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CHAPTER VIII

THE ROLE OF THE PREDOMINANTLY NEGRO INSTITUTIONS

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I

The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of the role of predominantly Negro institutions as part of a symposium on the Higher Education of Negro Americans: Prospects and Programs.

Three points should be made at the outset. First, we should recognize that a major characteristic of this period of American life is an enlarged sensitivity of the national conscious to the indispensable value of higher education and consequently the need for *every* existing¹ institution to accommodate the irresistible flow of oncoming students. Second, the period is characterized by demand that education break out of conventional molds and take on new and better ways to meet a variety of imperatives imposed by diversity in the flow of oncoming students. Both of these points bear heavily on my observations regarding Negro colleges and universities as part of American higher education. A third point is this: I believe too much emphasis is placed on "predominantly" when referring to Negro and white colleges. Use of the word predominantly adds little to the equation. It so happens that a group of colleges

exists in America that have historically served Negroes but many of them have never been exclusively for Negroes. In a period of change when a few white students trickle into these colleges they suddenly become "predominantly" Negro. The fact is they are historically Negro and, as I shall try to establish later in the paper, they are likely to remain Negro and there is no reason to qualify their historic role or their projection as integrated institutions with unnecessary terms.

II

The contemporary college and university in America is faced with striking anomalies, perhaps unprecedented in history. Colleges and universities are key institutions in our post-industrial society. On the one hand they have grown enormously powerful while on the other hand they have become intensely fragile to forces outside their own environments. (I shall comment on these forces momentarily.) A strong climate of pluralism in the society enriches college and university objectives and purposes as well as operations. At the same time they are torn in the drive for a competitive edge in prestige and image, the search for which frequently threatens to compromise the very vitality and character they wish to preserve.²

Both private and public institutions of higher learning face special questions. At

* The author is indebted to Clifton Johnson, Director, and Lewis Jones, Research coordinator, Amistead Center, Board of Homeland Ministers, United Church, Fisk University for use of their unpublished material on Negro Colleges in the preparation of this paper.

¹ See: Earl J. McGrath, *The Predominantly Negro Colleges and Universities* (New York: New York Institute of Higher Education, Columbia University, 1965).

² George W. Bonham, *A Report To Education* (New York: Science and University Affairs, 1967).

no time has it been so necessary to preserve the special passions and strengths of the private institutions of higher learning, including the Negro college and university, but at no time (with few exceptions) has their long term survival been more questioned. The public institutions, on the other hand, while beneficiaries of an education-starved society, must soon face up to the massive task of defining almost open-ended needs to a heavily taxed public which in essence holds a growing mortgage on the destinies of public higher education. One only has to look at recent issues of involving budgets for public higher education in the State of California and pressures in that state for initiation of tuition in tax supported institutions to understand this latter point. As much as 80 per cent of total budgets in some states are committed to education.

It is unnecessary to make a case to detail anomalies in higher education. Nonetheless, it may be important to identify some of the forces which appear to be shaping them, and which appear to be shaping demand for change and new direction.

Beyond population pressures, growth in numbers of school age and college age youth and the logistics associated with them, these forces seem to be major sources for change and appear as major factors influencing the direction of higher education in general and conditioning roles for particular segments of higher education. Two such forces stand out:

1. Transformation in the racial structure of American and world societies. The move toward elimination of racial dualism in education and racial stratification in employment and elimination of racial isolation as a fact in American life.

2. The new wave of expectations among the growing underclass, the other Americans, regarding education and other amenities associated with privileged groups. Accompanying this are new educational demands that grow out of the desire to fulfill a historical commitment to make equality of education realistically accessible to all.

There are these additional forces:

3. A galloping technology — escalation of jobs and other aspects of economic opportunity — the development of new occupations and occupational demands.

4. New occupational and employment opportunity for Negroes.

5. Urbanization and development of an urban mentality on the part of Negroes and other poor people.

6. Social conflict — ghetto problems more sharply focused as well as maldistribution in benefits and burdens between the haves and have nots.

7. New stage in social reforms in the nation — the rise of public policy as an effective instrument of social change.

8. Development of new concepts of human rights including student rights and rights of the poor.

These, of course, by no means encompass all forces shaping current developments in higher education, and in the society. They are sufficient to establish a framework for partial analysis of major issues involving the role of Negro institutions in higher education.

Growing out of these forces are two major issues that occupy much of the space in the literature and are frequent topics in current dialogue involving higher education. One issue involves Negro institutions of higher education, their role,

future and in fact their worth. The other involves education for the so-called disadvantaged.

