New Directions

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Race Poverty and the College

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Race, Poverty And the Colleges

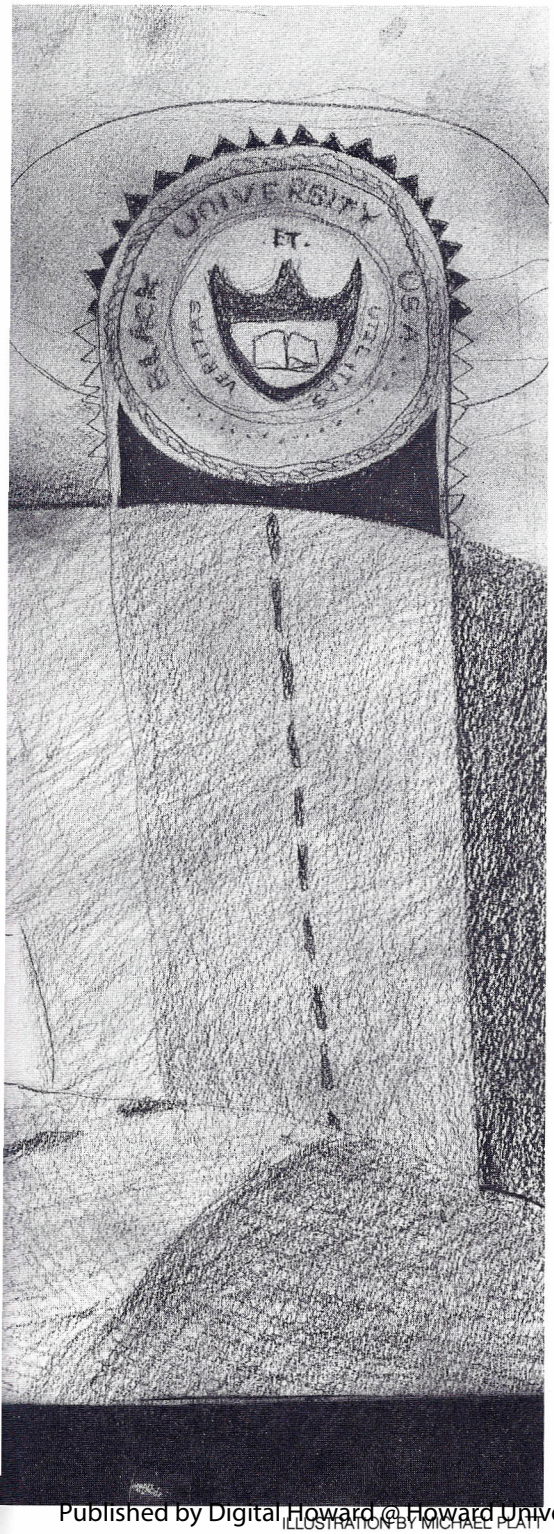

ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL PLATT

By Lois D. Rice

In 1972, when the late President Lyndon B. Johnson addressed the Civil Rights Symposium, he was speaking for today too when he said:

"... By unconcern, by neglect, by complacent beliefs that our labors in the fields of human rights are completed, we of today can seed our future with storms that would rage over the lives of our children and our children's children....

"... we cannot obscure this blunt fact, the black problem remains what it has always been, the simple problem of being black in a white society. That is the problem to which our efforts have not yet been addressed. To be black in a white society is not to stand on level and equal ground. While the races may stand side by side, whites stand on history's mountain and blacks stand in history's hollow. Until we overcome unequal history, we cannot overcome unequal opportunity."

There is a small elite of fortunately situated blacks—those who have graduated from college in recent years. A miniscule fraction of the elite has gone on to earn the doctorate degree and is much pursued by academic employers. But the good life for this comparative handful need not screen the fact that there are more blacks below the poverty level today than there were five years ago.

People are now weary with what was once called the war on poverty, but poverty continues to be devastating. It cripples individuals and destroys families. Blacks are more likely to be affected by poverty, and because of this, their families are more likely to face chronic unemployment. And people who cannot work have an extremely high probability of being poor, with the cycle of poverty continuing and reinforcing itself—aided in part by government welfare policies which promote rather than retard the destruction of families. What is the solution?

