Black Undergraduates in Higher Education: an Historical Perspective

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Abstract

The participation of Blacks in collegiate education in the United States is traced from earliest settlement up to contemporary times. From the time of the graduation of the first Black student in 1826, the Black educational experience has passed through several important stages, each shaped by significant changes in national policy and culture that trace the evolving views of educational access and race in the United States.

Black Education before the Civil War, 1619-1861

With the arrival of the first slaves at Jamestown in 1619, Blacks were introduced to the harsh realities of life in America, including the cruelty of the peculiar institution of slavery. Slavery in its most rudimentary form sought to deprive Blacks of the necessities of life including family structure, spiritual development, and both formal and informal education. However, with indomitable resolve, slaves acquired knowledge and continued to educate themselves as was customary on the continent of Africa. Education broadly defined as the acquisition of knowledge can be obtained in a multitude of settings, formal and informal. In this sense, adult education of Blacks began at the moment they made contact with the people condemning them to slavery and continued unabated as they entered into their new environment in North America (Whiteaker 1990).

While the education of Blacks occurred on numerous levels during slavery, it would take more than two hundred years after the start of slavery in America before a Black student would graduate from college. The first Black student to graduate from a college or university in the United States was John B. Russwurm, who graduated from Bowdon College in 1826. Since Blacks were prohibited from receiving any formal education in the southern states, it is not surprising that this first Black undergraduate student to graduate from an American institution of higher learning graduated from a college in the north. The graduation of Russwurm was not only pivotal to higher education but proved important to the American anti-slavery movement, as Russwurm would become the first editor and publisher of the *Freedom's Journal* and the *Colored American* (Bullock 1970). The graduation of Russwurm ushered in a new era for Blacks and higher education. From 1826-1828, two more Black undergraduate

students would graduate from an American college or university: Edward Jones, an 1826 graduate of Amherst College of Massachusetts, and John Newton Templeton, an 1828 graduate of Ohio University.

Franklin and Moss (1994) found that before the Civil War, Blacks were attending Oberlin (Ohio), Franklin (Indiana), and Rutland (Vermont) colleges, the Harvard University Medical School, and other institutions of higher learning. Among the first colleges and universities willing to admit Black undergraduate students, Oberlin College was also a force in the anti-slavery movement. Affiliated with the Presbyterian Church, Oberlin adhered to a strict anti-slavery platform that would serve as the impetus to enroll and graduate Black students from the College. At the point in time that Oberlin College graduated its first Black student George B. Vashon in 1844, through the start of the Civil War, the College would graduate a total of twenty-one Black undergraduate students (Fletcher 1971). During this era, the matriculation and graduation of large numbers of Black students made Oberlin College a pioneering institution in promoting the education of Blacks in higher education.

As was the case with the early colonial colleges and universities, which were founded and governed by religious interests, the first Black institutions of higher learning were chartered and administered by religious denominations. Inherent in the founding of Black colleges and universities by the church was the insatiable desire to do God's work: educate Black students. The Quakers are credited with the formal establishment of the first institution for higher learning specifically for Blacks. This occurred with the founding of the Institute for Colored Youth (now Cheyney University) in 1837. During the Antebellum era two more universities for Blacks would be founded. In 1854, the Presbyterian Church established Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, and one year later the Methodist Episcopal Church founded Wilberforce University in Ohio. The founding of these institutions of higher learning specifically to educate Black undergraduate students would serve as the foundation, a beacon of hope, supporting the aspirations of emancipated slaves and free Blacks eagerly seeking higher education.