Issues associated with Negro colleges and universities are mainly associated with transformation in the racial structure of American society. The basic thrust of that transformation is that race slowly but perceptibly is diminishing as a factor conditioning men's lives.

Issues involving the disadvantaged center upon *where* the so-called disadvantaged are to receive higher education and development of programs to meet their needs at all levels of education.

It should be pointed out that in the minds of many, including established scholars, the two issues, i.e., Negroes and disadvantage, are not inseparable. They appear as two faces of the same coin. When one says Negro he says disadvantaged; when one says disadvantage he says Negro. Consequently one of the more subtle developments one observes in education today is substitution of the term "disadvantage" for racial inferiority. More often than not many realize reference to disadvantage among Negroes is equated with and substituted for racial inferiority. This comes clear when one looks at employment patterns, and training programs; when one looks at program development and distribution of grants by philanthropic agencies; and when one examines conclusions that imply, for example, that Negro institutions of higher education are in essence incapable of serving white students.

Recognizing, first, forces for change and, second, the two major issues, let me mention some of the conclusions reached about Negro institutions of higher learning. These conclusions have been reached

by two groups — one group composed of those involved in broad, general and presumably scholarly studies made by persons not involved in Negro education; and the other involving defensive and subjective examinations by administrators and faculty members of Negro colleges and universities. These conclusions are often espoused by those in the first group speaking to the issue of Negro colleges: (1) close the Negro colleges, (2) reduce them to remedial institutions, (3) reduce them to junior colleges, (4) they are destined to be disaster areas,³ and (5) they will always be Negro and therefore by implication inferior institutions (again an implication if not a conclusion by Jencks and Riesman), (6) they should be reduced to homogeneous units for low achievers, (7) they are destined to perpetuate segregation, (8) Negro colleges have no role to play in providing quality education and therefore no role of significance in the future of American higher education.

III

In discussing the role of Negro institutions one must face realistically the fact that Negro colleges and universities have entered a new era in American education. It results directly from the civil rights revolution. The foremost question raised consequently is what is to be their role in this new era? Should they endeavor to become institutions serving fully integrated student bodies and offering the best in liberal education; or should they continue as predominantly Negro institutions endeavoring to meet the particular needs of a "disadvantaged" minority?

³ Christopher Jencks and David Riesman "The American Negro College", *Harvard Educational Review*, XXXVII (Winter 1967), 3-60.

Either role demands self evaluation and change in policies and curricula on the part of the colleges involved.

In one sense these institutions are anachronisms. They are the creation of a passing order and remnant of that order. The nation's determination to sweep aside segregation and discrimination encompasses a determination to eliminate racially constituted educational institutions. On the other hand to conclude from that that these colleges are outdated and can no longer serve a useful purpose is to confuse long-term goals with present and short run realities.

The dilemma of Negro colleges has been the subject of numerous studies in recent years. Lewis Wade Jones,⁴ in a study five years ago, pointed out that not only had expectations increased among Negro students regarding career opportunities but that involvement in the sit-in movement had affected these colleges internally and produced among students new attitudes and expectations regarding campus life, curricula and instruction. There is every evidence that this continues today. Twenty-two articles "Studies in the Higher Education of Negro Americans" published in the yearbook of *The Journal of Negro Education* last fall (1966) indicate the variety of problems facing Negro colleges and universities today. Each of these articles is tentative and inconclusive and suggests need for more thorough study. This was brought out by Stephen J. Wright in his contribution to that volume.

The most recent and probably most critical of the studies of Negro colleges

was made by Christopher Jencks and David Riesman. In their paper on "The American Negro College" in the *Harvard Educational Review* for the Winter of 1967, Jencks and Riesman maintain that Negro colleges are likely to remain academically inferior institutions. Regarding the future of public Negro colleges they conclude that for the most part these colleges "are likely to remain fourth rate institutions at the tail end of the academic procession." Regarding the future of the private Negro college they conclude:

For better or for worse, then, most private Negro colleges seem likely to survive. They will continue to recruit most of their students from all-Negro Southern high schools and to send a substantial proportion of their graduates back to teach in the high schools, unable to break out of the cycle of mis-education and deprivation. Eventually their clientele may shrink, partly as result of the widening price differential between private and public Negro colleges and partly as result of increases in the proportion of Negroes in the South attending integrated high schools. The latter development is, however, likely to be slow if it comes at all. . . .⁵

The most glaring weakness in the Jencks-Riesman statement regarding Negro colleges is that they have arrived at some rather far-reaching conclusions, developed generalizations and set forth inferences without establishing a methodology. Consequently their apparent scholarship suffers from the worst kind of demagoguery — the use of half-truths to support pre-conceived conclusions and hypothesis. Nonetheless they do recognize that there are alternatives to their dire predictions, some on the positive side and perhaps more probable than Jencks and Riesman apparently anticipate.

