

7-1-1978

## Meeting the Challenge: The Future of Black Colleges

Vernon E, Jordan

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dh.howard.edu/newdirections>

---

### Recommended Citation

Jordan, Vernon E, (1978) "Meeting the Challenge: The Future of Black Colleges," *New Directions*: Vol. 5: Iss. 4, Article 5.

Available at: <https://dh.howard.edu/newdirections/vol5/iss4/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Howard @ Howard University. It has been accepted for inclusion in New Directions by an authorized editor of Digital Howard @ Howard University. For more information, please contact [digitalservices@howard.edu](mailto:digitalservices@howard.edu).

# The Future of Black Colleges

By Vernon E. Jordan

There are some people who think predominantly Black colleges and universities are an anachronism. That view is false. Black people still do not have equal access to the predominantly white colleges and universities. There still is a great need for institutions concerned with the Black community, traditions, and excellence.

In a pluralistic society, there is a need for institutions oriented toward particularism; institutions that equip their constituents to function within the framework of the larger society while at the same time preserving their own heritage. A national regard for pluralism that recognizes the special role a Notre Dame and a Brandeis [universities] play for their communities must also recognize the special significance Howard University and other traditionally Black educational institutions have in the community.

The past role and potential future contributions of the historically Black colleges and universities makes their revitalization a matter of major national interest. In recent years, those institutions have struggled with rising costs, increased student needs, introduction of changes in the curricula, modernization, and a host of other demands on resources and administrative talent.

By and large they have responded to those challenges with creativity, and with the realization that their response has tremendous importance for the community they serve.

One sector of Black higher education is under special stress today—the historically Black public colleges in states that are under court orders to desegregate. States that evolved dual systems of education must now integrate. That's the constitutional mandate—a mandate established in no small part through the efforts of Howard-educated lawyers.

But integration need not—and should not—mean extinction. The historically Black public colleges should not be held

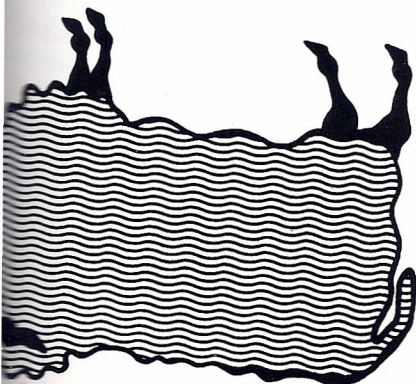
to ideal standards of integration their white counterparts ignore. Those colleges generally are more integrated in faculty and student body than are the predominantly white public colleges in those states.

It is clear that dismantling dual educational systems is right and necessary. It is also clear that the role of public Black colleges has altered with changing conditions. Equally, it is clear that an open, pluralistic, integrated society has ample room for healthy institutions that, while open to all reflect in important ways the nature and the aspirations of minority communities.

Integration cannot become a shield for destroying institutions crucial to the Black community. Rather, the only just outcome of the current process of desegregation is the strengthening of the public Black colleges. Now is the time for the affected states to make up for their past neglect of those schools; pump in the resources and additional features needed to make them the showplaces of state educational systems. Thus, they will attract greater numbers of white students and faculty, while retaining the special flavor that makes them so vital to the community.

And it goes without saying, these vastly improved institutions should remain under Black leadership. To do otherwise would be a mockery of integration, an evil attempt to strip Black people of basic institutions, a denial of the unique and distinctive role of the historically Black institution. These institutions have special obligations to the community, obligations not felt to the same degree by predominantly white institutions.

They have a special charge to expand their services, upgrade their facilities, and modernize their curricula. I label that obligation "special" because the Black college is still, unlike its white counterpart, the vehicle through which poor and economically deprived Black people acquire the skills and knowledge needed to enter the mainstream of society.





As President Cheek [Dr. James E. Cheek of Howard University] has stated, "Although adequate resources will not guarantee educational quality, educational quality is not likely to be achieved without adequate resources."

