CHAPTER VII

WHITE COLLEGES AND NEGRO HIGHER EDUCATION

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Negroes are linked to whites by their common humanity but they are separated from them by the memories of a brutal past and the experiences of a troubled present. The Negro historical legacy includes severely restricted educational opportunity and special dilemmas of self-recognition and group affiliation. Thus, poverty rigidly limits the pool of Negro talent that is academically and financially eligible to enter and graduate from college. The badge of color worn by every Negro student who does matriculate adds a critical dimension to the transitional identity problems of late adolescence and early adulthood; he must discern some intelligible meaning in the permanent fact of his race.

The failure of white institutions of higher learning to pay sufficient heed to these facts of resemblance and difference is partly a result of the meager representation of Negroes on their campuses. Until very recently most silently acquiesced to the enormous disparity between the ideal and the actual in the American Creed. After all, the senior author of a document proclaiming that "all men are created equal" later retired to the serenity of the presidency of the University of Virginia — but it is not recorded that any Negroes were admitted during his tenure of office. Jefferson lived fifty years to the day beyond the adoption of the Declaration, perhaps long enough to have heard that earlier in the same spring Amherst College had acknowledged his words and implicitly rebuked his failure to honor them by granting the baccalaureate to a Negro, Edward Jones, and thus became the first college in America to demonstrate that it grasped the meaning of Jeffersonian democracy.[1] In the seventh decade of the twentieth century, the small proportion of Negroes in college remains a national scandal, but their number is growing, and of these many, perhaps most, are, or soon will be, enrolled in interracial institutions.

Christopher Jencks and David Riesman have examined statistics compiled by the U.S. Office of Education, the Census, an NORC survey, and the McGrath mail questionnaire and have concluded that

> given contradictory evidence, we can make only approximate guesses about Negro educational patterns. We know that in 1966 about 11 per cent of all 18-21 year olds were Negroes; between 4 and 5 per cent of all undergraduates were Negroes; about 2.5 per cent of all undergraduates were enrolled in Negro colleges . . . This means that between 50 and 60 per cent of all Negro students are probably in Negro colleges. The percentage is probably falling, but we do not know how fast.[2]

The immediate constraint limiting the admission of more Negroes to white col-

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1 For a discussion of the conflicting claims of Edward Jones and John Russwurm to primacy as the first Negro college graduate, see H. Hawkins, "Edward Jones: First American Negro College Graduate?" *School and Society,* XXCIX (1961), 375-376.

2 Christopher Jencks and David Riesman, "The American Negro College," *Harvard Educational Review,* XXXVII (1967), 3-61.

leges is their academic performance in the pre-college years. There is an orderly positive relationship between socioeconomic status and school achievement and average Negro scores on standardized tests are accordingly substantially lower than those of white children in every section of the nation. This gap tends to widen from the elementary to the senior high school. Low socioeconomic status and race are such powerful predictors because they are shorthand expressions of underlying predispositions, conditions, and experiences that affect school behavior. For example, so fundamental a requirement as a quiet place to study may be denied to children who live in crowded substandard housing in urban slums.

There are more subtle correlates of economic deprivation. Peter Rossi has produced a lucid summary of research and informed speculation on class and race differences that seem most relevant for the educational process.[3] The author notes that the literature appearing over the last thirty years "has been considerable, and of considerable variability both in scope and technical excellence." Nevertheless, certain salient features emerge:

1. Disadvantaged populations have restricted experience in the knowledge and skills that are relevant for school experiences. Rossi cites as illustrations "the kind of knowledge gained from first-hand travel, knowledge and familiarity concerning the protocols of social life in standard American homes, familiarity with dealing with adults on some level of equality, etc."

2. The evidence suggests that such groups are comparatively less inclined towards self-discipline and to defer gratification than "standard" Americans.

3. Much research indicates that the disadvantaged have relatively lower motivational levels than persons of higher socioeconomic status. A number of studies report that the occupational aspirations of Negro young people are actually higher than those of white youths of roughly comparable status. Rossi observes that "these aspirations are so far out of line with the obvious educational and occupational destinations of these youths that one might take them as an indicator of how questions asked in this area of life are so lightly answered that they tap fantasy rather than carefully thoughtout plans and aspirations. Interpreted in this light, such findings indicate how far from the center of their attention are such matters as education and future occupational life."

