

## **Stephen J. Wright on the Historical Background and Prospects of Black Colleges and Universities (1987)**

Let me begin with a very brief historical overview because it helps us, I think, to understand the present status of the black colleges and universities and the public policies affecting them.

With two exceptions—Lincoln and Wilberforce Universities—the black colleges and universities were established after the Civil War. They were established, in the main, by three different groups: The predominantly white northern church denominations and organizations, the black church denominations and the southern states.

The white northern denominations and organizations established the majority colleges and universities during the first decade following the war, 1865-1875. Included in this group of institutions were Atlanta University, Fisk, Howard, Johnson C. Smith, Shaw University, St. Augustine's, Talladega, Virginia Union, among others.

It is important to recall that when the Civil War ended, 96 percent of the 4 million newly freed blacks were illiterate and that there were no schools to provide the college preparatory work. The newly established institutions were thus colleges and universities in name only - the hopes and dreams of their founders. They had pitifully few facilities, having begun their work in churches, hospital barracks, abandoned railroad cars and various other temporary accommodations.

Instruction in these institutions necessarily began at the elementary school level. But most of these institutions went on to develop academies to provide college preparatory work. These academies were gradually phased out as black public schools were established. This did not occur on any large scale until the 1920's and 30's. I am, for example, a 1930 graduate of the Hampton Institute Academy, in next to its last class.

The next major group of colleges to be established were those established by the black church denominations. This group was established for the most part in the second decade following the Civil War, 1875-1885. The group included such institutions as Allen University, Morris Brown, Lane, Livingstone, Philander Smith, among others.

Beginning also about 1875, the southern states began the establishment of colleges for blacks and continued to do so until by 1891, every southern state except South Carolina and Tennessee had at least one public college for blacks. South Carolina and Tennessee established their black institutions in 1896 and 1912, respectively. Black public colleges have, of course, been added since that time. North Carolina Central University for example, was purchased by the State in the 1920's; Fort Valley State College, Morgan and Jackson State Universities were purchased during the 1930's by Georgia, Maryland, and Mississippi, respectively. Mississippi Valley State College and Texas Southern Universities were established as late as 1946 and 1947 respectively.

## II.

Let us turn briefly to the missions of these new institutions. The principal mission of the private black colleges was the development of leaders, especially teachers—a critically urgent need at the time. The content of the programs, however, emphasized the liberal arts. In other words, they were patterned basically after the colleges from which their northern missionary teachers came, especially those institutions established during the first decade following the Civil War. The conspicuous exception was Hampton Institution which introduced a strong vocational emphasis they called “Industrial Education.”

Hampton with its “industrial education” philosophy was later joined by Tuskegee under the leadership of the eloquent Booker T. Washington, a graduate of Hampton, a member of the class of 1875. The influence of Hampton and Tuskegee so dominated the education of blacks that many of the institutions attempted to emulate them in order to share the philanthropic generosity which Hampton and Tuskegee enjoyed. As late as 1950, the combined endowments of Hampton and Tuskegee exceeded the endowments of all of the other black institutions combined!

It was the spread of the idea of vocational education as the best type of education for blacks, which was also embraced by the southern states, that gave rise to the so-called Booker T. Washington-W.E.B. DuBois controversy—DuBois believing essentially in the higher education of the "Talented Tenth" by means of the liberal arts.

The mission of the public black institutions reflected the deep reservations that southern whites held, at the time, concerning the educability of blacks and was limited almost entirely to teacher training. With the designation of the 17 land-grant colleges, following the passage of the second Morrill Act in 1890, the second emphasis was vocational - "agricultural and mechanical," the mechanical meaning primary trades. In fact, the only public black institutions with strong liberal arts until about 1940 were North Carolina Central and Morgan State Universities, both purchased as ongoing institutions as already indicated.

Until the Supreme Court's Gaines decision was handed down in 1938—a decision to which we will return—no black public college offered any graduate or professional work. Nor did any public black college have a school of engineering. The policy of the southern states was to operate the black colleges as cheaply as possible. There was no real pretense about separate being equal.

But even after Gaines, the degree programs in public black colleges were extremely limited. Until 1983, only four states—North Carolina, Louisiana, Tennessee and Texas—provided schools of engineering in black colleges. Maryland joined the group in 1983 with a school at Morgan State University. The fact that degree programs were so limited makes the enhancement of these institutions difficult and expensive not to mention the duplication involved.

### III.

The development of the black colleges and universities over the years and particularly those located in the South, has been greatly influenced by seven major events: The Jones Study of 1917, the Klein Study of 1928, the decision of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools to accredit these institutions, the Gaines decision of 1938, the Brown decision of 1954, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Adams Case, filed in 1970.

#### The Jones Study

The first systematic study of the black educational institutions was conducted by Thomas Jesse Jones and published by the U.S. Bureau of Education in 1917. The devastating conclusion of the study was that only three of the institutions—Fisk University, Howard University and Meharry Medical College were even worthy of the name college.

