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David Harold Blackwell: 1st African-American in the National Academy of Sciences

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David Harold Blackwell (born April 24, 1919) is Professor Emeritus of Statistics at the [University of California, Berkeley](#), and is a theoretical statistician noted for his teaching and work in game and probability theory. He is one of the eponyms of the Rao–Blackwell theorem. Blackwell's research in mathematics and statistics have found application in many fields including economics and accounting.

Blackwell was the [first African American inducted into the National Academy of Sciences](#) in 1965, and the **first black tenured faculty member at UC Berkeley**.

Early Life



Young Blackwell

Blackwell grew up in Centralia, Ill. His father worked for the Illinois Central Railroad and his mother stayed at home to take care of him and his three siblings. At school, he was intrigued by geometry and calculus, especially theorems and methods for solving equations. His high school math club advisor would challenge members with problems from *School Science and Mathematics* journal and submit their solutions. **Blackwell was identified three times in the magazine as having solved problems and one of his solutions was published.**

Education

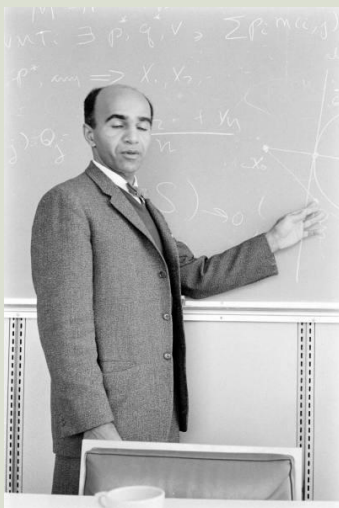
In 1935, aged 16, Blackwell entered the [University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign](#), where his interest in mathematics continued to grow. He supported himself in college by washing dishes, waiting tables and cleaning equipment in the entomology lab. After three years, he graduated and continued at the university to obtain his master's and doctorate degrees. At age 22 he earned his first Ph.D. in mathematics. Blackwell was also a member of [Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity Inc.](#), Tau Chapter at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

He wrote letters of application to 105 [Historically Black Colleges and Universities](#) to see if any post was available; he felt at the time that a black teacher would be limited to teaching only at black colleges.

Princeton's Protest (denied)

Blackwell was given a one-year appointment as a **Rosenwald Postdoctoral Fellow** at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton University in 1941. It was common for Institute members to be made visiting fellows of Princeton. This caused quite a stir because there were no black students enrolled at the university during that time. Princeton's president wrote a letter to the Institute protesting Blackwell's admission, but the Institute upheld the appointment.

Career



Blackwell Teaching

When his tenure at the Institute was drawing to a close, Blackwell applied for teaching positions at 105 black colleges. He didn't apply to white institutions because he assumed they would not accept him because of his race. His first teaching job was at [Southern University in Baton Rouge, La.](#) The following school year, Blackwell accepted a position at [Clark College in Atlanta](#) (now Clark Atlanta University). In

1944, he joined the mathematics department at [Howard University](#). He was promoted to **full professor in 1947** and served as the **head of the department until 1954**.

Blackwell's focus shifted to the field of statistics while attending an Abe Girshick lecture on sequential analysis. He contacted Girshick with a counterexample to his theorem and the two became collaborators and friends. They co-authored "*Theory of Games and Statistical Decisions*" in 1954 and later revised it in 1980.

Also in 1954, Blackwell accepted a professorship at the University of California at Berkeley. By 1956, he was appointed chairman of the statistics department. He continued teaching and publishing a substantial amount of research until his retirement as professor emeritus in 1989.

Awards

He is the recipient of numerous awards including the R.A. Fisher Award from the Committee of Presidents of Statistical Societies. He also holds honorary degrees from 12 universities, among them Carnegie-Mellon, Yale, Howard and Harvard.

Blackwell was also a pioneer in textbook writing. Blackwell wrote one of the first Bayesian textbooks, his 1969 *Basic Statistics*.