The need for excellence and for the resources with which to achieve it has a special meaning in an increasingly technological and complex society. The economic structure of our nation is changing; jobs once held by high school graduates now require college degrees; jobs once held by college graduates now require advanced degrees.

---

***As the society demands ever-higher educational credentials for jobs, increasing numbers of Black people are financially unable to obtain those credentials.***

---

In 1964, some 6,000 persons earned MBA degrees; in 1976, the total was 30,000. These figures reflect the growing obsession with ever-higher educational credentials by employers. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports the following: "Between 1970 and 1974 the proportion of workers having four or more years of college has increased by more than 60 percent in clerical service, and blue-collar occupations, areas which traditionally had very small proportions of college graduates."

There are important implications in this for Black people. First, just as Blacks are beginning to achieve educational attainments, employers are raising degree credentials. Second, if Black Americans are to begin to approach economic parity with white Americans, they will have to acquire the necessary credentials. Finally, as credentialism becomes more rooted in our society's economy, the importance of the Black colleges increases.

Therefore, Black colleges need to have the resources to enable their students to compete in this economy, which promises to exclude Blacks without adequate credentials as ruthlessly as it excluded Blacks on purely racial grounds in the past.

A second aspect of the financial crunch lies in the needs of the student body. At Howard University, about 80 percent of the student body requires some form of financial assistance, but the university can provide aid to only half of them.

The situation is even more acute in less favored Black colleges and universities. While the bulk of white college students are from middle class families and are able to cope with escalating costs, most Black students come from families under financial duress. The median Black family income is less than 60 percent than for whites, below the level the government itself says is required for maintenance of austere living standards.

Again, there is a serious implication here for the future. As the society demands ever-higher educational credentials for jobs, increasing numbers of Black people are financially unable to obtain those credentials.

The irony here is: While money is today a major barrier to keeping Blacks from equal participation in education, it is the white middle class that is the object of Congressional concerns. The Congress is now considering various plans for tax credits to families with children in college. Some of those plans would further weaken the public schools by extending the credit to families of students in private schools below the college level. In an attempt to stop this raid on the federal treasury, President Carter has proposed a plan of his own, which would increase federal scholarship funds and drastically raise the family income ceilings required for eligibility.

Neither the plans of the Congress nor those of the Administration will adequately benefit Black people and institutions, or

the goal of achieving educational parity between the races.

The tax credit plan would primarily benefit higher income families and would affect proportionately fewer Black families. The Administration's plan would simply dilute scarce scholarship money. In the process, fewer funds would be available to help fewer students from moderate income families.

Black people cannot ignore the implications of this unconscionable attempt to help the middle class at the expense of the poor. Society has asked Blacks and moderate income people to bear disproportionate burdens. In unemployment, in the effects of inflation, in bad housing, in inadequate education, Black people have been generously allowed by our society to be the leaders. Now, a populist President and a liberal Congress are both moving boldly to make a college education harder to get for Blacks and other poor people.

There is a terrible contradiction here, not only between the Administration's stated goals and its deeds, but also between conflicting actions it takes. I was at the White House announcement [in February] of the restructuring of federal equal employment opportunity enforcement agencies. That reorganization was taken with the full support and consultation of civil rights agencies. It is intended to make federal enforcement efforts more efficient and more capable of system-wide attacks on discriminatory practices.

But equal employment opportunity and affirmative action programs are dependent upon the availability of qualified Blacks and minorities. Without college education and professional degrees, Blacks will not get the managerial jobs and other skilled positions in society. Without an educated and skilled work force, the federal enforcement agencies will be unable to assure equal opportunity.

So within the same month, the Administration proposes to revitalize federal equal opportunity enforcement, and to reduce



the numbers of moderate income families eligible for educational assistance. It fails to realize that the one measure is dependent on the other—that educational parity for Blacks is inseparable from employment parity.

