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Executive Director

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Breaking News: Chicago Debates' Executive Director Named Crain's Notable Black Leader & Executive



The first Black Executive Director in the 24-year history of Chicago Debates was recently named one of [Crain's Business Chicago's 2021 Notable Black Leaders and Executives](#).

“At a very young age, I felt compelled to help and to make a difference. The unfair realities of the world and my desire to help pushed me to pursue an education and career that focused on service and community impact. As I overcame the stereotypical first-generation college student challenges I faced in college, many of which followed me into jobs as a first-generation career professional, I found nonprofit work and loved it. At 27 years old, I was promoted to my first Executive Director position. I wasn't found by a search firm and I didn't have the most experience. In fact, I most likely would have never gotten that opportunity under today's standards, but someone gave me the opportunity because they believed that with support, I could lead and do the job well.

Today, I pay that forward by serving as Executive Director of Chicago Debates, where I am helping to bridge the access and educational opportunity gaps for Chicago Public School students. At every turn, I continue to be compelled to do more, help the most, and have a larger reach with the deepest impact. We are working to do just that at Chicago Debates! I am honored to lead this charge with the partnership of an amazing team. I am also thankful and humbled to be named a notable Black leader amongst so many amazing leaders and game changers

here in the city. The collective impact of this group's work is inspiring and undoubtedly making a difference in the Black community. It takes a village and I am proud to be a part of this community."

Dr. Toinette Gunn joined Chicago Debates in 2018. As the Executive Director, she is responsible for the strategic direction, overall management and all aspects of the organization's operations. She has 25 years of experience in the nonprofit sector working to provide at risk youth with quality education programs. However, it was her leadership roles focused on supporting Black youth in Chicago the last 13 years that garnered her this recognition. Previously, she served as the Vice President of Programs for Chicago Scholars, where she led vision, research, and strategy for all programming for nearly 3000 students annually. Prior to her position there, Dr. Gunn worked in leadership roles for international organizations such as Boys Hope Girls Hope of Illinois (BHGH) and Habitat for Humanity. Prior to BHGH, Dr. Gunn served as Executive Director for Chicago's Partnership to Educate and Advance Kids (PEAK) and Detroit's Student Mentor Partners, in providing at-risk youth with scholarships to afford them a quality private high school education, access to college, and one-on-one mentoring support.

At Chicago Debates, Dr. Gunn is helping CPS students to build critical academic, social-emotional, career, and life skills that will ultimately strengthen their future economic stability, break cycles of poverty, and promote civic engagement. About 30% of Chicago Debates' students identify as Black with a goal to support more. Since debaters are three times less likely to drop out of high school and 80% more likely to graduate college, her work directly supports graduation, career preparedness, and leadership development efforts within the Black community.

In response to last year's heightened awareness around systemic racism and recently released CPS data, which found Black students, particularly Black males, performing at extremely lower rates than their counterparts, Dr. Gunn implemented concrete goals to address this inequity including doubling the number of Black male students as well as establishing debate programs at 10 new Title I schools (low income) on the south and west sides of Chicago. Additionally, Dr. Gunn tasked her team with piloting a new format of debate called Public which we anticipate will help to recruit more Black and LatinX students.

Additionally, Dr. Gunn has intentionally embedded racial equity, diversity, and inclusion across the organizational culture, specifically in diversifying the Board and establishing the first ever set of organizational values, which include a focus on Justice and Community. She is a confident leader who empowers her team to stretch and grow. She values them, their development, and believes in their abilities to lead. This is most evident through her coaching, mentoring and professional development investments, and employee satisfaction rating of 94%.

Dr. Gunn firmly believes in the power that education holds in breaking negative intergenerational cycles. Having been a Black low-income first-generation college student, she experienced firsthand how access to quality educational programs can bridge the opportunity gap and break the cycle of poverty. She has dedicated her life and career to providing Black youth with quality educational opportunities, access to college, supportive services to persist through college, leadership and career readiness skill development, and mentoring, including founding the [McClellan Family Foundation](#) to positively impact Chicago communities. Through her work, she has helped thousands of Black youth and families.

Dr. Toinette Gunn is a Limited Licensed Professional Counselor with a specialization in Mental Health. She is a Chicago Urban League & University of Chicago Booth Graduate School of Business IMPACT Fellow, a King Chavez Parks Future Faculty Fellow, the founder of the [McClellan Family Foundation](#), a Children's Institute Board member, and a member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.

Photo Credit: TripleZ Photography

About Crain's Business Chicago: Notable Black Leaders & Executives List

To qualify for the list, nominees demonstrated that they made a difference in contributing to the Black community in any number of ways.

This cohort of 71 Notable Black Leaders worked for decades to reach prominent places in law, banking, media, and nonprofits and lift their communities. Following the murder of George Floyd and reckoning over systemic racism, they found themselves in new positions.

For the first time, they say, they've had an opportunity to share their experiences with racism and how they overcame obstacles. They've been encouraged to share their views and open deeper conversations on race with colleagues. Many observe that their insights have a wider impact and are aiming to use that visibility to speak out on inequality in the workplace.

Many have taken on new roles leading new or expanded diversity initiatives as companies vow to improve their practices in recruiting, hiring and retaining talent from diverse backgrounds. And these leaders have redoubled efforts to boost the next generation through nonprofits that help young people succeed in school and prepare for a career. These leaders are seizing the moment.

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Chicago Debates is bridging the opportunity gap for Chicago Public School (CPS) students by providing them with an after-school program that supports their academic, career, and leadership success. Our mission is to advance the educational achievement, community contributions, and life success of Chicago's youth through the transformative power of academic debate. We envision a world in which Chicago youth are empowered to find their voice, succeed in college and career, and become leaders in their community. Debate may not fix all of the world's problems, but it can shape the next generation of leaders who will. We exist to ensure that includes some of Chicago's most marginalized youth.

Learn more at ChicagoDebates.org.