Black Undergraduate Education During the Civil War and Reconstruction

The Civil War served as one of the most important events shaping the history of America. It brought about major change in the United States and throughout the world. Before the Civil War, the vast majority of the Black population, including nearly one hundred percent of the Blacks living in the south, did not enroll or were prohibited from enrolling in college. Given the fact that the majority of Blacks living in America at this time in history lived south of the Mason-Dixon Line, there was limited access to higher education thereby creating a dearth in the numbers of Blacks graduating from college. Johnson (1938) found that before 1860, the number of Blacks graduating from an American college or university stood at only twenty-eight. The Civil War forced the

temporary shutdown of colleges and universities throughout America, including the shutdown of Wilberforce University, thereby further limiting access to higher education for Blacks. An exception was Oberlin College. During the Civil War, Oberlin continued to enroll and graduate Black undergraduate students. At the 1862 commencement, Mary Jane Patterson received the A.B. degree making her the first Black female to graduate from college in the United States and probably the world (Fletcher 1971).

The cessation of the Civil War led to a proliferation of educational opportunities for Black students. Between 1865 and 1880 at least thirty-nine colleges and universities were established specifically to educate growing numbers of Black students interested in pursuing higher education. Several widely known institutions founded during this time span include Fisk University (1866), Talladega College (1867), Atlanta University (1867), Howard University (1867), Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute (1868), Tougaloo College (1869), Clark University (1870), Alcorn Agricultural and Mechanical College (1871), Shaw University (1873), Bennett College (1873), and Knoxville College (1875). With the founding of these colleges and universities there was a concurrent increase in the numbers of Black students matriculating and ultimately graduating from college. While the overall percentage of Blacks receiving a bachelor's degree remained low, by 1876 the total number of Black students in America that had earned a bachelor's degree stood at 208 (Johnson 1938).

This period in time is historically significant for Blacks in that from 1860-1890 more Black colleges and universities were founded than at any other point in history. During the four-year time span of 1876-1880, which coincided with the height of Black college establishment, Black students were conferred a total of 215 undergraduate degrees. The number of degrees conferred during this time span was more than double the total number earned in all of the decades following the graduation of Russwurm. The significance of the founding Black colleges and universities should not be underestimated. These institutions of higher learning would serve as a source of opportunity and hope for thousands of free Blacks and former slaves seeking access to the American educational system.

Black Undergraduate Students, 1890-1945

"That no money shall be paid out under this act to any State or Territory for the support and maintenance of a college where a distinction of race or color is made in the admission of students, but the establishment and maintenance of such colleges separately for white and colored students shall be held to be a compliance with the provisions of this act if the funds received in such State or Territory be equitably divided as hereinafter set forth: Provided, that in any State in which there has been one college established in pursuance of the act of July second, eighteen hundred and sixty-two, and also in which an educational institution of like character has been established, or may be hereafter established, and is now aided by such State from its own revenue, for the education of colored students in agriculture and the mechanic arts, however

named or styled, or whether or not it has received money heretofore under the act to which this act is an amendment, the legislature of such State may propose and report to the Secretary of the Interior a just and equitable division of the fund to be received under this act between one college for white students and one institution for colored students established as aforesaid which shall be divided into two parts and paid accordingly, and thereupon such institution for colored students shall be entitled to the benefits of this act and subject to its provisions, as much as it would have been if it had been included under the act of eighteen hundred and sixty-two, and the fulfillment of the foregoing provisions shall be taken as a compliance with the provision in reference to separate colleges for white and colored students" (Bullock 1970).

The Morrill Land Grant Act of 1890, Section 1, Provisions 1-2

The Morrill Land Grant Act of 1890 (the second Morrill Act) forced states to either provide separate educational facilities for Black students or admit them to existing colleges. In response to this federal mandate, southern and border states moved to expand dual systems of higher education by establishing colleges and universities under the guise of separate but equal. This approach to providing higher education opportunities for Black students led to further increases in the numbers of Black colleges and universities. One outcome of the Act of 1890 was that southern states, which were slow to provide funds to previously established Black colleges and universities, were compelled to finance these institutions under the provisions of the Act. Several widely known Black colleges and universities founded as a result of the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1890 include Kentucky State College (1886), Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University (1887), Delaware State College (1891), West Virginia State College (1891), North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University (1891), and South Carolina State College (1895). As was the case during previous years, the increase in the number of Black colleges and universities served as the impetus for increasing numbers of Black undergraduate students. The total number of Black students conferred the bachelor's degree during the 1890s totaled 1,336, a fifty-nine percent increase compared to the previous decade. While the numbers of Black undergraduate students increased as a result of the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1890, it evolved from a philosophy of overt racism—an approach that sought to ensure racial separation at all costs.

