Brown v. Board's Legacy and Contemporary Black Higher Education

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AS A SCHOLAR WHO STUDIES BLACK COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES, I RECEIVE QUERIES FROM THE NEWS MEDIA ON A REGULAR BASIS ABOUT ISSUES RELATED TO THESE HISTORIC INSTITUTIONS. WITH THE CURRENT "CELEBRATION" OF THE *BROWN V. BOARD OF EDUCATION* DECISION, ONE QUESTION FROM REPORTERS IS ASKED MORE THAN ANY OTHERS: "WHY SHOULD BLACK COLLEGES EXIST IN THE POST-*BROWN* ERA?" ALTHOUGH THIS IS A LEGITIMATE QUESTION, IT ALWAYS UNSETTLES ME. I WONDER WHY NO ONE EVER ASKS IF PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS (PWIS) SHOULD STILL EXIST. I CAN ONLY CONCLUDE THAT THE REASON REPORTERS POSE ONLY ONE QUESTION IS THE CONTINUING STIGMA ASSOCIATED WITH ALL-BLACK INSTITUTIONS AND THE ASSUMPTION THAT PWIS ARE INTEGRATED.

Brown and the Assumption of Inferiority

I will speak first to the stigma of inferiority. This notion has been attached to black colleges since their establishment but was actually reinforced by the majority opinion in the *Brown* decision. In 1954, Chief Justice Earl Warren wrote, "Segregation of white and colored children in public schools has a detrimental effect upon the colored children." In making its decision, the Court relied on the work of several social scientists—the most prominent was Kenneth B. Clark. With his wife, Mamie Phipps, Clark conducted research on the self-image of black children, and this research was used by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to convince the Warren Court that segregation had a negative effect on black children.

Based upon their research, the Clarks concluded that segregation was psychologically damaging to black children, that it often created feelings of inferiority, self-rejection, and loss of self-esteem, and that this in turn negatively affected their learning ability. Of course, Earl Warren noted in his opinion and the NAACP argued that it was segregation with the "sanction of law" that caused these feelings, but that technicality is lost on contemporary audiences. As the legal scholar Derrick Bell points out so eloquently in his new book, *Silent Covenants:* Brown v. Board of Education *and the Unfulfilled Hopes for Racial Reform* (2004), all-black institutions were pronounced substandard for their very racial makeup, but nothing was said of their all-white counterparts. According to the Warren Court, an all-white educational environment did not have any negative effect on the self-concept of white children and was deemed obviously superior.

Quality of Black Colleges and Universities

The most damaging aspect of the assumed inferiority of all-black institutions is that all 103 historically black colleges are lumped into a single, substandard category. I often have to remind reporters, scholars, and policy makers that, yes, black colleges have some commonalities—for example, a dedication to racial uplift—but there are as many different kinds of black colleges as PWIs. Black colleges are public, private, four-year, two-year, religious, nonreligious, selective, and nonselective. Each is dedicated to a unique educational mission. Some are strong in the humanities, others in music, and still others in the sciences. For example, Xavier University in New Orleans has become nationally known for its ability to nurture and graduate students who do well on the MCAT, attend medical school, and pass state medical exams. In fact, in 2001 Xavier was ranked the top institution by the American Medical Association for placing African American students in medical school (see Figure 1).[1] In 2003, 169 students from Xavier gained entry into chemistry- or biology-based graduate and professional schools (including eighty-four who were accepted into medical schools). Likewise, Spelman and Bennett Colleges, both historically black women's institutions, produce over 50 percent of the African American women in science-related doctoral programs nationwide. The second reason I think the public continues to ask, "Why do we need black colleges?" is that the majority of white people assume that the playing field is level and that *Brown* has made an education at a predominantly white university possible for most African American students. However, if you look at the statistics pertaining to African American students at PWIs, the picture is bleak and could get worse.

Figure 1. Medical School Placement of African Americans (2001)

*denotes historically black institution

Ranking	Institution	Number of Students
1	Xavier University*	94
2	Spelman College*	38
3	Harvard University	37
4-5 (tie)	Howard University*/Morehouse College*	33/33
6	University of Maryland College Park	24
7	Johns Hopkins University	20
8	University of California-Los Angeles	17
9-10 (tie)	University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill/ University of Virginia	16/16

(Data from American Medical Association, 2001)

Predominately White Institutions and Black Students

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, only 11.4 percent of African Americans hold bachelor's degrees, compared to 21.5 percent of the white population. Moreover, African Americans make up only 10.1 percent of those who attend college, while whites make up 72.9 percent.

Of these African American students, 28.5 percent attend historically black colleges. The rest attend predominantly white institutions throughout the country. Some of these institutions, either through aggressive recruitment strategies or because of their location in predominantly black cities, have been able to attract a significant percentage of black students.

For example, the student body of Georgia State University in Atlanta is 30 percent African American. It awards more bachelor's degrees to African American students than any other PWI. In 2003, Georgia State graduated 885 African American students. Temple University and Florida State University follow with student bodies boasting 20 percent and 11.5 percent African American students respectively. Temple graduated 753 and Florida State 748 African Americans in 2003. Despite these hopeful statistics, PWIs, for the most part, have small percentages of African American students. In fact, of the top ten institutions that graduate the most African American baccalaureates, only three are PWIs (see Figure 2).

In a troubling trend, the number of African Americans admitted into the University of California system fell 15 percent from 2003 to 2004. Most dire was the plummeting enrollment of black students at UC-Berkeley—arguably the most prestigious school in the system. Of the 7,753 students admitted in the freshmen class, only 194 were African American—a 30 percent decrease from 2003. Most scholars blame this drop on the backlash against race-based admissions in California. In 1997, the last year Berkeley considered race as a factor in admissions, 515 black students were admitted to the incoming class.

The underrepresentation of African Americans in predominantly white institutions, juxtaposed with the success of African Americans who attend black colleges, shows that black institutions are an essential fixture in American higher education. To suggest their elimination is naive, and shows a failure to understand the opportunity that they provide to African Americans and many other students. It also ignores the lessons PWIs might learn from HBCUs about how to set high expectations for black students and how to ensure their graduation. Moreover, it fails to adhere to the spirit of *Brown*—one of providing more opportunity. Much like small colleges, single-sex institutions, military academies, and denominational schools, black colleges are an educational option that has served, and continues to serve, a portion of our population. In a post-*Brown* era—one of uncertainty with regard to admission to PWIs—many black colleges offer a culturally rich, educationally strong option and a central mission dedicated to racial uplift. ■

Works Cited

Bell, Derrick. 2004. *Silent covenants: Brown v. Board of Education and the unfulfilled hopes for racial reform.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Notes

[1] Figures later than 2001 are not yet available.

Figure 2. African American Baccalaureate Degrees in 2003

(all disciplines combined)

*denotes predominantly white institution

Institution	Number of African American Graduates	Percentage of Graduating Class
Florida A & M University	1408	94 percent
Howard University	1001	84 percent
Georgia State University*	885	32 percent
Southern University and A&M College	884	98 percent
North Carolina A&T University	877	98 percent
Hampton University	832	96 percent
Tennessee State University	821	83 percent
Morgan State University	758	89 percent
Temple University*	753	20 percent
Florida State University*	748	12 percent

(Data from *Black Issues in Higher Education*, June 3, 2004, vol. 21, no. 8)