4. The families of disadvantaged children expose them to "speech patterns and vocabularies [that] are respectively deviant and impoverished," culture patterns that interfere with effective school performance.

5. Low status groups feel victimized. According to Rossi: "To be lower class and/or Negro in comtemporary America is to know from a very early point in life that one is different from the 'standard' American and different in ways which are devalued. This is the sense in which to be in such groups is to be continually punished." Such people understandably react by frequently creating deviant value systems, indulging in aggressive behavior, or retreating into apathy.

These "negative" characteristics of low-

[3] Peter Rossi, "The External Environment of the School" in forthcoming volume Melvin M. Tumin and Marvin Bressler (eds.), *Quality and Equality in Education.*

er-class culture do not indicate either biological inferiority or intrinsic perversity. They arise out of their life circumstances rather than genetic insufficiency.

It is obvious, then, that the most fundamental problems of higher education for Negroes lie outside the university walls. So long as the "Great Society" remains a slogan rather than a reality, the numbers of Negroes who can meet the standards of college admission will be disproportionately few. At the same time statistically defined handicaps should be conceived as obstacles to be overcome rather than as impediments beyond remedy. It is a crime against Negro youth to act on the assumption that an unfavorable environment forever disqualifies them from the possibility of learning. Sociological sophistication and misplaced compassion may sometimes be as damaging as insensitivity and prejudice. A system of higher education that is resigned to failure because its potential clientele is the product of slums, or broken homes, or racial discrimination becomes an accomplice to the victimization of the student.

There is, in fact, gratifying evidence of societal concern to provide the financial and academic wherewithal to enable students to seek college admission and to complete their education. The largest scale programs are, of course, those specified in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and the Higher Education Act, both of which went into effect in 1965. Projects Headstart and Upward Bound are of special benefit to Negro students. These public efforts have been supplemented by the National Achievement Program, the Independent Schools Talent Search, the College Assistance Program, as well as the continuingly valuable National Scholarship Service and Fund for Negro Students. Moreover, there now exists a variety of less well financed mechanisms, both private and governmental, to assist the economically disadvantaged.

White colleges should, and often do, cooperate with such programs by furnishing direct services to students and their teachers in the manner of Yale's transitional year, the Princeton-Trenton Institute for Teachers, or the summer programs for disadvantaged youth which thrive on many campuses. They may even, like the New York University School of Education, intervene in the daily operation of a secondary school in an urban ghetto. It does not belittle the moral impulse which generates such activities to observe that the benefits of these and similar programs of compensatory education remain to be demonstrated.

One of the most attractive features of the current educational ferment is the willingness of many to take arms against a sea of troubles equipped only with virtuous intent, accumulated experience, and common sense. The distressing aspect of such effort is that much enthusiasm, energy, and good will is frequently squandered because of inadequate knowledge and the failure to undertake a systematic evaluation of the results of sponsored educational change. Opinions vary as to whether universities should act as direct instruments of social reform, but there can be no question that it is consistent with their highest traditions of social research to appraise educational action programs with reference to their compatibility with cherished social values, their effects on society and the individual, the efficacy of alternative modes of procedure — in short, all of

those elements that enter into a determination of "success" or "failure." The current scarcity of confirmed findings on strategies of educational intervention reflects the low estate of "action" research in the leading American graduate schools which by tradition and affluence are best equipped to engage in responsible social investigation. The "pure-applied" dilemma is a pseudo problem. There are numerous instances where austere social inquiry can intersect with problems that need solution and surely usefulness is not antithetical to serious scholarship.