There are at least two well-defined paths of upward social and economic mobility for most Black Americans. One is through the armed forces, which, at least in peacetime, offer stability, training, and educational benefits which can break the grip of poverty for those who can adjust to the special burdens which the military life imposes. The other is through the pursuit of higher education. Whatever growing disenchantment there may be among whites with respect to the value of college, there is no evidence to warrant such disenchantment among Blacks.

Data from the National Longitudinal Study show that Black high school graduates are now about as likely to enter college as their white counterparts in high school record and family income but their patterns of enrollment are quite different. Forty-eight percent of all Black freshmen and 32 percent of those in the highest ability quartile are enrolled in two-year colleges and proprietary/vocational schools; figures for white freshmen are 41 percent and 26 percent. Thirty-seven percent of the highest ability Blacks enroll initially in four-year public colleges and universities compared with 48 percent of highest ability whites.[1]

In 1970, Blacks were 8.3 percent of the total college enrollment, about 9 percent of all freshmen and 5 percent of seniors; in 1974, they were 11.2 percent of total enrollment, about 12 percent of all freshmen, 7 percent of seniors and about 3 percent of graduate enrollments.[2]

Expectations

Every year when hundreds of thousands of entering college freshmen fill out a questionnaire,[3] there are marked, but not surprising differences between the answers given at predominantly Black colleges and at public universities—the least Black of postsecondary institutions and hence for purposes of comparison a possible surrogate for the white population.

Seventy-six percent of freshmen at

Black colleges, merely by enrolling, have surpassed their fathers' educational attainments, whereas the figure at public universities is 40 percent.

Sixty-eight percent of the Black college freshmen report family incomes of under $10,000, against only 17 percent at public universities.

Blacks are much more likely to pursue a business major—23 percent against 13 percent—and place far greater emphasis on attaining financial well-being—67 percent against 43 percent.

Blacks are also more optimistic, 31 percent thinking they will be more successful than the average of their peers, against 18 percent at public universities.

Finally, Black freshmen are slightly more sanguine than freshmen at public universities generally about the prospect of obtaining a job in their chosen career field—59 percent against 55 percent.

There are apparently sound reasons for such expectations. All the available evidence suggests that job opportunities and *starting* salaries for young Blacks with college degrees have in recent years come to parity—in some fields above parity—compared to those of young white college graduates.

According to calculations by R. B. Freeman, in 1959 Black male *college* graduates age 25-29 had a mean income equal to only 85 percent of the mean income for white male *high school* graduates.[4] Ten years later, the Black college graduates (again males in the 25-29 age group) had mean incomes almost equal to white high school graduates, and 83 percent of the white college graduate mean income. Freeman found that by 1973, mean incomes for *young* Black male college graduates had not only passed those of white high school graduates—$11,168 against $9,702—but those of white college graduates as well, who were at $10,242. But Freeman, like others, observes that overall parity of earnings of Black and white college graduates of *all ages* is decades away.

Notably, Freeman found no significant gain for Black male high school graduates compared to their white counterparts. In 1969 they earned about 77 percent of the white high school graduate mean and in 1973 about 79 percent. It was only the college-going, college-completing Black male who caught or passed white males with like educational attainments (see Table I).

From all the foregoing, one can draw a variety of conclusions. But however one views the prospects, the present truth is that the Black population of the United States, taken as a whole, lags behind the white population in every measurable indication of well-being—income, good jobs, good health, decent housing, longevity.

The die is probably long cast for most of those who are 15 years and older. No policy changes even a year or two hence are likely to have much effect on whether they attend and complete college; and certainly it is not helpful to urge a 50-year old, unskilled, unemployed, functionally illiterate laborer to try the college route.

But for an immense number of Blacks, it is not too late to influence their futures and in major ways. Thirty-five percent of all Black males and 31 percent of the females are younger than age 15, compared to about 25 percent of whites. It is for the young—one third of all Blacks—for whom the commitment to equal opportunity of the 1960s needs to be preserved.

However, that commitment can be endangered by selective use of some of the statistics which have been compiled in recent years. For example, it is now a fact that Black and white high school graduates from low income families (under $7500) are equally likely to attend college the next fall—about 45 percent of them, according to the National Longitudinal Survey of 1971-1972 high school seniors.