The ruling in the 1896 case of *Plessy v.Ferguson* and the resulting doctrine of "separate but equal" signaled a new era in the evolution of Black undergraduate student education in America. This ruling further solidified attempts by southern and border states to segregate colleges and universities. The ruling also served to fuel a debate between the two leading Black public figures of the era, W. E. B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington. Both men believed that higher education would change the plight of Blacks in America. However, there was much disagreement as to the approach. DuBois espoused the "Talented-Tenth" philosophy and encouraged Blacks

to acquire a liberal arts education, as he had acquired while a student at Harvard. The DuBois approach entailed the development of an elite cadre of educated Blacks to teach and train the masses. Much of the Washington philosophy was predicated on the notion that most Blacks at this point in history were solely dependent on agriculture as a means of survival. Washington, believing that conditions for Blacks would change only through vocational training, sought to encourage
Black students to secure this type of training as opposed to a liberal arts education. As this debate raged, Black students continued to matriculate at colleges and universities.

In the late 1890s and early 1900s, as the number of Black students increased, student organizations were established on college campuses to provide a system of support both social and academic. The adjustment of Black students to college was further hampered by strong anti-Black sentiment and a wave of indifference toward Blacks that was supported by President Theodore Roosevelt. So strong was the anti-Black sentiment that race riots erupted in Wilmington, North Carolina (1898); Springfield, Illinois (1908); East Saint Louis, Illinois (1917); and Tulsa, Oklahoma (1921). Given the levels of racial hostility in America, Black students found solace in student organizations. Building on the religious customs of the slave communities of previous generations, religion was an important component of the early Black student organizations. One of the most influential organizations for Black undergraduate students on college campuses was the gospel choir. Gospel choirs comprised of Black students traveled throughout America and abroad garnering fame and financial resources for fledgling Black colleges and universities. The most famous of the student choirs was at Fisk University. The Fisk Jubilee Singers, established in 1871 by George L. White, was used primarily to advertise the school and to generate badly needed money (Richardson 1980). Traveling throughout the United States and Europe in the 1890s and early 1900s, the choir generated thousands of dollars for Fisk University.

Of the earliest non-secular student organizations were Black fraternities and sororities. The first Black Greek letter organization to be established was Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity founded in 1906 at Cornell University followed by Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority in 1908 at Howard University. The establishment of these organizations was followed by the founding of six additional Black Greek letter organizations including Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity (1911), Omega Psi Phi Fraternity (1911), Delta Sigma Theta Sorority (1913), Phi Beta Sigma Sorority (1914), Zeta Phi Beta Sorority (1920), and Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority (1922).

Research indicates that five major types of student organizations are vital to retaining Black students. These include Black student unions, academic organizations, artistic organization, Greek organizations, and graduate/professional organizations (Stewart et al. 1996). Today, Black student organizations are thriving and have become integral components of collegiate life. The mere existence of these organizations not only symbolizes the fact that they have survived over one hundred years, but serves to indicate the importance of creating campus environments that support diversity and facilitates the recruitment and ultimately the graduation of Black students.

