

Urging attention to profiling, prisons

Angela Davis lauds Northeastern research on race, justice in lecture at Blackman Auditorium

BY BRIAN LEE

Labeling racial profiling "affirmative action in reverse," social activist Angela Davis says she's nonetheless optimistic that the issues surrounding its practice can be resolved.

The former Black Panther and Communist Party affiliate said that law enforcement's tendency to eye African-Americans as potential criminals derives from the abolition of slavery.

But in opening her lecture "Radical Frameworks of Social Justice," Davis acknowledged that it was "not such a problem that nothing ever corrects it."

As keynote, Davis commended Northeastern's Institute on Race and Justice for its racial profiling projects during its conference "Confronting Racial Profiling in the 21st Century." She spoke before a capacity audience at Blackman Auditorium.

"It's absolutely crucial to conduct this kind of research and to make it acceptable to community workers and police departments, so that something can be done strategically toward the citation of racial profiling," said Davis of the institute's racial examination of traffic stops in Rhode Island and Massachusetts.

"I'm extremely impressed by the work of this institute, and specifically by its efforts to produce scholarship that will make a difference in the social world."



Angela Davis says race has always played a role in criminal justice.

A native of Alabama and graduate of Brandeis University, Davis cited her home state's torrid history of racism.

"The aftermath of slavery (in Alabama) is the direct result of the shift that was produced by the institution of the black folk" into society, when "the overwhelming majority of Alabama's convicts were black."

Among her suggestions for resolving racial profiling, Davis called for the citation of instances' rather than statistics, a change in individuals' attitudes, and improvements in urban schools.

"I'm often very wary of numbers," she said. "They don't tell us anything about who these people are. We tend to think about people in prison as this big glob."

She said that people are too quick to pass judgment on young African-American males. "I'm not talking about just white people," she said. "Black people react exactly the same way."

On schools: "We need to turn schools into something better than finishing schools for juvenile hall."

In a 2000 report by the Human Rights Watch, African-Americans represent 13 percent of the population, but 30 percent of people arrested, and 41 percent of people in jail. Of every 100,000 African-American men nationwide, more than 4,600 are in prison, according to the report.