

# Vanderbilt Law Review

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Volume 26  
Issue 3 *Issue 3 - Symposium on Race Relations*

Article 5

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4-1973

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### Recommended Citation

Herman H. Long, *The Negro College: Role and Prospect*, 26 *Vanderbilt Law Review* 453 (1973)  
Available at: <https://scholarship.law.vanderbilt.edu/vlr/vol26/iss3/5>

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# The Negro College: Role and Prospect

*Herman H. Long\**

## I. INTRODUCTION

American higher education, especially in the Negro college, is in a time of major crisis; the institutions are beset by many new problems and issues. Perhaps at no other time in the nation's history has higher education been more widely discussed and written about in the public press as well as in educational circles. Indeed, higher education has emerged in recent years as a national issue that ranks close to the problems of poverty, welfare, and the decline of the cities. A national policy on higher education is being formulated; resource allocation priorities are being determined; and Congress is struggling to implement new forms of legislation that will translate new goals into programs. In sum, a general reassessment of educational policies and goals and a girding for the future are taking place among governments, corporations, private foundations, church sponsorship groups, and others.

A national policy of equal educational opportunity and access for nonelite groups and individuals—the blacks, the poor, and the traditional minorities—stands at the center of this reassessment; achieving this policy in fact and marshalling the nation's financial resources to effect it are the principal unifying task. The historic Negro colleges are essential and critical components of this effort, for they constitute, in a sense, the central core of the process of resolving the larger issue. This confluence of higher education interests presents the Negro colleges a strategic current opportunity, although awareness of that opportunity is neither widely nor evenly shared.

The spectre of the unresolved issue of American racism hovers over policy deliberations like an ever-present cloud: its by-product attitudes and opinions emerge in mixed and diverging perspectives: integrationists oppose separatists; loyalists oppose critics; and "white views" conflict with "black views." And as always when ideologies, assumptions, and human values conflict, an easy and presumably rational prescription has arisen. Here, this prescription is reflected in the popular, recurring expectations of the early demise of historically Negro institutions of higher education, expectations probably born of the wish for black disappearance that has long existed below the surface in American race

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\* President, Talladega College.

relations. "Now that integration has begun," as the casual and frequently expressed sentiment goes, "there is hardly a need for black colleges any longer."

It is not my purpose to treat this sentiment substantively, but merely to indicate its existence as a stubborn element in the situation that can have undesirable consequences. For the cursory observer, it appears to represent the obvious conclusion—at least from the "white perspective" of reality—embodying assumptions of what ought to be and, indeed, of ultimate cause. Perhaps it suffices to say that the issue needs examination from an "other's" perspective. A slight turn of the kaleidoscope is appropriate, moreover, for with no other group of institutions of higher education bearing a distinctive cultural or religious heritage has a similar issue been raised—not a Brandeis nor a Notre Dame, for example. Indeed, if integration is the process through which diverse group and cultural experiences are shared, institutions that have played the major role in educating four or more generations of Negro families obviously have a vital claim and function in that process.

## II. ATTENDANCE TRENDS: GROWTH AND GOALS

A brief review of college attendance rates of black young people, as contrasted with their peers generally, can provide a clearer view of the task of Negro higher education. Estimates made in 1970 indicated a nationwide total of some 470,000 black students in college. This number represented about six percent of the nation's entire college population and thus was equivalent to about half the proportion of Negroes in the general population. The disparity between black college-going and black population percentages represents an opportunity deficit for black youngsters stemming from the pattern of limited access, economic and educational poverty, and discriminatory admissions policies that has characterized the entire period since emancipation.

On the other hand, the total of 470,000 black college students in 1970 contrasts sharply with the total of 230,000 in 1964, representing a doubling of black attendance in the short space of six years. This increase probably exceeded all other college population segments for the period involved, and on the happy side of affairs, it suggests a heightening of educational aspirations among the current generation of black young people. In addition to a strong motivational component, the increase also reflects, among other factors, some improvement in the economic status of Negro families, the growth of community and junior colleges, the adoption of open enrollment practices, and the positive efforts to increase black enrollment in diverse institutions, particularly at the urban facilities.

