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# Blacks in Higher Education

## The Challenge of Survival

By John E. Jacob

Both external and internal realities shape Black students' ability to take full advantage of college education.

All along the line, from environment to elementary and secondary education, Black college students have been short-changed in their preparation for higher learning. Public and private Black colleges and universities draw students from diverse backgrounds, not all of them disadvantaged, not all of them urban. But the need to give extra attention to a probable majority of students who have been ill-prepared ought to be recognized.

The difficulties of public high schools, particularly in the District of Columbia, are an example of the social forces working against student academic development. In 1976, with middle income Black and white families and taxpayers migrating to the suburbs, public school planners found it harder to plan, administrators to administer, teachers to teach, parents to get involved, and students to learn.

Twenty-two new schools in Washington, D. C., which took 10 years to build and cost nearly \$180 million in the last five years, stood underused due to declining school enrollments. The academic 1975-76 school budget was cut \$25.6 million eliminating new or improved programs, then further constrained by a city-wide hiring freeze which left 1,000 school positions unfilled. In 1975, daily absenteeism had reached 19%, and dissatisfied students were defecting and dropping out permanently at a rate of 8.9%. Others caused 1,323 reported crimes, and cost the schools \$1.3 million in vandalism during the year. Only 16% of the schools were found up to health standards by the city's Environmental Health Administration. Sixty-one percent of parents told a Washington Urban League survey that they had not been notified of any kind of

meeting or conference at their children's schools. 35

As a result, public high school graduates in Washington fell 100 points below the national college board average in 1976. We are aware of the middle class, racial bias of standardized testing, and agree that Black students' intellectual ability and potential performance are unfairly projected by their test scores. But until Black social scientists and educators come up with functional alternatives for determining student ability, we must work with existing instruments. Their results tend to confirm what we know to be true of public high school learning environments: That Black high school students are not being adequately provided with the basic skills necessary to take immediate advantage of college education.

Many Black colleges and universities have instituted programs of remediation to help students catch up. The trouble with remedial programs is that they serve too few students, and only the most disadvantaged. There seems to be a bias against allocating too many higher educational resources for such programs, and also an attitude by both students and faculty, of impatience with basic skills attainment thought to be the proper domain of secondary learning. Thus, many colleges and universities have done little more than highlight the need for such programs, blame the high schools for the problem, and bring the problem of inadequate preparation into every classroom, where it is dealt with as a matter of course but not "up front".

This has done a disservice to students. By not being honest with many students about their need to make all-out efforts to acquire better reading, writing, speaking, computation and science skills, educators and counsellors have reinforced the rationalization that a normal approach to undergraduate education is enough for meaningful matriculation. It is not enough. The work world for coming generations of Black college graduates is a "mine field"



ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL PLATT

of risks because of the changing job market and value of a college education — to which are added white hostility and systematic constraints on Black employee growth. Because today's students do not have to ride at the backs of buses or suffer indignity at drinking fountains, educators as well as students are forgetting how severely graduates' opportunities will be limited by white racism and the effects of past discrimination on their readiness to compete. This reality is producing patterns of "last hired, first fired" Black unemployment across the nation, and continuing Black underemployment in both public and private sectors.

In the District of Columbia, unemployment averaged 16.8% of the Black workforce each month in 1976, a rate three times that of whites. Last October, there were 29,000 Blacks (15 to 19-year olds) who wanted jobs and couldn't find them. From 1970 to 1974, Black female unemployment rose 36 times that of white females in the Metropolitan area. In low income neighborhoods, the situation was both worse and emblematic of the Black experience. A Washington Urban League survey found nearly 30% of *all* households unemployed. Asked why they had lost their jobs, more than a third said they had been laid off due to the recession and budgetary cutbacks; another 10% said because of job "hassles". Asked why they could not find new jobs, half said they had not gained the job training or work experience to qualify for available jobs; more than a third said there were not enough jobs for them.

The effects of past discrimination on Blacks' ability to compete for jobs are now being stated in terms of recessionary cutbacks, job availability and opportunities for training. Students who think a college education will insulate them from such experiences need to be told that, on the contrary, they face a greater likelihood than whites that their jobs will be low-paying and possibly dead end . . .

first to be laid off when their employment is not convenient to private industry.

Working Black female heads of household in the District had a median annual income of \$7,200 in 1974, compared to \$10,000 for whites in the same category. Working married Black women in husband/wife households had a median annual income of \$14,300 in 1974 compared to \$20,900 for whites in that category. Great disparities between Black and white employment continue in all sectors, despite a display of reports seeking to show progress or get employers off the hook.

In 1975, the U.S. Civil Service Commission reported that during 1973-74, minorities nationally got 64% of all new non-postal federal jobs. Buried in the fine print was the fact that only 12,789 "white collar" jobs were created that year for Blacks, Orientals, American Indians and Latinos, nationally. In 1976, a new Civil Service Commission report showed that during 1974-75 Blacks suffered a *loss* of 2,734 non-postal jobs (plus another 1,097 postal jobs). Some 1,500 "new" white collar jobs had been created, but almost 60% were at levels below GS 8 earning under \$12,000 a year. Even in the District government, Blacks' median annual salary lags \$3,000 behind whites'. The police and fire departments are bastions of white employment — and despite Home Rule, whites hold 60% of the top jobs, and anywhere from 61% to 70% of the middle management jobs (GS 12-15). On the other hand, GS levels 1-4 at the bottom of the opportunity heap are 90% Black and 92% female. Population wise, the District is 73% Black.

