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Instilling an Ethic of Leadership at Fisk University in the 1950s

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Abstract

In many cases, student activism on college campuses stems from alienation – alienation of one generation from another, alienation of students from administration. The atmosphere in Nashville, Tennessee, at Fisk University during the early 1950s included neither of these ingredients. Most students admired their professors and respected the University president. In the case of Fisk, activism grew out of a shared sense of values and demonstrated leadership – as well as a response to outside oppression. This leadership and these values were passed on to students by Fisk’s charismatic president, Charles S. Johnson. The purpose of this historical research is to explore the approach to activism that Charles S. Johnson advocated and instilled in the students at Fisk University. How did Johnson develop his values and convictions? On which principles were they based? How did he pass them on to others? And, how can Johnson’s example help today’s college presidents contribute to a renewed sense of activism among their students? Through the use of archival materials, interviews, and secondary sources, I will highlight Johnson’s “sidelines” approach and discuss his student’s reactions to it. Further, I will explore their own approaches to activism – that in their words “were heavily influenced by their Fisk experiences.”

Instilling an Ethic of Leadership at Fisk University in the 1950s

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*"Don't show your anger in your writing;
make others angry with your writing."*

-Charles S. Johnson 1

In many cases, student activism on college campuses stems from alienation – alienation of one generation from another, alienation of students from administration. The atmosphere in Nashville, Tennessee, at Fisk University during the early 1950s included neither of these ingredients. Most students admired their professors and respected the University president. In the case of Fisk, activism grew out of a shared sense of values and demonstrated leadership – as well as a response to outside oppression. This leadership and these values were passed on to students by Fisk's charismatic president, Charles S. Johnson. The purpose of this historical research is to explore the approach to activism that Charles S. Johnson advocated and instilled in the students at Fisk University. How did Johnson develop his values and convictions? On which principles were they based? How did he pass them on to others? And, how can Johnson's example help today's college presidents contribute to a renewed sense of activism among their students? Through the use of archival materials, interviews, and secondary sources, I will highlight Johnson's "sidelines" approach and discuss his student's reactions to it. Further, I will explore their own approaches to activism – that in their words "were heavily influenced by their Fisk experiences."

A Brief History of Activism at Black Colleges

Although many scholars who study activism fail to give proper coverage to activism on black college campuses, it has taken place since the founding of these institutions (Altbach, 1989; Austin et al., 1989; Chambers & Phelps, 1993; Kahn & Bowers, 1970; Simon, 1980). However, according to Joel Rosenthal (1975), it was not until the 1920s that large numbers of black colleges "found their students protesting a variety of inequities" (p. 115). The 1920s brought a new era – one of rebirth for African Americans. Black literature, music, and the arts were gaining attention and the voice of the "Negro" was being heard. Alain Locke, E. Franklin Frazier, Charles S. Johnson, and W.E.B. Du Bois produced scientific research related to African Americans. However, the 1920s were also a time of great racism with the "resurgence of the Klan and the passage by Congress of explicitly racist restrictions upon immigrations" (Aptheker, 1968, p. 152). The 1920s brought on one of the largest booms of higher education in United States history, especially for African Americans. The total enrollment in black colleges and normal schools in 1920 was approximately 600,000, but by 1930 it had increased to 1,188,500 (Aptheker, 1968). Although eager for education, the black students did not agree with all of the policies and practices of their respective institutions. The students were mostly concerned with the white northern influence on their college curricula and curtailment of student freedoms. For example, at Fisk University under white president Fayette McKenzie in 1925, students staged an all-out protest — glass was shattered and buildings were occupied for several days. The restrictions imposed by McKenzie caught national attention and aroused the anger of Fisk alumnus W.E.B. Du Bois (Anderson, 1988; Lamon, 1974; Wolters, 1975). Two years later, a similar protest took