One feature of the increase that gained attention in the public press was the shift of the preponderance of black college students from the historic Negro colleges; the 1970 estimates showed that only 35 percent attended these institutions. An inference has been erroneously drawn that the shift indicates a drain of resource constituency away from the traditional black colleges. This view is almost wholly unjustified upon further appraisal, for numerical increases in enrollment at the black institutions as a group occurred at the same time as the overall jump in college attendance by black youngsters at other institutions. There are approximately 110 historic Negro higher education institutions; alone, they could not have accommodated the increase in a way commensurate with the patterns of past years. What this represents, and fortunately so I think, is a tremendous broadening of patterns of access to higher education by black young people. And when factors of propinquity are taken into consideration for urban settings of the northern and western regions, it becomes apparent that we are dealing with a substantially new group of Negro students, people who come from families with no college-going history and who previously would not have gone to college at all.

As dramatic as the 1964 to 1970 increase of black college students has been, it is important to remember that a gross disparity still exists between the Negro and white college attendance rates. If merely approximate equality of access has existed in 1970, the number of Negro young people in college would have been closer to 1,000,000 than to the 470,000 indicated. And as further barriers to Negro access break down, economic conditions improve, and state and federal assistance programs aimed at young people from poor and minority backgrounds expand, we should move closer to "parity" between black young people and their white age-group peers. Indeed, what we need to focus upon for achieving equality of higher educational opportunity is the goal recommended by Bowles and DeCosta in their recent Carnegie Commission study on Negro higher education: the achievement of a black professional labor force proportionate to the white professional labor force by the year 1990.<sup>1</sup> If this goal is to be attained, the authors indicate, black enrollment in higher education must reach about 1,000,000 by 1985, a mere twelve years from now.

Even considering the present trend of widened access, reaching this objective will require far greater efforts and more broad-scale attacks than presently exist. The import to me of this situation is vastly different

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1. See F. BOWLES & F. DE COSTA, *BETWEEN TWO WORLDS: A PROFILE OF NEGRO HIGHER EDUCATION* 247 (1971).

from an expected demise of Negro colleges and a draining of black college enrollment from the traditional institutions. It suggests, on the contrary, a necessary expansion of institutional and support resources to meet the expected demand for places and opportunities. One Carnegie Commission report states that the 8,500,000 overall higher education enrollment of 1970 can be expected to reach 12,500,000 by 1980.<sup>2</sup> Although a growth plateau is predicted after 1980, the report suggests in order to meet the growth need for the current decade and the deficit of institutions, that an additional 235 community colleges and 105 comprehensive colleges will be required by 1980, especially in metropolitan areas with populations exceeding 500,000. Thus, Negro educational demand will take place in the context of an enhanced general demand of the college age group. Because the phenomena relating to black youth represent a catch-up process and a fresh upsurge over previous barriers, however, a greater rise in the black enrollment curve for a longer period should be anticipated. To put the matter bluntly, there will be more than enough black students to fill the places in which they are wanted, if the matter is indeed merely one of numbers and distribution. The need and the opportunity are far greater than anything we have yet faced as a challenge to our institutional resources and capabilities.

This general prospect is colored, of course, by a number of imponderables, not the least of which is the degree of commitment to the goals of equality of opportunity and universal access that will be achieved both at the federal level and within the higher education community. Essential to this consideration is the adequacy of student financial aid and institutional support programs needed to facilitate the entrance of students from low-income and minority-group families into the higher education process. While the major policy and program parameters are already present in the higher education legislation enacted in 1972,<sup>3</sup> the question of sufficient supporting funding remains unresolved.

Another indeterminate factor is the process of integration itself. On the basis of the preceding observations, however, the only remaining question is one of the future numerical distribution of white college students, for some degree of two-way integration can be assumed over the years ahead, based upon existing cases of formerly all-black border state institutions. As to the definite proportions of the future load that

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2. CARNEGIE COMMISSION ON HIGHER EDUCATION, *NEW STUDENTS AND NEW PLACES: POLICIES FOR THE FUTURE GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION, A REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS* 4 (1971).