Black Undergraduate Students, 1945-1980

The conclusion of World War II signaled dramatic change in higher education. Emboldened by victory in Europe, thousands of troops, some of them Black, returned to America and sought a college education through funding provided by the Serviceman's Readjustment Act (G.I. Bill). The G.I. Bill provided federal subsidies for veterans to attend the college or university of their choice. Due to rigid segregation at predominantly White schools in the south and a continuation of policies that supported *de facto* segregation at northern schools, the majority of the Black troops returning from WWII matriculated at Historically Black Colleges and Universities. The impact of the G.I. Bill on predominantly Black colleges and universities was tremendous in that the physical facilities for classes, housing, and laboratories was not adequate to support the large number of matriculants at these fledgling institutions. Herbold (1994) found that in 1947 at predominantly White institutions the percentage of veterans enrolled grew by 29.4 percent; the increase at Black colleges during that same year was fifty percent. Olson (as cited in Herbold 1994) found that the pre-war enrollment at Black colleges in 1940 stood at 43,003. By 1950, the number had risen to 76,600–a post-war increase of fifty-six percent. So dramatic was the shortage of space at Black colleges that during the 1946-1947 academic year, limited facilities forced Black colleges and universities to turn away an estimated 20,000 veterans.

The landmark 1954 ruling by the United States Supreme Court in the case of *Brown v. Board of Education* served to dramatically alter the higher education landscape. In this case, the Supreme Court ruled that segregation of public educational facilities was unconstitutional. Based on the ruling, colleges and universities throughout America were given a federal mandate to admit Black students. In spite of this ruling, however, most colleges and universities in America continued with business as usual. According to Anderson (2002), "except for spectacularly successful attempts by individuals here and there, racial exclusion remained a pervasive practice in traditionally White institutions of higher education."

Several major institutions voluntarily admitted Black students prior to the historic ruling, including West Virginia University, which voluntarily admitted a Black to its graduate school in 1948, and the University of Arkansas, which admitted its first Black student in 1948 (Peterson et al. 1978). However, a majority of the predominantly White institutions, particularly those in the south, refused to voluntarily admit Black undergraduate students. The integration of college campuses was not consistent. At East Carolina University located in Greenville, North Carolina, integration occurred gradually and peacefully. Beginning in 1961, prior to full participation on campus, Black students attended classes at off-campus extension centers. Finally, in the fall of 1963, Laura Marie Leary became the first Black student enrolled in a regular session ultimately graduating in 1966 (Bratton 1986). Attempts to integrate several well-known southern colleges and universities, including the University of Georgia in 1961, the University of Mississippi in 1962, and the University of Alabama in 1963, were met with violence and required the intervention of federal troops. Not until the passage

of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 would the desegregation of American colleges and universities finally occur.

The desegregation of predominantly White colleges and universities would have a negative impact on enrollments at predominantly Black colleges and universities. Prior to the commencement of integration, over ninety percent of the Black undergraduate students in America were educated at predominantly Black colleges and universities. By 1970, approximately 378,000 Black students were attending predominantly White colleges and universities (Fleming 1984). Concurrent with the shift was the initiation of admissions policies designed to provide educational opportunities for all Americans. In 1970 McDaniel and McKee (as cited in Nettles 1988) estimated that over eighty percent of the American colleges and universities had adopted open admissions or some form of special admissions policies for Black students. Nettles (1988) researched enrollment data from 1960 and 1975 and found that Black enrollment in higher education increased at a rate more than three and a half times that of total enrollment growth. In slightly over one hundred years since the Emancipation Proclamation, the growth would propel Black student enrollment toward its highest level in history.

Black Undergraduate Students, 1980-Present

After peaking in 1980 there was a precipitous drop in the number of Black undergraduate students (see Table 1).

Table 1
Black Student Enrollment in Higher Education 1974-1984

Year	Total Enrollment	Percent Change
1974	745,414	
1976	866,455	+13.97
1978	887,505	+4.23
1980	926,909	+4.25
1982	833,043	-11.27
1984	839,071	+0.71

Source: Allen, Epps, and Haniff, 1991.

The decline in the numbers of undergraduate Black students attending college was the largest percentage decrease for any racial or ethnic group in the United States. The decreasing enrollment coincided with waning federal support for many of the affirmative action programs implemented two decades earlier. One of the programs that was heavily impacted by the shift in policy was federal financial aid. During the mid-1980s, there was a major decrease in federal dollars utilized to support college students. This policy was a stark contrast to policies of the early to late 1970s that provided financial assistance to Black students attending college. Data from the

Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education report (1979) indicate that with the introduction of the Basic Grant program in 1972, the number of women and minority students enrolled in college increased by twenty-two percent from 1972-1976. These data support a correlation in Black undergraduate student enrollment and financial aid.