⁴ Lewis Wade Jones, "The Negro Student Movement," unpublished study for the Field Foundation made in 1962.

⁵ Jencks and Riesman, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

A more extensive, detailed and methodologically oriented study than was made by Jencks and Riesman has been made by Earl J. McGrath, *The Predominantly Negro College in Transition*. McGrath maintains that "In this day when for the first time the nation is really awakened to the indispensable value of higher education and consequently needs every existing institution to accommodate the irresistible legion of oncoming students," the predominantly Negro institutions "should be maintained while rigorous efforts are made to strengthen them." Mr. McGrath recommends long-range planning, cooperation and coordination of efforts among Negro educational institutions as necessities for their growth and development.

Many studies involving Negro colleges and the role of Negro institutions in higher education focus attention primarily on questions of integration and second on questions pertaining to achievement of competitive excellence with America's more prestigious schools which are assumed to be schools of excellence. While no one can discount the validity of these points of concern and national interest, I feel rather strongly that they distract from the more fundamental question of "quality education."⁶ It is rather disconcerting to focus on the attraction of white students as being a major index of educational quality in a society where racial prejudice continues to be a major force underlying decisions involving human interaction. The only legitimate purpose for attention to attraction of white stu-

dents to Negro colleges is to project the fullest meaning of pluralism in the society. The impression is given that if Negro colleges suddenly enrolled a hundred white students, immediately the quality of education in these schools would be improved a hundred times. The real reason that Negro colleges need white students is to reduce the prevalence of racial isolation in education and thought, and through contact to educate whites and Negroes as to the dynamics and full meaning of a multiracial society.

The second aspect of the integration bit is the idea of doing away with anything in the society that is Negro. I am not a black nationalist or black power advocate, but I do raise questions as to whether a college has to be white to be good and to be good enough for everybody. Many Negro colleges and universities have never practiced racial discrimination. They have served in the main a Negro clientele. Many, however, have never excluded whites. Many were founded by whites and continue to have interracial faculties. I raise a fundamental question at this point. What is wrong with Negro colleges continuing to be Negro colleges? They are going to be just that for a long time to come and perhaps it wouldn't be a bad idea for them to remain Negro colleges through eternity. A second fundamental question to be faced in higher education is this: What is wrong with whites going to Negro colleges? Gentiles go to Brandeis and Brandeis is a Jewish University; any way you cut the cake Notre Dame is a Catholic college but Jews and protestants attend Notre Dame.

Jencks and Riesman failed miserably trying to deal with the fact that commensurate with higher education in general

⁶ McGrath, *op. cit.*

⁷ Richard Balzer, "Freedom Is Not Enough," unpublished paper developed as an outgrowth of on the spot observations of Negro colleges while serving as an assistant to James Perkins, President of Cornell University.

Negro colleges cannot all be put into one category. The assumption that because they serve in the main a Negro clientele they are necessarily inferior is a woefully invalid assumption. Unfortunately, the image held of Negro colleges is part of society's image of the Negro. The more important aspect of these institutions is their posture and potential as vital to America's educational resources and to accomplishment of the democratic ideal.

In summary at this point Negro colleges both public and private are part of the problem of American education. As implied above we could easily be talking about Catholic colleges or the Jewish institutions Yeshiva or Brandeis. All the same we must accept this difference: Negro colleges have faced in the past, they face at present, and no doubt will face in the future problems conditioned by a societal process entrenched with racial practices and racial overtones which go beyond education in general.

It seems to me that we are experiencing a race relations mentality today comparable to that experienced by Negroes in the first decade of this century when W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington expressed themselves on Negro education. This is seen in the search for a simple answer to the practical and the ideal at the same time. The practical problem in higher education is that of providing large numbers of youth of diverse backgrounds, Negroes as well as whites, with higher education while at the same time recognizing demands for competitive excellence.

In earlier days we had arguments for schools to develop the mind and an elite for leadership in contrast to development for manual and economic competence.

Just as today, the arguments then were always at extremes. Today the arguments are that Negro colleges should serve as institutions for remedial and compensatory education, as junior colleges, and as vocational institutions, or that they should be eliminated entirely.

