



# NATIONAL CROSSTALK

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## Letters to the Editor

### More to the Story

Editor-We are writing to comment on your article, "A Mixed Blessing? Critics object to Mississippi's settlement of a 1975 anti-segregation lawsuit involving the state's 'historically black universities'" (*National CrossTalk*, Summer 2004). While shedding light on the "desegregation" of the historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in Mississippi, the article could also mislead readers about the extent to which colleges and universities in the 19 southern and southern-border states are providing equal educational opportunity to blacks.

Our comments draw, in part, from preliminary findings of a two-year study entitled, "Race equity and diversity in public higher education in the South," that the Lumina Foundation for Education began funding in January 2004. The co-principal investigators for the project, all faculty in the higher education program at the University of Maryland, College Park, are the four signatories of this letter: Sharon Fries-Britt, Jeffery Milem, Laura Perna and John Williams.

In several instances, the author of the article, Kay Mills, makes statements that would lead many readers to inappropriately conclude that we do not need to be concerned with the college enrollment patterns of blacks in the South. While data that Mills presents are correct, they do not tell the entire story.

First, although the rate of increase in college enrollment was faster for blacks than for whites during the 1990s in all 19 southern and southern-border states, blacks continue to be underrepresented among college enrollments relative to their representation among high school graduates in each of the states. Mills notes that blacks represent 13 percent of students at the University of Mississippi and 37 percent of students at Delta State University, but fails to provide the reference point that is necessary to evaluate the adequacy of these shares.

Our analyses of data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System show that, between 1991 and 2000, the number of first-time full-time freshmen enrolled at public four-year non-HBCUs in Mississippi increased by 15 percent. Despite this growth, blacks continue to be underrepresented among first-time full-time freshmen (22 percent) and bachelor's degree recipients (15 percent) at these institutions, relative to their representation among public high school graduates (47 percent). Blacks received only 11 percent of the bachelor's degrees awarded in 2001 at the public flagship institution, the University of Mississippi. This pattern occurs in each of the 19 states.

Second, the statement that "Only 28 percent of black students in the South now attend historically black institutions," suggests that blacks are no longer concentrated in the HBCUs. However, our data show that the HBCUs enroll 28 percent of blacks but only five percent of all students in these states. Moreover, the representation of blacks among first-time full-time freshmen exceeds 90 percent at all the HBCUs in 15 of the 19 southern and southern-border states. Although the HBCUs in West Virginia are now majority white (as stated in the article), this pattern is the exception, rather than the rule (a critical omitted caveat).

Third, simply labeling the eight states that are no longer subject to oversight from the federal courts or the Office of Civil Rights as "desegregated" ignores the continued gaps in educational opportunity that exist in these states. For example, after design and implementation of several state desegregation plans, North Carolina has been ruled in compliance with federal law by OCR. Nonetheless, blacks continued to represent substantially smaller shares of both first-time freshmen (23 percent) and bachelor's degree recipients (nine percent) at public four-year non-HBCUs than of public high school graduates (27 percent). At the state's flagship institution, the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, blacks received only nine percent of the bachelor's degrees awarded in 2001.

The University of Georgia, another flagship institution, provides an additional example of an institution that has continued to struggle in enrolling black students, even though the school, along with the rest of the state's system of higher education, was ruled in compliance with Title VI by OCR in 1989. In 2001, the Eleventh Circuit Court of Appeals prohibited the use of racial preferences in freshman admissions at the institution. After the decision, applications by black students fell by almost 40 percent. In 2003, black students comprised less than six percent of students enrolled at the university.

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