Unfortunately, the report was essentially correct. The trouble was that the report became obsolete shortly after World War I but was still being used as the “Bible” on black colleges as late as 1925 and served as the authority for excluding black students from graduate and professional schools. This situation led to a successful appeal by the leaders of the black colleges for a new study. This new, 964 page study, conducted by Arthur Klein of the U.S. Bureau of Education, was published in 1928. Apart from updating the data on black colleges and universities and thus superseding the Jones' study, the most important result of the Klein study was that it led to the decision, in 1930, by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools to accredit black institutions for the first time. They did so by creating a special committee for the purpose, but did not admit the colleges to membership. This did not occur until 1957—27 years later. Negotiations incident to membership extended over a number of years. During the 1950's, I served on the Liaison Committee of the Black Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools which worked with a comparable committee of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools in effecting the admission of black institutions to membership in the Southern Association.

#### Accreditation of Black Colleges and Universities

The decision by the Southern Association in 1930 to accredit black colleges and universities did three very important things: (1) it cleared the way for blacks to gain admission, without conditions or penalties, to the graduate and professional schools of the North West, the principal sources of faculty for the black colleges and universities; (2) it gave the black institutions a strong rationale for some increase in financial support from both the states and private sources; (3) it stimulated the institutions in their pursuit of accreditation to improve their educational programs.

#### The Gaines Decision

The event that brought the first real major changes in the degree programs of the public

black colleges and universities was the decision of the U.S. Supreme Court in 1938, to which I alluded earlier. In essence, the court held, in a class action suit brought by the NAACP, that the State of Missouri had to admit Lloyd Gaines, a Black, to the University of Missouri Law School or provide him an equal legal education within the State.

The Gaines decision had reverberations throughout the South. One example will illustrate the nature of the changes. I joined the faculty of North Carolina Central University in the fall of 1939. That fall, North Carolina Central University opened a law school (with 3 students), a school of library science and began graduate work at the masters level, primarily in Education. But North Carolina Central was not alone. Other law schools were established at Lincoln University in Missouri (actually located in St. Louis), Florida A and M College, South Carolina State College, Southern University and later at Texas Southern University. Furthermore, graduate work at the master's level was begun in selected black institutions in most of the southern states. The Gaines decision also reminded the South of the doctrine of "separate but equal" and this doubtless improved, modestly, the financial support of the black institutions.

#### The Brown Decision

The well known Brown decision handed down by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1954 held that... "in the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal. Therefore we hold that the plaintiff and others similarly situated for who the action have been brought are, by reason of the segregation complained of, deprived of the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment."

This decision did not have as great an impact on the colleges as on the public schools during the years immediately following 1954. What it did do, however, was begin the long process of desegregating both the traditionally black and traditionally white institutions, despite strong opposition at several institutions and the violence that erupted with the admission of James Meredith to the University of Mississippi in 1961.

In any event, the opening of the traditionally white institutions has, in later years, begun to have an adverse effect on the enrollments in the majority of the black colleges.

#### The Civil Rights Act of 1964

The Civil Rights Act of 1964, in outlawing segregation, helped to encourage the modest flow of white students into the traditionally black institutions in the border states of West Virginia, Kentucky, Delaware and Missouri, changing the racial character of these institutions - particularly in West Virginia and Missouri. At the same time, the flow of black students into the traditionally white institutions has become substantial, even in the deep southern states of South Carolina and Alabama.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 also includes Title VI which prohibits racial discrimination

where federal funds are involved—the legal basis for the Adams case.

#### The Adams Case

The Adams case, filed by the legal Defense Fund had as its purpose requiring the Department of Health, Education and Welfare to enforce the provisions of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, mentioned above - in effect to eliminate the vestiges of segregation in those institutions which had practiced *de jure* segregation.

Filed in 1970 (and still continuing), the principal emphasis in the case has been desegregation of the governing boards, the administrations, faculty, staffs and student bodies in both black and white institutions and the enhancement of the black institutions. The efforts to desegregate student enrollments have adversely affected the enrollments in the black institutions as mentioned above but the Adams litigation has had a positive impact on these institutions where the efforts to enhance them are concerned—i.e., improving these institutions to the end that they "will have the facilities, quality, and range of programs, degree offerings, faculties, student assistance, and other resources which are least comparable at those at traditionally white institutions.

Taken seriously, the enhancement efforts could make the critical difference in the quality of the black institutions. For the current biennium in Virginia, for example, the legislature appropriated some \$12.8 million above and beyond their normal budgets for the enhancement of Virginia State and Norfolk State Universities. These funds are for such things as the academic programs, the elimination of historical deficits and the improvement of teacher education programs.