place at Hampton Institute. In the words of Joel Rosenthal (1975), "Not surprising was the fact that widespread direct action took place at the so-called 'elite' institutions whose students had the greatest interracial contact. There the aspirations to enter into middle-class American life were the greatest and the disparities between black and white cut most deeply" (p. 115). A decade later, in 1934, black students from Virginia Union College went to the state legislature and demanded increased expenditures for the black colleges in Virginia. The same year, Fisk University student Ishmael Flory organized a protest around a lynching that took place at the edge of the campus. He also led protests against a local theatre that provided Jim Crow entertainment. By 1935, the black student protests began to focus on the anti-war movement. Students at Howard and Virginia Union College took the 'Oxford Pledge,' vowing not to support the United States government in any engagements of war (Rosenthal, 1975). On April 12, 1935, approximately 150,000 students "struck for an hour against war and Facism. Among them were 3,000 black students from Howard University, Virginia Union, Virginia State and Morgan College" (Rosenthal, 1975, p. 117). Although the War itself tempered some of the protest enthusiasm, returning black veterans spawned a new activist movement. They provided the spark which lead to a desegregation rally at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. Students tried to gain access to local coffee shops and movie theatres. However, they were unsuccessful until 1954 when they were awarded \$600 in damages along with an injunction forbidding segregation at the theatre (Jones, 1962). After the Supreme Court handed down its historic decision in 1954, students at black colleges stepped up their efforts to end segregation. Their initiatives sometimes angered the administration of their respective colleges. For example, South Carolina College for Negroes expelled its student body president for testing the limits of the Brown decision. In situations where the administration supported the student efforts, the State Board of Education often intervened. This was the case at Alcorn State the student protestors and president were removed from the university.

Fisk University

Although located in Nashville, the Fisk University campus provided an integrated environment for its students, faculty, and guests. A historically black college, Fisk was founded in 1866 and had a rich tradition of providing liberal arts education to its students. Its first black president, Charles S. Johnson, created a milieu at the University that gave young blacks the benefits of integration. At Fisk, prominent artists and intellectuals of all races came together to nurture students and encourage scholarship. Not only was the campus integrated in terms of its faculty and guest speakers, but also it boasted a diverse student body. According to one of these students, Jane Fort, "the campus burst with intellectual activity: the faculty was full of well-trained professors, the best in their fields... During my years, we heard from and had an opportunity to meet and interact with such notables as W.E.B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King, Jr., Langston Hughes and so many others that we may have taken it all too much for granted" (Gasman, 2000; personal communication, March 19, 1999).

Fisk University's First Black President

A nationally and internationally connected figure, Charles S. Johnson used his status as a researcher and advisor to several United States presidents, philanthropists, and the United Nations, to bring acclaim to the campus, and to attract prominent scholars to it (Gilpin, 1973; Stanfield, 1985; Robins, 1996). He came to Fisk in 1928, schooled in the Chicago-style of sociology.² His career and interactions were much more far-reaching than those of earlier Fisk presidents, thus playing a significant role in the changes taking place at Fisk. Johnson shared with other black leaders a sense of outrage over the injustices of

