moved from Robinson Science Building to a new biology building under the leadership of Dr. James S. Lee. At that time the department had offered undergraduate and graduate programs for many years. Among the numerous distinguished NCCU alumni who graduated from the biology undergraduate program are the following:

Thomas E. Malone, Ph. D., who in 1962 was named the sixth deputy director of NIH. He earned his B.S. and M.S. degrees from NCCU in 1948 and 1949, respectively, and his Ph.D. from Harvard University in 1952. Dr. Malone was professor of zoology at NCCU during 1952-1958 and was noted for genetics. He served as a member of the U.S. Delegation to the 31st through 35th World Health assemblies and participated in numerous other international health activities.
Dr. James Graham, MD, who graduated with a BS from the undergraduate program in 1968. He later graduated with an MD from the medical school at the University of North Carolina (UNC) at Chapel Hill. He completed his specialization at Duke University School of Medicine, moved to Michigan to practice, and joined the medical faculty at Michigan State University. He retired in 2007 from his prestigious practice of GYN oncology in Flint, Michigan.

Dr. Gwendolyn Todd, MD, who graduated with a BS from the undergraduate program in 1973. She later graduated with an MD from the medical school at UNC Chapel Hill. She joined the medical hospital staff in Charleston, South Carolina, and now runs a multi-practice clinic in pediatrics there.

Dr. Linda Faison, Ph.D., who graduated with a BS from the undergraduate program in 1970. She later graduated with a Ph.D. in biochemistry from Johns Hopkins University and became a researcher at the (then called) Burroughs Wellcome Laboratories.

Dr. Leon King, Ph.D., who graduated with a BS (1964) and MS (1976) from NCCU. He later graduated with a Ph.D. in toxicology from North Carolina State University in 1991. He has been active for several years as a prominent scientist at the US Environmental Protection Agency in Research Triangle Park, NC.

Drs. Sampson Harrell and Russell Harrell are brothers and MDs who graduated with BS degrees in biology. They later graduated with MDs from UNC Chapel Hill. Their sister Dr. Cynthia Harrell attended NCCU for two years before graduating from Wellesley College. She also completed her medical studies at UNC Chapel Hill.

The Department of Biology at NCCU will continue to provide a premier academic program to its undergraduate and master’s level students in the biological, biomedical, and natural sciences. Through excellent teaching, meaningful research experiences, and strong partnerships, the curriculum will foster student preparation for doctoral programs, medical schools, careers in the biotechnology industries, jobs in state and federal agencies, as well as teaching positions in secondary schools and colleges. As a participant in providing the best quality of instruction to all NCCU students though the Biology service courses within the general education curriculum, the department will foster student success across the colleges. The department’s strengths in faculty expertise, modern facilities, and strong links with research institutes on campus will continue to provide outstanding opportunities to the students, the community, and the nation at large.

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The James S. Lee Biology Building