

# PR 5

Office of the President  
February 21, 2020

Members, Board of Trustees:

## HONORARY DEGREE RECIPIENTS

Recommendation: that the Board of Trustees approve awarding an Honorary Doctor of Humane Letters to William Harry Clarke and an Honorary Doctor of Humanities to Nikky Finney, as approved and recommended by the University Faculty.

Background: Pursuant to the Conditions of Merit for Honorary Degrees, the University Joint Committee on Honorary Degrees recommended to the elected Faculty Senators that the specified honorary degrees be awarded to William Harry Clarke and Nikky Finney. The elected Faculty Senators have approved the recommendation.

Biographical sketches of the recipients are attached.

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Action taken:  Approved     Disapproved     Other \_\_\_\_\_

**William Harry Clarke**  
***Honorary Doctor of Humane Letters***

Professor Emeritus William Harry Clarke exemplifies the ideal community member—he has spent the entirety of his life engaging earnestly with the people that surround him, improving their experience of life in countless ways. His passion and expertise in music and his devotion to multiple community organizations have played an important role in making Lexington a dynamic and welcoming home.

Clarke earned his B.A. in Music Education at Delta State University in 1959, then his Master of Arts in Music Education at the Vanderbilt University George Peabody College for Teachers in 1963. Already eager to share his love of music in the form of teaching, he served as Assistant Director of Bands for Vanderbilt University during his education, and Band Director for several high schools in Mississippi, Tennessee, and Kentucky thereafter.

In 1965, Clarke joined the UK community as the first Teaching Assistant for the UK Marching Band while he worked on his PhD in Music Education. His involvement at UK quickly grew as he took up the role of the Director of Bands at UK in 1968, serving for 21 years. During this time, he grew the Wildcat Marching Band from 30 members to 300, transitioned the band to include women, and established the Band's reputation as one of the best in the country. Clarke later served as the Director of the School of Music and transformed the Music Education curriculum at UK. He taught students of every interest and career goal. His impact on them has shaped the paths of their lives.

After 43 years at UK, Clarke retired from teaching music. However, his involvement in the Lexington community has only grown: he has served as an elected Council member in the Lexington-Fayette Urban County Government (LFUCG), as a Board member for Planning and Public Works, Public Safety, Friends of the Arboretum, and America in Bloom. Clarke has also served on the General Government Committee, the Picnic with the Pops Commission, the Tree Board, and countless others. His devotion to promoting the Arts is evident in his positions as the Vice President of OperaLex and the MoonDance Association.

Musician, educator, Little League Baseball Coach, Councilmember, Kentucky Music Education Distinguished Service Award recipient, and more—Clarke has spent his life sharing his passion for the Arts and helping others develop skills that enhance their experience of joy in this world. With every life he has touched, William Harry Clarke reminds us all of the importance of being deliberately present in one's own community.

William Harry Clarke is recommended for an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters from the University of Kentucky.

**Nikky Finney**  
***Honorary Doctor of Humanities***

Renowned poet and professor Nikky Finney has spent her career illuminating the Southern cultural and political heritage of African-Americans in ways that resonate throughout the country and the world. Her legacy of poignant expression, indomitable truth, and devotion to social justice has enriched both the state of Kentucky and UK.

Finney's love of writing and poetry began in childhood, and she heeded this calling by earning her bachelor's degree in English Literature at Talladega College in 1979. The influence of the Civil Rights Movement and her parents' activism in the South led her to pursue additional education in African-American Studies at Atlanta University. In her career of more than 30 years, Finney has written six books and dozens of poems and essays that explore and confront the experiences that have shaped life in the South for herself and countless other African-Americans.

Finney's work has attracted multiple awards from organizations across the country, including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Image Award for photography in 2012; several awards from the Kentucky Arts Council and Kentucky Foundation for Women in 1994, 1995, and 1999; the Golden Crown Literary Society Award in 2012; and most famously, the National Book Award for Poetry for her 2011 book *Head Off & Split*.

The University has been influenced by Finney since 1989, when she first came as a Visiting Writer. She proceeded to guide and inspire writers as a professor for more than 20 years. During her time at UK, she left a legacy of excellence in the departments of English, Creative Writing, and African-American Studies, as well as in the hearts and minds of students. She has gone on to serve as a professor at Berea College, Smith College, and the University of South Carolina, where she currently holds the title of John H. Bennet, Jr. Chair in Creative Writing and Southern Letters.

It was at the University of Kentucky's Martin Luther King Jr. Cultural Center that Finney co-founded the Affrilachian Poets in 1991, to elevate voices and faces of the Appalachian region that had previously gone unrecognized by the world at large. She has further empowered African-American writers and poets by serving as faculty on the Cave Canem Writing Retreat. This commitment to fostering talent and skill in young and developing writers is yet another brick in the tower of exceptionalism Finney has built.

Nikky Finney is recommended for an honorary Doctor of Humanities from the University of Kentucky.