segregation; however, his approach was liberal, not radical. His circle of friends included people of all races and he showed his advocacy of cooperation across racial lines. Johnson believed that by leading a first-rate historically black college in the South — a university whose academic program attained a level equivalent to many prominent white institutions — he was demolishing the notion that blacks were intellectually inferior. He was supportive of and demanded integration on the Fisk campus. He believed that Fisk would be an incubator for changes that might eventually happen throughout the country. In this sense, Johnson was an activist (Gasman, 2000; Johnson, 1942). Although Johnson had had many national and international experiences, it was his early years that had the greatest impact on his values and his method of "sidelines activism." Born in 1893, Johnson was the son of an educated Baptist minister. Although he was not overly active in the church, Johnson had a deep spiritual sense, which he gained from his father (Jeh Vincent Johnson, personal communication, September 13, 1999). Of his father he said, "he had both the will and a way of translating his religious convictions into useful and pioneering social action" (Johnson, 1948, p. 192). As a small child growing up in the South, Johnson also felt the sting of Jim Crow in his community. One day, visiting the ice cream parlor that had become a familiar and inviting place, he and his mother were refused service. Although his mother never shared the reason for the refusal — newly imposed segregation laws — Johnson knew what was taking place in his small town. This incident "was the beginning of a new self-consciousness that burned" for Johnson (p. 195). From this experience, Johnson also learned the art of grace under pressure — a skill his mother had perfected as a black woman in the South (Johnson, 1948). In order to help his family, young Johnson took a job shining shoes in "Mr. Davis' barbershop." He spent hours at the shop in Bristol, Virginia, listening to the white customers talk. According to historian Patrick J. Gilpin, Johnson "took a keen interest in humankind and society. The sociological skills of a neutral observer, ...and an insightful analyst were first developed in that uniquely 'American' capacity of an 'invisible man'" (Gilpin, 1973, p. 12). Johnson entered Virginia Union College in 1913. It was here that he met one of the most significant people in his life--Joshua Simpson, a black professor of Greek. Simpson challenged Johnson's ways of thinking. He was able to convey to Johnson "the full and rich meaning of a wholesome life through an exacting, but never apprehensive discipline (Johnson, 1948, p. 196). It was Simpson who helped Johnson "come closest to understanding the art and meaning of human relations" (Johnson, 1948, p. 196). Another individual who had a profound influence on Johnson's ideas was Robert E. Park, the University of Chicago sociologist. Park was not only Johnson's professor, but he also served as his mentor until Park's death in 1944. It was Park who linked Johnson's deep concern with human relations, developed under Joshua Simpson, with science. Johnson said that Park gave "[me] whatever philosophy I can claim as my own, and out of this has come such spiritual maturity as may have developed" (Johnson, 1948, p. 197). While a college student, Johnson participated in the annual Christmas Basket Drive with the Richmond Welfare Association. His role was to determine the neediness of potential applicants. While doing his job, he came across a young pregnant woman lying on the ground amidst a pile of rags. Johnson tried to get her help but was refused — not only the authorities, but her own family turned her away. Because of her color or because in the eyes of society, she had sinned, every door was closed. Eventually the young woman disappeared. Johnson was never able to shake the image of the young mother, or, in the words of his long-time friend Edwin Embree, "to cease pondering the anger of people at human catastrophe while they calmly accept conditions that cause it" (1946, p. 52). Even thirty years later, Johnson had haunting memories of the incident. In 1948, he wrote, "Out of this experience... came a lasting insight and conviction. It was simply that no man can be justly judged until you have looked at the world through his eyes (Johnson, 1948, p. 197)." This experience led to Johnson's values and his life-long commitment to equality and the understanding people of all races. Often ahead of his time, Johnson was heavily criticized and mistrusted by many black leaders and white southerners alike. Some of his ideas, however, would prove to be

prophetic in the field of black higher education. One of his goals for academic and social preparation at Fisk was to build students up in "terms of their own strength and identity" (Peggy Alsup, personal communication, March 31, 1999). Johnson was fond of saying, "This is where we come to give these kids the strength that they are going to need to confront the rest of the world." Much different from the challenge found in the Civil Rights movement — to prepare students for civil disobedience — Johnson's focus was on "nurturing and incubating" students: giving them academic tools, self-worth, and confidence. Johnson would say, "there are many different ways to make change" (Peggy Alsup, personal communication, March 31, 1999). Making change, moving forward, and seizing opportunities were cornerstones of Johnson's approach. He believed that "life [was] something constantly in the process of reconstruction — a reconstruction made necessary by ever shifting scenes, and situations ..." (Johnson, 1948, p. 199). Johnson was politically astute, and worked hard to give students a sense of the larger forces that shaped society.

Student Experiences: The Impact of Charles S. Johnson

Fisk was the stage on which Johnson sought to make change. He saw Fisk and the education it provided to students as a way to instill values, challenge the status quo, and develop minds. It was Johnson's belief that "...man is made both good and bad by his institutions; that these institutions are responsible for the shaping of personalities, our morals, and the patterns of our social relations; and that the reshaping of our institutions are our responsibility" (Johnson, 1948, p. 199). At Fisk, Johnson promoted his method of activism — activism through scholarship and leadership. In order to promote his idea, Johnson used both the academic and co-curricular programs. Fisk's programs drew upon cultural, political, and artistic resources from around the world and the programs were open to both Fisk students and the local citizens of Nashville. According to student body president Prince Rivers, "Fisk provided entertainment and education for all of Nashville. For example, we used to have a film series every Saturday and Sunday night and we'd play foreign films and the Nashville community was welcome... Fisk was one of those places in Nashville where all people could get together and mingle without concern" (personal communication, March 25, 1999). The university's film series was quite comprehensive and included an international array of films (International Center Annual Report [ICAR], 1951-1952, 1955-1956). Although the showing of "art" films seems the norm on most college campuses today, Fisk was ahead of its time in providing this type of entertainment. The nature and content of many of the films were radical. Not only were the films a diversion for the Fisk students, but they provided an entry into the outside world — a world in which blacks were treated differently than in the South. The Fisk students were exposed to other influences as well — through guest speakers in music, art, and theater. The visual arts offerings were particularly extensive and ranged from the ancient to the European renaissance to the modern. Fisk showcased the avant-garde, hosting a photography exhibition of works by Lisette Model and Irving Penn in 1950 and Man Ray in 1951 (ICAR, 1955-1956; International Center flyer, March 30, 1950). Most significantly, Fisk housed one of the largest and most impressive Modern art collections in the South donated by Georgia O'Keeffe in 1949. The international scope of the guest speaker series encouraged the Fisk students to view their own situation in terms of the larger world. The topics ranged from "Psychology of Aesthetics" to "The Middle East and the Modern World." There was a special focus on the decline of European colonial empires, a topic that was in the forefront of people's minds in the early 1950s. For example, lectures were given on "British Policy in West Africa" and "The Abolition of Colonialism." These lectures drew attention to the changing situation for people of color around the world. As noted by historian Harvard Sitkoff (1993), "The rapid growth of independence movements among the world's colored people had special significance for African Americans. They provided the feasibility of change and the vulnerability of white supremacy, while at the same time aiding African