IV

In general, the role of Negro colleges should not be that of solely providing compensatory education. Few educational institutions can expect to survive, let alone meet demands of a future student population with compensatory education as an orientation and purpose. Moreover Negro colleges should not be expected to shoulder the costly burden of compensatory education while white institutions go their merry way.

Rather than reject the need for these institutions, their resources and potential, it is important that they be strengthened to serve better more Negro youth while simultaneously made more attractive to white students so that institutional differences will not appear to reflect racial differences but student variations in ability, intellectual interests and career goals. In other words, the extent to which Negro colleges will leave the periphery of higher education and achieve a balance which lends itself to educational ventures that function well in a multiracial society will depend upon the extent that these colleges, and the appreciation of their roles and contributions, are unmarred by the predominance of their racial composition.

V

Negro colleges do encounter problems primarily associated with an academic community which may influence their future roles in higher education. Studies

and reports alluded to earlier mention some such problems. Among the problems is that of serving a clientele unhappily burdened with poor preparation for college work but who nonetheless have abilities and potential for success in higher education. There is no reason to apologize for this fact. Roles in this regard are shaped by historical commitment and these roles in general should not be abandoned. By the same token, there is no reason to abandon service to that part of a historical clientele or otherwise that is properly prepared for fullest exploitation of higher education. There is no reason to abandon competition for the bright student; just as there is no reason to apologize for serving a historical clientele with a disproportionate number poorly equipped for college. However, one cannot stop at this point.

During the 18 months I have been President of Clark College I have observed two things more broadly than I did as a chairman dealing with the narrow confines of my department of economics at Fisk University. One is that Negro colleges are effectively serving that part of their constituency with better preparation but, second, there is serious need to adjust curricula and instruction to accelerate achievements of those with imbalance in preparation. The problem here is acceleration not remediation; more carefully organized curricula and instruction to move poorly prepared youth at a faster pace in their adjustment to higher education. For example, the number of Negro colleges with an adequate academic counseling system and program to reach and work effectively with freshmen in their adjustment to higher education is minimal; and the number with curricula that cuts through the maze of conventional syllabi and in-

structional procedures is even more so. This, of course, is the case with most of American higher education. In Negro colleges this is reflected in high attrition rates which in the private colleges average about 68 per cent. At the same time high attrition rates may be testimony of the rigors imposed in these colleges, Jencks and Riesman to the contrary.

The major purpose of education is to maximize development and participation in social and economic processes. In a sense every person black and white has a right to get all the training and education he can absorb regardless of norms set by the educational standard bearers. Negro and white institutions of higher learning have a responsibility to contribute to this end.

Beyond curricula and instructional adjustment to accelerate achievement of students, roles of Negro colleges are increasingly influenced by failure to abandon more quickly traditional career orientations in favor of those pursuits that are in keeping with modern and future social and economic development at home and abroad.

It is unnecessary for me to repeat the story of growing and increasing opportunity for Negroes in the world. Recent rise in employment opportunities has generated new attention and demand for Negroes in white collar occupations. The forces at work here call for adjustments and re-definition of Negro college pursuits if positive roles and postures are to be strengthened. The implications are many. I shall mention only two.

In 1961 I wrote in *The Journal of Negro Education* an analysis of this aspect of the role of Negro institutions. I

have seen little since then to alter my basic observations.⁸

Pivotal to any question regarding roles of Negro colleges and strengthening them is the decision whether to provide education along narrow lines to prepare students for particular jobs and occupations or broad education which prepares students to adjust to a range of related jobs. The former is obviously faster and cheaper. The latter is more costly in the short-run both in time and money.

Pressures for narrow training in particular fields are particularly relevant to Negro colleges at a time when employment opportunities for Negroes with particular skills and training is greater. Employers, while saying they want broadly educated persons, actually look for those with 24 hours of accounting or those who have met rigid and narrow requirements of the American Chemical Society so they can

go into industry and make lipstick.

In dealing with careers and occupations, therefore, I do not suggest that educational development along the lines of liberal arts be sacrificed. On the contrary it is suggested that a step-up and strengthening of general education is what is needed to provide every college graduate and even those lost at the end of two years with tools of analysis and computation necessary for competition and adjustment to employment demands.

At the same time it is obvious that specialized education over and above general education needs greater thrust. This is particularly relevant to Negro land grant institutions. Re-definition of the role of agriculture in Negro higher education vis-a-vis engineering and technical studies is badly needed. The same goes for home economics where too much emphasis is placed upon homemaking and home economics education at the expense of nutrition or programming to meet needs of urban poverty.

⁸ Vivian W. Henderson "The Economic Imbalance" *Journal of Negro Education*, XXX (Winter 1961), 4-16.