The paucity of demonstrable knowledge and the reliance on conjecture is equally great in defining the appropriate tactics of instruction for Negro youth once they have been admitted to college. Nevitt Sanford's encyclopedic inventory of higher education devotes all of two pages to the Negro experience.[4] Kenneth Clark and Lawrence Plotkin's slim volume, *The Negro Student in Integrated Colleges*, is the closest approximation to a major work dealing with the subject and yields the much cited finding that Negro survival ratios are superior to whites.[5] The generalizability of this valuable monograph is limited by an atypical sample. Even less is known about Negro alumni. Here Charles S. Johnson's *The Negro College Graduate* is still pre-eminent although it was written in the 1930s.[6] More recent general studies of alumni such as Ernest Havemann and Patricia West's *They Went to College* report the experiences of comparatively few Negroes.[7]

Meanwhile, most universities insist that Negro students meet orthodox admission standards and their teaching practices remain unaltered. This, despite the fact that the prediction of academic success is at best a hazardous undertaking. The usual predictors, SAT scores and high school grades, each correlates with college grades at about .5 and, since Hoyt's review of the relevant literature has shown that the latter cannot be demonstrated to correlate with anything whatsoever,[8] much variability in the academic and future life patterns of students is obviously not yet explained.

In any event, the familiar contention that "this student cannot benefit from the education that we offer here" rests on the assumption that both the student and the institution are incapable of change. The university has exhibited the most inertia, the least inventiveness, and the most contempt for pedagogical innovation of all echelons of the American educational system. Except for students of science who are pampered with laboratory experiences, the full range of instructional techniques in institutions of higher learning ordinarily consists of lecturing to large classes and holding discussions with smaller ones. Surely this impoverished repertoire does not exhaust scholarly ingenuity. We have just begun to experiment with the uses of technology, enrichment programs, the pre-admission tu-

4 Nevitt Sanford (ed.), *The American College* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1962).

5 Kenneth B. Clark and Lawrence Plotkin, *The Negro Student at Integrated Colleges* (New York: National Scholarship Service and Fund for Negro Students, 1963).

6 Charles S. Johnson, *The Negro College Graduate* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1938).

7 Ernest Havemann and Patricia S. West, *They Went to College* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1952).

8 Donald P. Hoyt, *The Relationship between College Grades and Adult Achievement*, A. C. T. Research Reports, #7, September 1965.

torials, "buddy" techniques involving the assistance of fellow students, and similar measures. In short, many universities suffer from a restricted sense of adventurousness that would lead them to relax formal criteria of admission for disadvantaged youth while maintaining the integrity of academic standards. These are twin desiderata for the invitation to enter the open door of the lecture hall is not truly hospitable if an educationally handicapped student emerges with a diploma but with little education.

If the American system of higher education has been guilty of neglecting the specialized needs of disadvantaged populations, it has been even more remiss in its responsibility to its intellectually impoverished colleges and universities. Academic recruitment proceeds according to a competitive model in which a comparatively small number of intellectually and financially well endowed institutions bid for faculty talent against institutions with less prestige and resources. It is not surprising that the rich get richer and the poor get students. This means that only a small proportion of the college population, Negro and white, can hope to experience the full intellectual rewards of a college education. The usual rationale for this state of affairs is that only the "best" can profit from the "best," but, even if we knew the meaning of this uncertain word, it is plausible to assume that the contribution of each additional good course to the education of a student in an elite college is governed by a principle of diminishing marginal utility. Meanwhile students elsewhere are deprived of even a small number of genuinely capable and inspiring teachers.

That some colleges are concerned with this issue is evidenced by the existence of the increasing number of inter-institutional cooperative programs between leading universities and predominantly Negro colleges. These arrangements could serve as a model for broader patterns of collaboration within as well as across racial lines. For example, it should be possible to develop regional consortia of cooperating colleges situated at all points along the quality continuum which would rotate faculty in such manner as to guarantee that each has its share of competent faculty. At the very least, despite the humanistic aversion to technology and "depersonalization," it is difficult to see why white and Negro students in poor schools under whatever auspices could not benefit from televised lectures by America's great teachers, or how disadvantaged institutions could fail to be enriched by linking their libraries through a closed circuit network to universities with superior collections.

These would be welcome innovations but no amount of organizational ingenuity or pedagogic virtuosity in behalf of the disadvantaged will of themselves suffice to meet the needs of Negro students. All Negroes, including the growing middle class, are faced with problems of infinitely greater subtlety and complexity. More than any other group, they are obliged to make a self-conscious choice among the traditional alternatives of assimilationism, separatism, and cultural pluralism.