But that comforting parity disguises the fact that 57 percent of the Black high school graduates come from low income families, while only 19 percent of whites do so. Because enrollment rates increase with income, the concentration of Blacks at the bottom of the income scale means that their overall enrollment rate is only 72 percent of the white rate.[5]

If it is argued that the comparatively low college-going rate of high school graduates from poor Black families is acceptable because such graduates tend to be less able—as measured by high school performance—the answer is that poverty is much more decisive than ability in determining who enters the groves of academe. According to the National Longitudinal Survey, 60 percent of the high ability Blacks are from families in the lowest income quartile. The highest ability children in the lowest income quartile attend college at a lower rate than the next to the bottom ability quartile in the highest income group, despite expanding federal and state student aid targeted on low income students (see Table II).

The impact of poverty is not ended by the act of matriculation. Seventy-four percent of the high ability-low income freshmen who entered college in the fall of 1972 came back for the second year; the figure for high ability-high income freshmen was 90 percent. Blacks in general have a significantly lower persistence rate through four years of college than do whites. A 1974 census survey found that 41 percent of Blacks and 57 percent of whites who entered college in 1971 were enrolled as seniors.

The data already accumulated are overwhelmingly adequate to demonstrate that the lot of Blacks in American society is not equal to the lot of whites. What is missing are ideas and the kind of information which can guide public policy in directions more likely to be most helpful in realizing full equality of opportunity for those Blacks who are not yet of high school age. □

Table I

Mean incomes and differences in mean incomes of 25-29 year old Black and white college and high school men, 1959-1973 [6]

Group and year	Incomes (in 1973 dollars) and ratios of incomes		
	Black men	white men	ratio Black/white
1959[a]			
1. college	$6419	$9158	.71
2. high school	5121	7574	.69
3. difference (1-2)	1298	1584	
1969			
4. college	9120	11022	.83
5. high school	7157	9269	.77
6. difference (5-6)	1963	1753	
1973			
7. college	11168	10242	1.09
8. high school	7700	9702	.79
9. difference (9-10)	3468	540	

[a] *Incomes in 1959 are based on medians adjusted to means by multiplying by 1959 ratios of mean to median incomes from U. S. Bureau of Census, 1963a, table 1.*

Source: *U. S. Bureau of Census 1963c, table 6; 1973b, table 7. Current Population Survey Computer tapes for 1973.*

Table II

College enrollment rates of 1971-72 high school seniors one year after graduation

by ability and family income (in percent)

	Ability quartiles (high school grades)				
	Bottom	Second	Third	Highest	All ability levels
Income quartile					
Lowest	29.9	41.3	47.3	63.8	45.4
Second	31.7	47.5	57.9	69.7	52.6
Third	35.0	48.7	63.8	74.6	57.2
Highest	47.2	64.4	76.6	86.4	72.1
All income levels	35.3	49.9	61.8	74.8	56.8

Source: *National Logitudinal Study of the High School Class of 1972.*

[1] *Source:* Analysis of first year follow data from NLS study by the Washington Office of the College Entrance Examination Board. Like other surveys these estimates are subject to sampling and response errors.

[2] *School Enrollment—Social & Economic Characteristics of Students:* Oct. 1974. Current Population Reports, U. S. Department of Commerce, Nov. 1975. The standard errors of these estimates are large enough to preclude confidence in the count. All other surveys report lower undergraduate Black enrollments; some, however, report slightly higher graduate enrollments.

[3] *The American Freshman: National Norms,* Cooperative Institutional Research Program, American Council on Education, University of California at Los Angeles.

[4] Richard Freeman, *Black Elite,* forthcoming from McGraw-Hill, New York. Copyright ©1976—The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Cited with the permission of the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education. Freeman asserts that "the major market problems facing Black women graduates result from sexual rather than racial differences."

[5] Calculations from Current Population Reports (CPS—1975) show that the college participation rate of 18-24 year olds from families in the bottom income quartile is 20% while it is 54% for students from families in the top income quartile. Only 5% of Black students are from families in the highest income quartile, compared with 29% of whites.

[6] Freeman. Printed with the permission of the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education.

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