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Black Colleges In the Seventies

By Luther Brown

Institutions of higher learning that traditionally serve the educational needs of a vast number of America's Black students are probably the most important single resource available for our collective advancement in the American social scene. Understanding the dynamic status of Black colleges is crucial to advancing the interest of Blacks in higher education.

The specific function of Black colleges in relationship to the Black community and the nation as a whole are worth noting. These institutions provide the following:

- Educational opportunities for low-income and educationally deprived youth.
- Comfortable learning environments where class, race, and previous educational experience are not determinant of success.
- They constitute centers of culture and tradition unique to Blacks in America.
- They act as centers for the development and advancement of Black political and economic interest.
- They serve as training centers for Black leadership of the next generation.

In the 1970s, it is ironic and contemptible that the survival and advancement of these institutions would be in question. Yet, we find that they face great peril and some promise.

"They [Black colleges] have been menders, healers for wounded minds and restless souls. They have produced sterling talent which has benefited this Republic beyond measure of calculation—not only in material contribution, but intellectual, cultural, moral, and spiritual offerings. In a number of instances Black institutions have been more profoundly representative of the American ethic than the larger, more affluent, schools of higher education in this country. Indeed, they have been and remain today a domestic 'Marshall Plan' committed to a public offering of educational attainment." [Herbert O. Reid, Esq. Amicus Curiae brief, *Adam vs. Richardson*, 1976]

Former HEW secretary Elliott Richardson once said: "Obviously there is a continuing need for Black colleges as the only means available to large numbers of poor Black students."

Today, as the problems of the poor and the deprived multiply, federal and state support remain inadequate. Yet there seems to be a growing awareness of the need for the preservation and advancement of Black colleges.

President Carter last January stated: "The continuing importance of historically Black colleges and universities, not only to students but also to this nation's social, economic, and educational life, cannot be overestimated. This administration is committed to enhancing their strength and prosperity."

Despite what appears to be a growing awareness of the need to preserve and enhance Black colleges, a number of efforts and trends have emerged which threaten these institutions.

The decision rendered in the case of *Adam vs. Richardson* [1970] has intensified the efforts of the federal government to desegregate public institutions of higher education in Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, North Carolina, and Virginia. This desegregation thrust brings both danger and promise to public Black colleges. It mandates that previously dual systems of higher education be dismantled, that public Black colleges increase their enrollment of whites, that public white colleges increase their enrollment of Blacks and that undue burden not be placed on the Black institutions in the desegregation process. But, if care is not taken in this desegregation effort, a very real danger exists that both Black participation in higher education, and Black colleges, will suffer and decline in the process.

In the *Adams* case, the courts recognize the right and need for Black colleges to continue to exist. The District Court, in its second supplemental order, stated:

"The process of desegregation must not place a greater burden on Black institutions or Black students' opportunity to receive a quality public higher education. The desegregation process should take into account the unequal status of the Black colleges and the real danger that desegregation will diminish higher education opportunities for Blacks. Without suggesting the answer to this complex problem, it is the responsibility of HEW to devise criteria for higher education desegregation plans which will take into account the unique importance of Black colleges and at the same time comply with the Congressional mandate."

This recognition, officially extended by the courts, has been translated into policy by HEW in the *Adams* criteria guidelines.

However, there are very real dangers in the desegregation process—for example, the mandate that white public colleges significantly increase their enrollment of Black students—that may diminish the Black student access pool which serves Black colleges. This danger is especially significant in light of the poor track record of predominantly white four-year institutions in successfully graduating Black students; thus it could result in an overall decrease in Black four-year degree recipients.

On the other hand, if the Black community and state and federal governments provide Black colleges with the opportunity to maintain their unique character, while improving Black matriculation of white institutions, then all can benefit from the desegregation process. At this point, it is imperative that desegregation be carefully designed, monitored and evaluated to insure successful Black participation in higher education.