In the early stages of the civil rights movement, the struggle for emancipation led psychologically, if not logically, to the assimilationist contention that to call a man a Negro did not add to our knowledge of him. Except for superficial physi-

cal traits, the impression of Negro-white differences was an illusion fostered by disparate representation in the various strata of the class structure. It was not then politic to speak openly of intermarriage, but many would nevertheless have welcomed a eugenic solution to the "race problem." Meanwhile it behooved both Negroes and whites to be "color-blind."

The mystique of Negritude may be understood, in part, as an effort to reclaim the Negro from nothingness, to reject self-inflicted invisibility, to protest against the imputation that the end of men's striving is the culture of white America in the twentieth century. An important sector of Negro youth, many of them students in quality universities, are prepared to concede that white men are part of the human family, but they do not expect or even desire all mankind to be as brothers. The separatist mood is clearly conveyed by a freshman writing in the student newspaper of Columbia University:

> The administration of Columbia College, or more specifically the admissions office, plans to increase the number of black students at Columbia to the level of one quarter of the College population over the next few years. The purpose of this is apparently to create a more thoroughly integrated community. With sincere apologies to the simplistic liberalism of the engineers of this policy, I feel compelled to announce the fact that Columbia College will never be integrated. If half, or even three-quarters of the College population were black, there would still exist two separate and basically unrelated student communities. . . . The subsequent classes of black students will not only reject the white man's hang-ups, but will also reject the mediocre goals this institution says they ought aspire to; they will resolutely refuse the man's benevolent offer of a '32nd vice-niggership' at General Motors. . . .
>
> Columbia College has nothing of significance to offer black students, and never will until it ceases to regard us as essentially white students with black skins.[9]

The doctrine of cultural pluralism furnishes an alternative to the indiscriminate universalism of amalgamation and the fierce parochialism of black separatism. It holds that there is a residual which transcends race and class which might properly be called a Negro culture comprising shared assumptions, life styles, and an art that is worth preserving. But cultural pride does not require denigration of significant white achievements and, although whites may be held culpable for past and present sins, its total civilization is not beyond redemption. Moreover, unless Negroes propose to secede from American society, their only viable option is to form coalitions with the more enlightened elements of the white majority.

It would be presumptuous, and in any case futile, to counsel Negro Americans on the tactics of freedom and their proper relationships to the wider society. However, it seems clear that interracial colleges are uniquely able to provide the student with the relevant experiences to guide his choice. At best such institutions consist of persons with varied backgrounds, talents, and aspirations, and can serve as laboratories for instruction in fruitful coexistence. They can offer the opportunity to develop equal-status contacts which alone can destroy the stereotypical symbolism of black or white villany.

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[9] Marvin S. Kelly, "Pride in Blackness," *Columbia Daily Spectator*, The Supplement, April 26, 1967, pp. S-2 – S-4.

As still another Columbia student reported:

> I will remember a fantastic collection of friends, many of them white, many of them black, many of them in some other 'category.' Acutely aware of the white-problem-in-America as I am, as prejudiced toward my own people as I am, I have still found individuals — not black — whom I can respect, admire, and even love.[10]

From all accounts Negro and white interaction on the American campus does not often result in these benign consequences. Each group tends to maintain sub-cultures with impermeable barriers and each thus forfeits the chance to develop a richer and more complex view of the social universe. One suspects that white students, even more than their Negro counterparts, deliberately remain aloof from potentially productive interchange, a stance that is reinforced by the omission from the curriculum of any reference to the contributions of Negroes to the civilization of the United States and the world. If the historical record were corrected, white students would learn more about themselves and their nation for, as Margaret Just Butcher has written, "some of the most characteristic features of American culture are derivatives of the folk life and spirit of this darker tenth of the population."[11]

The history departments of our great universities can no longer plead ignorance. Such Negro scholars as W. E. B. DuBois, John Hope Franklin, E. Franklin Frazier, Rayford Logan, and Benjamin Quarles have well documented the role of their people in American life. Moreover, in the last quarter century, an increasing number of white historians, among them Dwight L. Dumond, Kenneth Stampp, James McPherson, Stanley M. Elkins, and Leon F. Litwack, have interested themselves in the Negro. Even so there continue to be gaps in coverage in standard sources — for instance, John C. Miller's *Origins of the American Revolution* and L. S. Gipson's *The Coming of the Revolution* make no mention of Crispus Attucks — but with a little effort every instructor can restore the vision of those who are unjustly "color-blind" in their approach to American history.