It is worse in the suburbs and in private industry. In three of the Washington area jurisdictions, whites occupy from 90% to 99% of the public sector jobs, earning above \$16,000 a year. A recent national study of the banking industry showed that minority employment had risen from 24% in 1971 to 46% in 1975. But at three local banks included in the study, the number of minority officials and managers ranged from 11.5% to

17.8%. A 1975 study of the Washington Metropolitan Board of Trade's member firms showed that 55% of the new minority jobs created between 1968 and 1974 were in office and clerical work. Despite a five-year voluntary affirmative action program, minority journeymen in area construction trades have risen only 7% since 1970—and now stand at 18% overall in a city that has the fourth highest concentration of low-income Blacks in the country.

For today's Black college graduates, equal employment opportunity simply means that they will have to compete against more work-experienced and skilled whites in a business-as-usual system long antithetical to them. The question of their "qualification" for employment promotion and retention during business cycle recessions, lies behind growing national debate over reverse discrimination, quotas, seniority, and awards of back pay for prior discrimination. But behind these racially divisive code-issues lies the cost of affirmative action to white people; and every indication—from court decisions to enforcement backlogs to track records of private industry—suggests that whites are not willing to alter patterns. Black unemployment and underemployment.

The external realities of inadequate basic skills preparation for college, and of racism and discrimination in their future work world, are the framework within which Black college students must get the most from their four-year experience of higher education. Colleges' lack of realism about the real seriousness of academic preparation under these circumstances, is threatening the effectiveness of undergraduate education—whether seen as a matter of faculty lowering academic standards or as a matter of students avoiding academic challenges.

In the "Revolutionary Sixties," an era of liberalism on white campuses was matched by an era of empathy on Black campuses. Students putting their lives on the line in the South were listened to when

they drew the wrong conclusion from the right premise: That good grades were essential to take advantage of desegregated job opportunities. Students discovered power in their ability to bring higher educational institutions to a standstill on any given day. Faculties and administrations on the other hand desired to help, and had a respect for student civil rights accomplishments.

Furthermore, the risks and challenges of competition in a predominantly white work world were very real. Black students knew that their educational services were under-funded, that they had been inadequately prepared by their former schools, and that it was going to be rough when they graduated, without the added disadvantage of poor grades. Feeling deep insecurities, Black students—like undergraduates everywhere—tested their muscles against a basically sympathetic educational system, rather than against the real System which lay ahead. In doing so, they placed responsibility for educational initiatives outside themselves—avoiding exposure to academic challenges and hard work. Unfortunately, many Black educators and administrators condoned this development.

In many Black colleges and universities which have long been pacesetters of Black excellence in a segregated society, the result has been a "watering down" of educational standards. Students won the right to drop a course as late as the end of the semester without getting a failing grade . . . or the right to take a course again and have the failing grade expunged from the record. At Howard University, for example, the biggest student "cause" today is an effort to change a Board of Trustee ruling that all grades must be computed, and that all students must take an examination in their major before graduation. These changes have also occurred at white colleges across the country. But their consequences to Black students in a hostile society are more profound. Without standards to assure that

attainment . . . not only will students lose respect for the seriousness of their educational experience, but they also will leave ill-prepared to compete for hard-to-get jobs.

This is not to suggest that Black people have to be special to get good jobs, or to become academic superstars in order to be effective citizens. But it would be misleading and grossly unfair to students to suggest that racism no longer exists . . . that they are not going to be judged by different standards . . . and that Harvard University graduates are not assumed by employers to have greater ability, no matter how many academic achievements Black graduates can display on paper.

Black students must graduate equipped with the psychological strengths necessary to face a white society which has an intense need for feelings of control over Black people. They must have sufficient knowledge in the area for which they are certified to face a changing and increasingly competitive market. They must have the knowledge that their degrees are synonymous with competency in a given field. To succeed in a system designed for their failure, they must have both the skills and the assurance that their education is worth something—so that when threatened, they will survive.

Black America has experienced important social changes as an outcome of the Sixties, without a change in the racism and discrimination still denying empowerment to Black communities. Those who study and work at Black colleges and universities should realize the new responsibilities these opportunities are creating, adding to the challenges of survival for Black college students. The increasing alienation of more affluent Black citizens from the needs of Black people as a whole is a matter of concern. So is the loss of numbers of young marrieds to the suburbs; the loss of Black resources for low-income Black communities, and the increasingly self-oriented attitudes of students, higher wage-earners and professionals.

The heroism and leadership of the Sixties are not being passed on to today's Black citizens, forcing one to wonder—especially with regard to college students—whether this represents a fallout from an involved generation which gave too little time and attention to its children? This is not an issue of militancy. The so-called decline of Black militancy is simply the adoption of different strategies for a different point in nation-time. With regard to militancy, it is enough to say that street confrontation ought to end someplace, because if purposeful and successful it moves militants into positions of influence offering opportunities for different action styles. But today's young people seem to want to merge into the background, get a good job and avoid facing the systematic discrimination and deprivation still experienced by their less fortunate peers, and in fact by the majority of Black citizens. It seems that neither they—nor older adults—know *how* to get involved anymore. Those in a position to tell them seem to be holding back, either to duck *white reaction*, win *better opportunities*, or for *economic reasons* at a time of high unemployment.

In every town in which colleges and universities are located, there are ample opportunities for community building by students, faculty and administrators of those institutions. If Black colleges and universities let their responsibility to Black communities slip away, far worse will happen than the loss of a Black leadership cadre serving citizens in professional capacities. □

*John Jacob, vice chairman of the Howard University Board of Trustees, is the executive director of the Washington Urban League. This paper was excerpted from a recent address at the annual conference of the National Association of Personnel Workers, for which Howard was the host.*