In the 1980s there was also a major redistribution of Black undergraduate student enrollment to predominantly White institutions. Hill (1983), reported that in 1980, historically Black institutions enrolled thirty-eight percent of all Black undergraduates in states where they were located and twenty-nine percent of all Black undergraduates in the United States. The impact has been dramatic and extremely costly to historically Black colleges and universities. Throughout history, Black colleges and universities have assumed the responsibility of educating Black undergraduate students and have paved the way for the creation of the Black middle class. Jordan (cited in Fleming 1984), determined that Black colleges have graduated seventy-five percent of all Blacks holding Ph.D. degrees, seventy-five percent of all Black army officers, eighty percent of all Black federal judges, and eighty-five percent of all Black doctors. However, with the redistribution in the enrollment of Black students from predominantly Black colleges and universities to predominantly White institutions the necessity of Black institutions is being challenged.

Concomitantly, research shows that one of the major impacts of desegregation in higher education has been the low retention rate of Black undergraduate students enrolled at predominantly White colleges and universities. Deskins (1991) notes that between 1974 and 1984, Black students experienced the greatest losses in enrollment and degrees earned. Research also indicates that one of the major problems encountered by Black undergraduate students attending predominantly White colleges and universities is covert racism (Fleming 1984; Pounds 1987; Wright 1987). While no type of prejudice is tolerable, many Black students come to college expecting less racism and more social integration than they find, thereby creating frustration and resentment combined with a desire for separation and withdrawal from Whites. In most instances, this desire to separate oneself from White students and the larger university community leads to poor academic performance. This scenario was detailed in a Livingston and Stewart (1987) study in which Black and other minority students at a large predominantly White mid-western university expressed frustration and resentment toward White students' attitudes toward minority students on campus. Even more insidious, are the feelings of worthlessness experienced by some Black undergraduate students as a result of a poor campus climate. Racially insensitive campus environments, which are not accepting of diversity, can be a major hindrance to the retention rate of Black students (Wright 1987).

In an attempt to address campus climate issues, cultural centers were established at a number of predominantly White colleges and universities. Black undergraduate students also sought camaraderie and refuge in Black student organizations. While the establishment of Black student organizations has been viewed by some in the academy

as antithetical to the tenets of diversity, research clearly indicates that the existence of these organizations provides Black students with much needed support and social interaction with students who have common cultural experiences, interests and goals (Stewart, Haynes, Brown-Wright, and Anderson 1996). Pounds (1987), notes that in order for Black students to feel connected to a college or university, programs comprised of six major components which include the following must be in place: financial aid, developmental academic instruction, orientation, Black faculty and staff, Black student resources in other student affairs programs, and program goals.

During the mid-1980s and throughout the decade of the 1990s, there was a slight increase in the number of Black undergraduate students enrolling in higher education. From 1985 through 1997, Teddlie and Freeman (2002), found that there was a forty-eight percent increase in Black undergraduate enrollment. This growth, fueled by an increase in the number of Black students graduating from high school, is now in jeopardy of being hampered by an over reliance on comprehensive tests currently required by many states for graduation.

Black Undergraduate Students and the Reversal of Affirmative Action

The growth in Black undergraduate enrollment was met with staunch opposition from conservatives that concluded that Black enrollment increases were driven solely by affirmative action programs, not merit. These arguments were advanced under the guise of reverse discrimination and calls for America to move into a colorblind society. In 1976, in the case of *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, the United States Supreme Court ruled that race could be one of the factors used in the admission process if the applicant given preference helped to diversify the student body. However, recent lawsuits against colleges and universities are threatening to undermine the historic Bakke ruling and reverse the affirmative action policies that served to integrate and diversify college campuses. Throughout the 1980s and well into the 1990s, the ruling in the Bakke case would serve as the litmus test for college admission and scholarship programs predicated on race. However, as the Black middle-class in America grew there were renewed challenges to many of the higher education programs that were instrumental in creating the Black middle-class.