3. Pub. L. No. 92-318, tit. I, § 131(b)(1) (June 23, 1972), 86 Stat. 258 (authorizing grants to postsecondary institutions to design services to assist youths from low-income families to enter a program of postsecondary education).

will be carried by the black colleges as a group, the best and wisest judgment is offered by Bowles and DeCosta, who state that any prediction would be unsound because too many variables are involved and because too much pertinent data is lacking.<sup>4</sup> And, they observe further that whether the majority of black students are enrolled in the historic Negro institutions in the future is not relevant. What does matter, however, is how these institutions will discharge the still-unfulfilled function for which they were originally founded, the amount of responsibility they will be willing and able to assume, and the degree to which they will provide leadership in higher education on behalf of those whose life chances have been diminished by the neglect of the past.

### III. IMPACT AND ROLE

What remains to be said within the compass of this paper rests largely upon the matter of the historic function of the Negro college and the aspects of that function that are viable for the present and the future. We know little about the institutional processes of this group of colleges, the dynamics and effects of the learning experiences they maintain, and the interrelatedness of the institutions and the communities, both immediate and remote, which they serve. This area is undoubtedly the least understood of all our considerations, for it abounds with ascriptions of function that are tied to efforts to rationalize, either pro or con, the system of racial segregation in America. A major preoccupation has been largely judgmental in basic thrust, in the sense of describing the Negro colleges as good or bad, compared with either a generalization of "white institutions" as a whole or Ivy League models. These matters can and should be left to the accrediting agencies, at least when *individual* institutions are concerned; otherwise, they involve a kind of "racial game" that is both unworthy and unproductive.

Perhaps the best introduction to a consideration of the Negro colleges' function is an examination of students who come to them, for a great deal can be inferred in terms of the transformation that takes place in their life and status. Representative data of the American Council on Education's freshman testing program at Talladega College can be illustrative at this point.<sup>5</sup> None of the 1972 black male freshmen's parents had received *any* college education, and for the class as a whole, the proportion was only seven percent; this contrasts with the national norms group's proportion of seventeen percent, a ratio of more than two

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4. F. BOWLES & F. DECOSTA, *supra* note 1, at 236.

5. Sample data taken from Talladega College freshmen in the Council's 1972 coverage.

to one. In terms of actual numbers, the Talladega class of 143 students had some ten parents with any college training.

The contrasts between income levels of parents were even greater, falling in ratios of five and six to one. For families with income below 3,000 dollars, the proportions were 23 percent for the Negro college freshman class as compared with four percent for the national norms group. At the below-4,000-dollar level, the proportions were 48 percent as against seven percent. Slightly more than half the Negro families had incomes below 6,000 dollars, while only twelve percent of the norms group fell within this category. At the upper end of the income scale, the proportions are reversed: seventeen percent of the Negro families had incomes above 12,500 dollars as compared with 53 percent of the national group. As to other characteristics, the Negro freshmen were slightly older in terms of average age; significantly more came from large cities and slightly more from farms and small towns; at the same time, some ten percent more of the norms group freshmen came from the upper quarter of their high school graduating classes. The educational aspirations of the Negro freshmen, however, as indicated by expressed educational goals at postgraduate levels, were higher.

From the longer range experience of Talladega graduates, a quite revealing picture of before and after can be discerned. According to one study of alumni, some 80 percent of the graduates have undertaken some postgraduate study. On the basis of a study done under HEW auspices, Talladega's male graduates place the college eighteenth among the top 100 institutions in its rate of production of medical doctors.<sup>6</sup> In the same study, moreover, the college is fifty-fifth in the rate of production of science doctorates from its male graduates.<sup>7</sup>

Although this statistical summary represents the experience of just one institution and uses doctoral production, only one dimension of the "after" picture of the black college student, data from other studies show a comparable situation for the graduates from the Negro colleges as a group. In what is perhaps the most exhaustive effort of its kind to date, a study by Dr. Horace M. Bond found that some 370 Negro doctorates had been produced for the period 1920 through 1962.<sup>8</sup> Of major significance in our discussion is the fact that 72 percent of these

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6. W. MANUAL & M. ALTENDERFER, *BACCALAUREATE ORIGINS OF 1950-59 MEDICAL GRADUATES* 18 (Public Health Service Pub. No. 845, 1961).