In order for desegregation of public institutions to work properly, at least four things must be done:

- The Black student access pool in the affected states must be expanded in order to avoid destructive competition between white and Black institutions.
- The public Black institution must be enhanced so that these institutions may remain competitive and viable.
- Increased involvement by the citizenry is a must if the commitment of state officials is not to dwindle as federal officials shift their emphasis from desegregation.
- A fair and equitable definition of the means toward an integrated society, i.e. desegregation, must be reached by a broad based consensus and not by a few bureaucrats.

Enrollment growth at Black colleges has been impressive in the 1970s. There are good indications that this growth will continue. According to data from the Institute for Services to Education, undergraduate enrollment was 170,459 in 1970, and 213,784 in 1977.

In an initial report issued by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, a survey of college presidents revealed an unexpected optimism for the future of Black colleges and other private institutions. This optimism was likely

because of special links to a specified constituency, a clear sense of mission, a strong leadership, and experience in coping with financial and academic stress.

The critical variable to consider in predicting enrollment trends for Black colleges is the age group between 18 to 21. Changes in this age group will have an effect on the future of Black colleges, since this group is a prime source of students. The Congressional Research Service (CRS) states:

"According to the Bureau of the Census, between July 1, 1975 and July 1, 1985, the number of Blacks in the 18 to 21 years old age group will increase by 4%. This compares to a decline of 6% in that age group, in the total population. A comparison between the Black 18 to 24 year old age group shows an even greater difference in growth over that decade. The Black cohort will grow by 12% while the total age cohort will grow by only 1%. This demographic data argues that the prospects for Black colleges may not be as bleak as those being forecast for the higher education community in general."

Enrollment stability is especially important to Black colleges due to their high dependency on tuition and fees for revenues. Both public and private Black colleges derived 17% of their revenues from tuition and fees, according to CRS. This degree of financial dependency should be viewed in relationship to the significant reliance of these colleges on federal support.

According to the CRS, Black colleges receive approximately 53% of their revenues from federal sources as compared to 21% for all institutions. This degree of dependency on tuition, fees and federal support, which are often unpredictable, place Black colleges in somewhat of a precarious position, especially in terms of long range planning and institutional development.

There is a continuing demand for the services offered by Black colleges. And the demand seems brighter over the next 10 years than for other institutions of higher education. If these institutions receive the necessary funds (i.e., state, federal and private) to sustain themselves and overcome historical disparity, then they can continue to offer valuable service to the nation.

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enrollment at Black colleges are the significant number of Black students in community colleges, and the potential impact of the desegregation of public institutions of higher education. Both these trends may have a significant impact on the overall participation of Blacks in higher education. These two trends also tend to highlight the important role that Black colleges continue to play in the overall higher education arena.

According to the Office for Civil Rights, in 1976 there were 866,315 Black undergraduates in the United States; about 50% were in two-year institutions. The remaining were enrolled in four-year institutions, with 224,626 attending predominantly white institutions and 211,966 attending Black colleges. This breakdown and the significant number of Black students in community colleges (one out of two) shows just how critical Black colleges are in providing opportunity and (access) to college degrees.

Today, 105 Black colleges and universities are doing the equivalent work of more than 1500 predominantly white institutions.

Dr. Israel Tribble, provost of Bethune-Cookman College, in a presentation to the National Advisory Committee on Blacks in Higher Education and Black Colleges and Universities explains the above dilemma:

"With the heavy concentration of Blacks in two-year colleges and the normal attrition rate of 50% or better, the predominantly white institution will continue to produce fewer baccalaureate degrees for Blacks than the Black collegiate sector if it is allowed to survive . . . Perhaps by chance or circumstances, but in some instances by design (California in particular) Black students are gravitating to community colleges and vocational schools in increasing numbers while their number in the four-year collegiate sector is decreasing. This appears to be a new tracking system. Given the retrenchment occurring presently, this trend could continue through 1980."

This trend must be carefully monitored since the consequences of such a "tracking system," coupled with the neglect of Black colleges, could spell disaster for Black aspiration and participation in higher education.

Both desegregation and the growing

number of Black students in community colleges can have serious implications for the critical variable of enrollment in Black colleges. In both of these instances, careful study, planning and monitoring are warranted. The focus of educational attainment must continue to be on four-year (and graduate) matriculation. It is here that parity and equity really begin to have meaning. □

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