Americans to see themselves as members of a world majority rather than as a hopelessly outnumbered American minority" (p. 16). By encouraging students to think in a global manner, President Johnson's programs attempted to end their isolation from the rest of the world's ideas. This was consistent with Johnson's overall effort to "renounce the philosophies of escape, and pin [his] faith in the power of life experiences" (Johnson, 1948, p. 201). The exposure to these outside influences fed into the changing mindset of the Fisk students. In spite of the Jim Crow atmosphere present in Nashville, the diversity of offerings at Fisk brought people of different races together. As Peggy Alsup, a student recalls, "It was a time of strict segregation – we went downtown in groups and we knew where to go and where not to go... There were students from other universities and other countries who would come to Fisk and we would have the opportunity to interact with and learn from them" (personal communication, March 31, 1999). Thus, the Fisk academic and co-curricular program had a significant impact on the Fisk students. On a daily basis, students were learning to reject the status quo through their scholarship and the campus environment. According to student Vivian Norton, "The Fisk campus was an international microcosm. There were regular and exchange students from all over the U.S. and the world. This taught all of us that the world has all kinds of people in it; we needed to be able to interact in important ways – differences in skin color were irrelevant. We lived in dorms with roommates of different colors, religions, and national origins" (personal communication, May 11, 1999). The Fisk environment familiarized an integrated style of living and emboldened students to challenge the norms in the local community. This is exemplified by an account given by Fisk student Donna Penn Towns. Despite being warned by her mother not to leave the campus or venture into downtown Nashville, Ms. Towns decided to take the bus alone one day. She remembers, "Whites were on the bus. I [got on] and sat down in a seat near the middle of the bus. The bus driver pulled off, but before he reached the next stop, he noticed that I was not sitting in the back of the bus. He stopped the bus and came to me and asked me to move back. I just stared out the window and did not move. He repeated the request several times and then uttered some profanity and stormed back to his seat and pulled off. That was the end of it. I was not supposed to be on that bus, so I did not make a big deal of telling people when I got back to the campus. Only later did I realize that the results could have been not so pleasant" (personal communication, March 23, 1999). The Fisk students would sometimes flaunt their interactions with students of other races in front of passersby. According to student Prince Rivers, "...The black students would be standing out on the corner hugging and carrying on with the white students and people would almost fall out of their cars seeing us on the sidewalk" (personal communication, March 25, 1999). Although black students were required to sit in the balcony at movie theatres in Nashville, some of the international students, and in particular, those from Africa, "used to wear their head wraps and would be treated as whites in the theatres." Sometimes, in fact, the black Fisk students would "don the head wraps and get the 'white treatment' as well." The influence of the outside forces, brought to campus by Charles S. Johnson, encouraged the Fisk students to confront the absurdity of segregation in other ways as well. They would "go downtown and if [they] saw a colored fountain, [they] would say hey 'this is a colored fountain and you can buy colored water.'" Thus, the presence of outsiders encouraged the Fisk students to show contempt and mockery for a system that they had been raised to fear. Like Johnson years earlier, they "developed a new self-consciousness that burned" (Johnson, 1948, p. 195). The race relations institutes at Fisk were another of Johnson's means for chipping away at segregation. Started as a branch of the social science program, the race relations department sponsored annual summer institutes. The institutes included lectures on the black church, the Third World, labor, desegregation, etc. Participants included a cross-section of the nation's leaders – church representatives, labor organizers, government officials, academics and community organizers. Students were encouraged to participate in the institutes and had the opportunity to interact with both established and up and coming race leaders. Both Thurgood Marshall and Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke at the

race relations institutes. Johnson included undergraduate students in the scholarly endeavors of the faculty, thus exposing them to current research. Students learned that academics could be activists by sharing research with practitioners and those on the front lines. He also encouraged students to tackle issues brought to the surface during the race relations institutes. Some students did special research projects at Fisk or during their graduate studies elsewhere, while others tackled the issues more directly through sit-ins and boycotts during the ensuing Civil Rights movement.