We are told that Black and poor students can't get all the help they need because the middle class is hurting, and therefore, to alleviate its discomfort those who suffer disproportionately will have to accept further disparities of treatment.

I will leave it to others to shed tears for the middle class, whose suburban lifestyle has been amply subsidized by federal measures in the past. I prefer to be more concerned about the disadvantaged, whose disadvantage is perpetuated by public and private neglect.

And the neglect must end. I propose that the Administration take a new look at its educational scholarship plan. I propose it not lock itself into a reactive position responding to negative sectors of the Congress. I propose, instead, that it set clear, rational and attainable goals for education. And among those goals should be educational parity between the races.

As a major means of establishing that parity, I suggest that the Administration undertake a dual responsibility—to provide the resources necessary to upgrade and improve the predominately Black colleges, and to provide increased financial assistance in the forms of scholarships and long-term low-interest loans to students from poor families.

Such a program would recognize some vital facts. It would recognize the need for special efforts for the sector of American higher education that has been neglected. It would recognize the special role that sector plays in providing skills and training for minority youth. It would acknowledge that the Black institutions of higher education are a national asset. It would concentrate individual financial aid where the need is greatest.

I would hope the Administration will find the courage and the wisdom to come up with that kind of special effort to attain

racial parity in education. I would hope it has the generosity of spirit to remedy the abuses heaped on Black colleges and their students. I would hope it has the foresight to see that Blacks will remain economically and occupationally disadvantaged unless more Black young people are enabled to overcome financial barriers to college education, and unless predominantly Black institutions of higher education are enabled to acquire the tools of excellence their students need.

---

**Howard's alumni . . . have not carried their weight in supporting this institution. Howard gave us the education and the degree that took many of us out of poverty . . .**

---

Thus, each of us in the Howard community, must devote our lives and skills to the betterment of our people, to the pursuit of excellence, and to the healing of society's wounds. Each of us must make a personal commitment that our efforts will be devoted to public good, as others give themselves to selfish privatism; that our concerns will be to secure justice and progress for all of our people, even as our society retreats from the ideals that inspire us.

We must keep up the pressure on the President, on the Congress, on the private sector, but above all, we must keep up the pressure on ourselves. The Black community, and most especially the small, struggling Black middle class, must assume its responsibilities to an even larger degree than it has already.

Certainly, a prime responsibility for assuring the continued role this university plays must rest with its alumni. And it is sad to report that Howard's alumni, which includes the elite of the Black professions, have not done their fair share of supporting their alma mater.

Over the past five years, out of 35,000 alumni, only about 2,000 have made annual gifts to Howard averaging a mere \$131 per person. That's a sorry state of affairs.

Howard's alumni—and I include myself in this condemnation—have not carried their weight in supporting this institution. Howard gave us the education and the degree that took many of us out of poverty and now it's time that we repaid our debt to Howard so that others can reap the benefits of its training and dedication. Now is the time for Howard's alumni to come to the aid of this great university with the generosity born of deep obligation.

Black colleges, public or private, cannot continue to go to white philanthropies, Congress, or state legislatures for support while their own graduates fail to honor their obligation to help support their alma mater.

Real Black power is the creative use of green power to support Black institutions and community organizations, so that they can be strong, viable pillars in a time of need; so that they can be firm, guiding beacons amid a stormy, wind-swept sea of troubles.

The Black experience is such that we are no strangers to hardship and danger. Black people have been honed in hardship and steeped in adversity. We've been educated at the university of survival, and we've worked the vineyards and tasted bitterness. Yes, we bore the burden in the heat of America's day. Even in times of plenty, we've never had enough. Now, although we scrape for the crumbs of the society in this dark midnight, we know we're going to get through. □

*Vernon E. Jordan, Jr., is the president of the National Urban League. This article was excerpted from a March 2, 1978 Charter Day address at Howard University.*