However, curricular revision is a necessary but insufficient means to introduce whites and Negroes to each other. Stephen Leacock once listed the priorities for a college education as first a dormitory, then a library, and only later if funds permitted faculties and classrooms. Little will be learned unless Negro and white students meet in comradeship in the debating forum, the student union, and clubs, at parties, as roommates, in all those places where people reveal themselves. This is easier said than done. It is ironic that many Negroes have now joined whites in insisting on the "right to selective association" and in opposing "enforced integration." College administrations have relatively few options, such as random assignment to dormitories, but it is conceivable that if racial isolation were identified as a serious problem other means could be invented.

It will not do to conceal the fact that, if colleges are successful in stimulating more interracial associations, Negro students may experience increasing psycho-

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10 James Alexander, Jr., "Columbia College: A Paradox for the Negro," *Columbia Daily Spectator*, The Supplement, April 26, 1967, p. S-4.

11 Quoted by Benjamin Quarles in "What the Historian Owes the Negro," *Saturday Review*, September 3, 1966, pp. 10-13.

logical burdens. The college-educated Negro is the most recent exemplar of the marginal man about whom Robert Park and Everett Stonequist spoke more than four decades ago. For the indefinite future he will straddle two cultures, no longer fully a member of one and not yet wholly comfortable in the other. Generations will pass before Negroes will be able to deal with the competing claims of all their intersecting worlds with composure and serenity.

It may be some consolation that this ambivalence and alienation can serve productive purposes. A previous generation of immigrants who viewed American society from the vantage point of its own perplexities was able to enrich the arts and the social sciences with a literature of passion, complexity, and ambiguity. Ralph Ellison, who is a legitimate heir to this tradition, is a great writer precisely because his work reflects the continuously unstable equilibrium among multiple cultures.

The experience of marginal men in interracial colleges will expose them to the polar temptations of either extolling or denouncing white middle class existence. The urge to escape problems of identity could lead them to outdo their classmates in achieving bourgeois respectability. The socially mobile often tend to be unduly offended by the absence of refinement among the unlettered, to sneer at the vulgarity of the masses, and to regard every Negro indiscretion as a threat to their own position. The Negro alumnus has as much right as the next man to lead the life he chooses. Nonetheless, it would be a betrayal of his education if he should elect to abandon the struggles of his people for the sake of the symbols of middle class merit.

An even greater danger is the exaggerated fear of co-optation. The impulse to protest should not be corrupted by indulging in the now fashionable game of baiting the bourgeoisie. The "conformity," "middle class norms," and "bureaucratization" which many critics correctly perceive as characteristic of American life are in some measure features of all modern societies. Industrial nations require citizens who are work oriented, responsible, and masters of tangible skills, and the emphasis on such competencies tends to generate stable life styles. It is easy, but irrelevant, to speak contemptuously of a "vice-niggership at General Motors," unless we are also prepared to live without automobiles. Responsible social criticism identifies evils in order to combat them and not to demonstrate one's own superior moral yearnings. In short, useful men do not endlessly deplore their society; they try to organize it so that it is at once prosperous and habitable, that is to say, as humane, spontaneous, and free as it can be within the inescapable constraints imposed by the modern industrial state. American society can sustain the defection of numerous young people into romantic retreat and benefit from the pressure to examine its basic premises, but it is not in the various Haight-Ashbury's that we shall find national deliverance.

The basic problems of college-age Negroes — economic deprivation, academic competence, personal and group identity — require more from white institutions of higher learning than the now popular public confessions of past culpability. The sincerity of their repentance will be measured by their performance in discovering, recruiting, and training a new generation of black men and women. The souls they save may be their own.