

# SOONER SPOTLIGHT ● WANDA WARD

"A crisis exists in higher education. That crisis is a marked underrepresentation of ethnic and racial minority groups, despite the fact there is an increase in the number of minority high school graduates.

"Some reports estimate that by 2050 ethnic and minority citizens are going to comprise 45 percent of the U.S. population.

"As these population shifts continue, the clear importance and relevance of addressing this crisis stares one in the face."

Wanda Ward speaks these words in relaxed, carefully crafted sentences. Yet while her manner of speech is calm and moderate, her message is urgent and her lifestyle anything but low-key. She speaks softly and shoulders a huge workload — as founder and director of OU's Center for Research on Minority Education (CRME).

Ward, an associate professor of psychology, founded the center in 1986 after spending a one-year consultancy with the Educational Testing Service in Princeton, New Jersey. While working on a project concerned with minority graduate education, she concluded that problems facing minorities in higher education "weren't isolated issues you could work on for a year or two and the problem would be solved." She felt efforts to improve minority education opportunities urgently required the interdisciplinary, long-term approach a center could provide.

Conventional wisdom holds that approximately five years are required to bring a new center into full bloom. Perhaps due in part to Ward's admitted impatience, the CRME has attained a high degree of viability in its third year of operation. An external advisory council peopled by scholars from Illinois, Michigan, Washington, D.C., and New York — and including Oklahoma Secretary of State Hannah Atkins — gives the center important contacts at the national level. A six-member internal advisory committee made up of OU faculty, students and administrators provides an important avenue of ongoing local support.

A CRME-sponsored conference held in 1988 has produced a book, *Key Issues in Minority Education: Research Directions and Practical Implications*, offering scholarly perspectives on a



*Psychologist Wanda Ward*

wide range of minority education issues. Ward also cites two major CRME efforts which were launched last year, one with federal funding, the other with state support.

The Behavioral Science Methodology and Research Development Program used a \$49,500 grant from the U.S. Department of Education to bring seven students from Atlanta's historically black Spelman College to OU last summer for eight weeks of intensive science training. The students presented the results of their work at a follow-up conference held at Spelman in April. Meanwhile, the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education provided \$85,512—the largest Quality Initiative Grant award last year—for the CRME to sponsor an upcoming seminar and a forum on how to promote both integration and ethnic-identity preservation in Oklahoma's communities.

Ward uses words like "intense" and "unending" to describe the work involved in organizing and coordinating CRME-sponsored activities. However, she plainly enjoys the sense of adventure in the job. "You don't *think* of not rising to the occasion!" she notes with a chuckle. "You either learn how to manage or you are managed. So, there's a constant demand for growth and an opportunity to learn."

Ward studied psychology at Prince-

ton, earning a B.A. in 1976. She received her Ph.D. from Stanford in 1981. A product of Atlanta, she speaks with an affection approaching reverence of that city, her "family home base." She adds, "One of the beneficial things about being raised in Atlanta is the city has always fostered a high appreciation for education. Whether its citizens actually go to school there or not, the presence of its educational institutions — such as Emory, Georgia State, the University of Georgia, Spelman — are important symbols of the necessity for one to use knowledge to do productive things."

Ward credits her mother with being "a strongly supportive and motivational force" and her family in general for instilling a credo of service which has steeled her to a regimen of hard work: "Learn as much as you can wherever you are — so that you can become better equipped to contribute in whatever capacity you're called to serve." That philosophy leaves little room for recreational pursuits, save for events such as Scrabble games and picnics during rare parcels of quality time spent with loved ones. She also describes herself as a lapsed fitness enthusiast.

So, while the spirit might want to go jogging, the flesh is usually occupied elsewhere. Ward is co-authoring, with W. C. Banks, a textbook titled *Psychological Implications for the Education of American Blacks*. She also served on the most recent OU presidential search committee. Officially half time as CRME director, her teaching specialty is social psychology. She lists her goals in the classroom as confronting students with a marketplace of ideas on controversial social issues, leading to "a better reasoned and more sensitive perspective to issues and peoples different from oneself."

Beyond her inherent commitment to CRME's causes, Ward speaks of its future in the manner of a parent anxious for the success of a beloved offspring. "I look forward to a time," she says with hope, "when I could look at the center — whether I'm still affiliated with it or not — and say 'I never dreamed the place would come this far. But boy, it made it!' That would be a very nice feeling."

—MICHAEL WATERS