7. *Id.*

8. H. BONDS, *A STUDY OF FACTORS INVOLVED IN THE IDENTIFICATION AND ENCOURAGEMENT OF UNUSUAL ACADEMIC TALENT AMONG UNDERPRIVILEGED POPULATIONS* 109 (HEW Office of Education, Research Project No. 5-0858, 1967).

young men and women received their undergraduate educations at Negro colleges.

In the realm of the professions and leadership resources generally, historically black institutions have been the major source of educational strength for the nonwhite segment of the population. Testimony presented at 190 congressional hearings on higher education legislation indicated that 80 percent of the nation's black physicians, 75 percent of the 5,594 black officers in the armed services, 60 percent of the black federal officials appointed over the previous five years with GS ratings of fourteen and above, and 64 percent of the Negro representatives currently in state legislative bodies—including northern state bodies—came from collegiate backgrounds in the black institutions.<sup>9</sup> In law, social work, teaching, and the ministry, there is every reason to believe that similar patterns obtain. Three of the black judges in New York City, the only woman ever elected to the Senate of the State of New Jersey, and the present minority leader of the California legislature are alumni of just one black institution.

Bowles and DeCosta estimate that some 200,000 students have been graduated from the black colleges over the past 40 years and that approximately 80 percent of them have entered professional life. Accordingly, they state as historical fact: "With few exceptions whatever the Negroes have achieved in the way of professional entry has been achieved through the Negro colleges."<sup>10</sup> What is important about these and the preceding comments is not the facts themselves, but rather what they describe as educational and social process, or, indeed, as function in the sociological sense. Bowles and DeCosta also speak of the crucial importance of developing and enlarging the Negro professional class as an essential means of achieving equality of opportunity in the economic, and to some extent the political, spheres. This is certainly one dimension of the process. But I think the process is even broader in compass; Charles S. Johnson commented in the 1940's that education is not only a process through which culture is transmitted but also one by which *groups* are transformed, that is transformed in terms of status and orientation toward common goals.<sup>11</sup> In the context of the same discussion, Margaret Mead emphasized that education assumes the function

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9. *Hearings on H.R. 16098 and Related Bills Before the Special Subcomm. on Education of the House Comm. on Education and Labor, 91st Cong., 1st Sess.* 430 (1970).

10. F. BOWLES & F. DECOSTA, *supra* note 1, at 197.

11. Johnson, *Education and the Cultural Process: Introduction to Symposium*, 48 AM. J. Soc. 629, 629-30 (1943).



of conversion and assimilation, thus becoming political and serving as a basic mechanism for social change.<sup>12</sup>

This process must be viewed in both its internal and external aspects. Internally, education conserves the strengths of group experience by building and sustaining morale against the forces of an excluding, discriminating, and often hostile society. To a large extent, this is the means of group survival. Externally, on the other hand, the consolidation of group purpose thus achieved and translated into newly perceived goals leads to processes of social change through which the excluded group presses toward new status and the opportunity to share in the benefits of the larger society. The Negro college—uniquely and almost exclusively—has served as the instrument of this process. It is at once educational and profoundly social. And the educational leaders who carried the burden of sustaining the Negro college—white men and women as well as black—were not only teachers, but evangelists as well.

If this has been the function of the Negro college in the larger historical sense, the question remains whether it is and will remain a viable and crucial one. For the present, the answer is clearly in the affirmative; for the future, the issue seems to rest upon the uncertainties of change in American race relations and the achievement of the chance for black young men and women to enter the American opportunity system freely and openly. Negroes still remain outside the larger society, and the conditions that led to the founding of black institutions of higher education persist, although greatly moderated. To this set of conditions the Negro college must respond in the effort to meet the educational needs and aspirations of young black aspirants, many of whose parents have not entered the college-going, upwardly mobile track. As self-determined, flexible institutions, therefore, black colleges, both historically and at present, have a special role and responsibility in continuing a mission that has taken on newer and larger dimensions.

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12. Mead, *Our Educational Emphasis in Primitive Perspective*, 48 AM. J. SOC. 633, 636-37 (1943).