Two recent legal decisions have had a disparate impact on Black undergraduate student enrollment in the academy. In *Podberesky v. Kirwan* (1993), the court weighed evidence as to whether the University of Maryland at College Park could maintain a separate merit scholarship program (Benjamin Banneker Scholarship Program) that it voluntarily established for which only Black students were eligible. The United States Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit ruled that race-targeted scholarships could not be used to remedy the effects of past discrimination. The United States Supreme Court decided not to hear the appeal thereby upholding the ruling of the lower court. The impact of the ruling was far-reaching in that colleges and universities throughout the country moved to eliminate scholarship programs that targeted Black students.

Within less than two years, a second landmark court ruling that has also had a negative impact on Black undergraduate student enrollment occurred in a case involving admissions to the University of Texas Law School. In 1996, the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals in the case of *Hopwood v. Texas* ruled that the University of Texas Law School policy of separate admissions standards for Mexican-American and Black students was unconstitutional. As in the Podberesky case, the United States Supreme Court declined to hear the case thereby upholding the lower court's decision that diversity is not compelling under the Fourteenth Amendment.

In 1996, voters in the state of California passed Proposition 209, an anti-affirmative action referendum that eliminated "preferential treatment to any group on the basis of race, sex, color, ethnicity or national origin in the operation of public employment, public education or public contracting" (Anderson 2002). While the ruling was "limited" to California it had far reaching implications. Shortly after the passage of Proposition 209, voters in the state of Washington passed Resolution I-200, with language that mirrored the language of Proposition 209. In all-out attempts to avoid the rancorous debates created by the abolition of affirmative action programs in California and Washington, several states initiated race neutral admissions policies including Florida, Texas, and North Carolina.

The outcome of such recent legal decisions and the subsequent passage of voter-driven referenda have dramatically altered the higher education landscape for Black undergraduate students and has served to usher in the era of race neutral admissions. The specifics of the policies differ from state-to-state, with the programs generally guaranteeing admission to high school students that graduate in the top twenty percentile of their graduating class, irrespective of test scores. Bowen and Bok (1998) explored the impact of utilizing race as a criterion in admitting Black students at twenty-eight highly selective colleges and universities. Employing an approach that involved researching data on 93,660 full-time Black students entering college in 1951, 1976, and 1989, Bowen and Bok determined that a correlation exists between utilizing race as a factor in admissions and graduation. By constructing retrospective profiles from data collected regarding the Black matriculants in 1976, Bowen and Bok were able to determine that if race neutral admission policies would have been applied to this cohort group of the seven hundred Black students (who would have been rejected using present day race neutral standards) the following profile may not have realized:

- Over 225 members of this group of retrospectively rejected Black matriculants went on to attain professional degrees or doctorates.
- About 70 are now doctors, and 60 are lawyers.
- Nearly 125 are business executives.
- Well over 300 are leaders of civic activities.
- The average earnings of the individuals in the group exceed $71,000.
- Two-thirds of the group (65%) was very satisfied with their undergraduate experience.

This data supports the assertion that race neutral admissions policies will have negative consequences for qualified and capable Black students who might be denied access to higher education.

Future Predictions

Today, there is much debate about the American system of higher education and access. The diversity programs established by many colleges and universities in lieu of affirmative action are now under attack by ultra-conservatives. The attacks are reminiscent to the pre-Civil Rights era and are believed by many to be rooted in racism. Given this circumstance, in particular with regard to Black students in the academy, it is conceivable that the next few years will be marked by a multitude of court cases that will have a major impact on college and universities. In previous decades the courts have provided the impetus for access to higher education for Black students. However, in recent years, courts have reversed most of the rulings that promoted access and diversity. It is imperative that alternative strategies are sought to ensure that all racial and ethnic groups have equal opportunities to access higher education.

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