THE CITY COLLEGE OF NEW YORK
2015 HONORARY DEGREE NOMINEE FOR

Doctor of Humane Letters

URSULA BURNS
Chairwoman & CEO, Xerox Corporation

When Ursula Burns started as an intern at Xerox more than 30 years ago, she had no idea that she would someday end up running the company. Transcending her humble roots – she was raised by a single mother in the rough and tumble public housing projects on the Lower East Side of Manhattan—Ms. Burns ascended the corporate ladder at one of the world’s most venerable technology companies, despite the three obstacles many told her would hold her back: “I was black. I was a girl. And I was poor.”

Ms. Burns successfully parlayed a summer internship into a full-time job at Xerox shortly after completing her master’s degree in mechanical engineering at Columbia University. She earned her undergraduate degree in mechanical engineering from New York University Polytechnic School of Engineering in 1980. In 2009, Ursula Burns became the first African American female CEO of a Fortune 500 Company when Xerox appointed her to succeed Anne Mulcahy. She was also listed at Number 14 on the Forbes list of Power Women that year. In 2010 Ms. Burns became Chairwoman.

She is a Founding Board Director of Change the Equation, an organization focused on improving the U.S. education system in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM). Additionally, she is Director of the FIRST Foundation (For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology), striving to promote science, technology, and problem-solving to students of every age as a pathway to bright futures. Ms. Burns has been a longtime supporter and Director of the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, and a Director of the National Academy Foundation. She is a Trustee of the University of Rochester and MIT Corporation; a member of the Board of Directors of the U.S. Olympic Committee; a Member of the Executive Committee at The Business Roundtable. In 2010 she was appointed Vice Chair of President Obama’s Export Council.

In addition to her civic and philanthropic work, Ms. Burns is on the Board of Directors for the following corporations: Exxon Mobil Corporation, American Express Company, Hunt Corporation, Dames & Moore Group, the National Association of Manufacturers, and the Rochester Business Alliance.

Her commitment in the STEM fields, and specifically encouraging women and students from non-traditional socioeconomic backgrounds to pursue careers in the sciences, demonstrates leadership in harmony with the timeless values and current goals of City College. Her own narrative, though woven outside the arches of City College, embodies the mission and promise of our elite institution.
John Michael O’Keefe, a native New Yorker and 1963 CCNY alumnus, is a Professor at the Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience and the Department of Cell & Developmental Biology at University College London. After serving as the Interim Director for three years, in 2013 he was appointed as the Inaugural Director of the Sainsbury Wellcome Centre for Neural Circuits and Behavior, UCL. Professor O’Keefe is one of the most influential neuroscientists of our time. He has established a new field of research: The brain mechanisms underlying spatial navigation, and their possible link to memory. He has made two fundamental discoveries. First, using extracellular recording in behaving rats, Professor O’Keefe discovered in 1971 that hippocampal pyramidal cells respond selectively to an animal’s spatial location. The discovery of “place cells” suggested that this part of the brain might function as a cognitive map, a notion developed extensively by O’Keefe and Nadel in a book published in 1978, a ‘classic’ piece in the neuroscience literature. Second, he also found in 1993 that the hippocampal code for location was based on the timing, as well as the rate, of place cell spiking activity. This second discovery linked the mechanism of spatial navigation to the main physiological operation mode of the hippocampus and, at the same time, established the first clear experimental evidence for a temporal ‘code’ in the brain. The discovery of these now-famous “place-cells” led to a torrent of subsequent research, and a rethinking of how brain activity relates to cognition.

John O’Keefe is an exceptional scientist, having two critical discoveries. His research has opened a completely novel path of neuroscience research and has merged behavioral, cognitive and physiological mechanisms into a single theory. His works have been expanded by others into a unified theory about spatial and mental navigation, i.e., episodic memory.

It is not a surprise that his novel work with the brain makes him one of the most cited neuroscientists in the world. He has been acknowledged for his groundbreaking discoveries by multiple awards, including the Gruber Foundation Neuroscience Prize and the Kavli Foundation Neuroscience Prize. He has been named a Fellow of the Royal Society and of the U.K. Academy of Medical Sciences. And this past year, Professor O’Keefe was awarded the well-deserved Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine for his co-discovery of cells "that constitute a positioning system in the brain."
John Legend, a nine-time Grammy Award-winning soul artist; he was recently named one of Time Magazine’s 100 most influential people. His celebrated career as one of the most acclaimed singer-songwriters of this generation has led to numerous music industry awards and high profile performances, including at the White House.

In addition to his successful career, John Legend works tirelessly to improve education through his involvement with the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), the professions association for Student Affairs in Higher Education. He is passionate about providing equal educational opportunities for every child. At a recent conference where he served as Opening Keynote Speaker, his message to the 4,000 people in attendance was that higher education professionals can still do much to encourage the reform of the education available to the students who will serve in the future. He added that if students are not receiving adequate education and preparation for the rigors of college before they enter the halls of our universities, they cannot be expected to exercise their maximum potential (in and outside the classroom) or to grow into the leaders that they are capable of becoming.

Outside of music, John Legend is also involved in numerous social and charitable causes. He is a supporter of the Harlem Village Academies (HVA), a New York City organization that runs several charter schools. Mr. Legend serves as vice chairman on the HVA Board. He explained to Black Enterprise magazine why education is such an important issue to him. “I come from a city were 40% to 50% of our kids drop out of high school. I did well in high school and then went to an Ivy League school, but I was the exception. We need to do more to make sure every kid has a quality education. “

As a giant advocate for education, Legend also founded “The Show Me Campaign”, a nonprofit organization that fights poverty using proven solutions, with the hope that diminishing poverty will lead to improved high school graduation rates and college attendance for the next generation. Additionally Mr. Legend launched the Show Me Campaign Fellowship, which awards several $3000 stipends annually to college students with unpaid internships. Continuing with his commitment to education reform, Mr. Legend also lent his song “Shrine” to the 2010 documentary Waiting for Superman. The film takes a critical look at the nation’s public school system.
In light of the above, John Legend has made extraordinary contributions to the arts and higher education. The distinction of being awarded an honorary degree from The City College of New York would be well-deserved.