Conclusion

Charles S. Johnson's approach to instilling a sense of action into the Fisk students is similar to that proposed more recently by E. C. Harrison, the former vice president of academic affairs at Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Harrison encouraged black colleges and their faculty to provide students with research experiences, to engage students in interracial dialogue outside of the classroom, and to aid students in "making application of knowledge to social problems" (p. 119). Further, he urged administrators to make the educational program more relevant to student concerns and society. Through a similar approach, Charles S. Johnson was able to captivate the minds of the Fisk students and encourage them to be active in the pursuit of equality. Although he knew that direct protest and confrontation were valid and useful ways to make change, he showed students that there were multiple ways to be an activist. As a college president, he was committed to usurping societal oppression, but not undermining the foundation of the institution in which he worked. According to Johnson, "We are well enough aware of the disposition among many of the young to toss away moral codes along with the discovered fallacies and empty rituals and superstitions of outworn dogma" (Johnson, 1948, p. 201). Through an understanding of both scholarly issues and outside forces, Fisk students were able to sift through the "dogma" but also retain the moral foundations instilled and modeled by Charles S. Johnson. Johnson believed that scholarship and demonstrated leadership could "chip away at a problem" by exposing it to the public. Most importantly, Johnson taught the Fisk students what he had learned from the unwed pregnant woman years earlier – to reject the conditions that cause human catastrophe. Fisk students were encouraged to change these conditions with their written words and spoken voice. Johnson continually returned to the words attributed to him by the Fisk alumni, "Don't show your anger in your writing; make others angry with your writing." Fisk University and Charles S. Johnson influenced the actions of Hazel O'Leary (former Clinton Energy Secretary), Johnnetta B. Cole (former Spelman College president and distinguished professor of anthropology at Emory University), David Levering Lewis (Pulitzer Prize winning historian and biographer of W.E.B. Du Bois), Nikki Giovanni (poet, activist, and author of Racism 101), and Preston King (life-long activist, recently pardoned by President Clinton). On most college campuses today and throughout American history, we see activism started by student initiative, occasional faculty prompting, or by the influence of outside groups. It is atypical for the impetus for activism to come from the president's office. The combined effect of Johnson's influence, the Fisk curriculum, and visitors to the campus was instrumental in the changing mindsets of Fisk students during the 1950s. The boundary-pushing educational program helped introduce another way of thinking about race to Fisk University students – a more optimistic view in which integration was possible and desirable. Both the national and international guests brought ideas and questions to the Fisk campus that forced the students to think differently about their situation in Nashville. Charles Johnson's educational program inspired students to act by giving them a global awareness. The exact situation at Fisk cannot be replicated – the bond that unified the president and students was most likely that they were African American and living in a legally segregated community. What can be replicated, however, is the notion that a college president can be a role model for students. In order to accomplish this, the presidents' interactions with students need not be frequent

– but must be significant. Like Johnson, college presidents ought to bring to the students the experiences that shaped their own development as a leader. Most leaders have an internal motivation. Sharing formative experiences that led them to be agents for change can challenge students to look beyond the status quo and take control of ambiguous situations. Also, today's college presidents should follow Johnson's lead by exposing students to the widest possible range of intellectual experiences. These might include: close interactions with prominent political, educational, and artistic figures; exposure to research produced by their college faculty; and inclusion in campus symposia and other venues designed to disseminate research findings. By following these guidelines, college presidents can show students that education itself – not just protests, sit-ins and boycotts – can be a form of activism and a catalyst for change. Once students have this understanding, in the words of Charles S. Johnson, they will "translate their experiences into action" (Johnson, 1948, p. 197).

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Endnotes

1. The majority of the Fisk students that I interviewed attributed this quote to Charles S. Johnson. 2. Johnson came to Fisk in 1928 but did not become president until 1946. Prior to the presidency, he served as chair of the social science department.