In the case of Alabama, for another example, as the result of a Justice Department suit in the Adams case, the State has promised to provide, over the next five years, some \$35,200,000 in capital funds, \$17,760,000 in non-capital funds, along with a number of smaller enabling grants and very substantial student financial aid funds for the enhancement of Alabama A and M and Alabama State Universities. Furthermore, as a part of Alabama A and M's program enhancement, the University has been authorized to offer a doctoral degree in physics with an emphasis on optics. The relevant question is, of course, whether the state's commitments are enough. Or in a larger context, whether the affected states have made a commitment equal to the dimensions of the enhancement problem of bringing the black institutions to the required level. In the meanwhile, what has happened is that appropriation formulas now tend to be applied equitably where the black institutions are concerned, if one accepts the classifications given these institutions. But equitable current appropriations will not, of course, remove historical deficits.

#### IV.

With respect to the future of the black colleges and universities let us look first at the private institutions. This is a group of institutions born with what might be called a fatal flaw like the fatal flaw in the main character in a classical Greek tragedy. That flaw is the fact that these

institutions are dedicated to the higher education of one of the most economically disadvantaged groups in our society and that they simply cannot charge the level of tuition that other American private colleges charge and unless they have very strong endowments or very substantial operating funds from external sources, or both, the quality of their educational programs will undoubtedly be compromised.

According to the College Entrance Examination Board, the average that was charged by the private college for the academic year 1986-87 was \$5793. I doubt seriously private black colleges can charge the average without pricing itself out of the black student market—barring dramatic increases in federal or state aid, or both. Take Hampton University, for example, one of the strongest, if not *the* strongest black institutions. Its tuition for the year 1986-87 was \$4335 or \$1458 below the national average. If Hampton were able to charge the average, collect it and maintain its enrollment, it would have more than \$6,000,000 additional dollars to invest in its educational program.

The seriousness of this fatal flaw is reflected, in part, by the fact that during the past decade, five of the weaker black colleges closed their doors and last December, three institutions lost their Southern Association accreditation. Moreover, a number of others are in serious trouble.

Beyond the problem of the fatal flaw is the problem of enrollment. For the academic year 1986-87, 13 of the private black colleges had enrollments of fewer than 600, with apparently little or no prospect of growth, since they are compelled to deal with two counter forces: The increasing number enrolling in public institutions because they are less expensive and frequently have superior educational programs; and [the fact that] increasing numbers of students are enrolling in traditionally white institutions.

For the reasons given above, the majority of black colleges face a troubled future. But we know by now, that colleges and universities do not suffer heart attacks or strokes and die suddenly. On the contrary, they die slowly of chronic ailments like financial malnutrition, or "anemia" resulting from a decrease in the life blood of institutions: an adequate flow of students.

In the meanwhile, one of the most, if not the most effective public policies for private institutions are state tuition assistance grant programs. Virginia, for example, makes a grant in the amount of \$1150 per F.T.E. Virginia student enrolled in a Virginia private college. Several other states in the region have similar programs but the amount varies: Alabama \$600, Florida \$1000, North Carolina \$1500, and Georgia \$1237.

The public black institutions present, I think, a more complex but a less troubled future. Among the major factors that will influence their future are:

1. The number and percent of blacks in a given state. In West Virginia, for example, where blacks constitute less than 3 percent of the population, the historically black institutions are now 85 and 95 percent white. For all intents and purposes, the desegregation issue is dead. In such a state, blacks have very little political power. And while not as imbalanced as West Virginia racially, Kentucky, Oklahoma, and Missouri may face somewhere

similar problems.

2. The number of black institutions in a given state. This varies from one to five but eight of the southern states have only one. However, those states with the larger number of black colleges obviously have the larger problems of historical deficits. This could affect the speed with which they are desegregated.
3. The locations of the black college(s) within the state. Kentucky State and Lincoln Universities, for example, are located in cities with no approximate, public, traditionally white institutions and the high probability is that they will become predominantly white within a decade.
4. The existence of a large amount of unnecessary duplication, particularly where there are two proximate institutions - one black and the other white. Examples would include Alabama State and Auburn University at Montgomery; Florida State and Florida A and M Universities and Texas Southern and the University of Houston. In such situations, the high probability is that the predominantly black institutions will lose enrollment- unless, of course, they attract white students in numbers at least comparable to the enrollments of blacks in the traditionally white institutions. Jackson State University with no undergraduate public competition will, in all probability, grow substantially in both total enrollment and in the number and percentage of white students.
5. The vigor and sincerity with which the OCR criteria are pursued by OCR and the affected states and particularly the vigor and sincerity with which the enhancement of the black colleges is pursued. We know that several states have preferred long and costly lawsuits to compliance. Whether their resistance will carry over into their implementation of the court decrees remains to be seen.

Important as it is, public policy, in and of itself, will not totally determine the future of the public black colleges. Student enrollment choices, for example, will be a major factor. And no one can predict how the enrollment patterns develop, since college attendance is neither compulsory nor free.

I like to think of public policy as being a definite course of action, carefully selected among options by appropriate government bodies to guide decisions with respect to perceived problems and needs. Where the black colleges and universities are concerned, we cannot formulate sound policy without understanding thoroughly their problems, needs and potential.