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ABSTRACT
                  The significance of the black student union in the
past decade (1965-1975), both for black students and for the white
college, and some reasons for the apparent decline experienced by
black student unions in recent years are the concern of this paper.
Its focus is on reviewing some of the functions, activities and
impacts of the black student union during its most active years, and
reviewing some of the internal factors which seem to have played a
role in its current decline. Several functions served by the student
unions are suggested. Their goals and change oriented activities
center on five general areas and their implementation and impact upon
white college vary, both in degree and permanence. Two sets of
influences seem important in the apparent decline of black student
union and the black student population and those internal to them;
four such internal factors are emphasized in the discussion. A final
cautionary note is sounded, indicating that despite apparent decline
and a seemingly apolitical stance in many colleges and universities,
black student unions have not disappeared, and retain the capacity
for renewed vitality and activism. (Author/AM)

BLACK STUDENT UNIONS, 1965-1975:
A RETROSPECTIVE LOOK AT THE LAST DECADE

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ABSTRACT

. This paper examines the black student union in white colleges
and universities during the past decade. The career of black stu-
dent unions in this period is discussed in terms of two broad issues.

First, what have been the principal functions, activities and
goals of black student unions, and what has been their impact in terms
of changes within colleges and universities? Several functions served
by these student organizations are suggested. The goals and change-
oriented activities of black student unions, it is argued here, have
centered on five general areas. Implementation of these goals and the
impact of black student union activities in the white college and uni-
versity have been variable, both in degree and permanence. Reasons for
this variability are indicated.

Second, what factors have been involved in the apparent decline
of black student unions in recent years? Two sets of influences seem
important in this regard, those external to the black student union
and the black student population, and those which are internal to the
union and to black students. Such internal factors are stressed in
this paper, with emphasis given to four: the character of the black
student union as a particular kind of social movement organization;
heterogeneity and internal divisions within the black student popula-
tion on any campus; internal dynamics within black student unions; and
student "battle fatigue."

A final cautionary note is sounded, indicating that despite ap-
parent decline and a seemingly apolitical stance in many colleges and
universities, black student unions have not disappeared, and retain
the capacity for renewed vitality and activism.

One of the most common current features of predominantly white colleges and universities is the presence of some black student organization, significantly different from the more traditional fraternity or student government types. Though called by a variety of names, they all share certain traits: exclusively black in membership, monolithic in appearance, highly self-conscious and apparently motivated primarily by sociopolitical concerns.

However, despite their near-universality, black student unions are of recent origin. Among the first such organizations were: the black student union at Columbia (formed in 1963); the Harvard African and Afro-American Society (also formed in 1963); the Cornell Afro-American Society (formed in 1965); and the Black Student Union at San Francisco State (formed in 1966 out of a previously existing group, the Negro Students Association).[1]

Thus it has been roughly ten years or so since black student unions appeared as a national campus phenomenon. Beginning in 1965-66, they spread rapidly to campuses of all types.[2] By the late 1960s, black student unions, and the movement they embodied, had become central features of the period, while their actions have been a principal element in change-oriented efforts on campus during the past decade.

A number of factors in combination may be seen as influential in the development of the black student union. Though too numerous to discuss here, they include: the creation of a "critical mass" of black students in the white college; their particular traits, especially

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political beliefs; black students' experience of disjuncture, alienation and inauthenticity in the white institution; and off-campus developments in the larger black community.[3]

However, our concern in this paper is with indicating some of the significance of the black student union in the past (both for black students and for the white college), and some reasons for the apparent decline experienced by black student unions in recent years. Hence, the focus here is on reviewing some of the functions, activities and impacts of the black student union during its most active years, and reviewing some of the internal factors which seem to have played a role in its current decline.

Functions, Activities and Impacts of the Black Student Union

As several observers have indicated, black student experiences of the white college or university are likely to be stressful and alienating for many students.[4] The union may have served (and may continue to do so) in several ways to mitigate the strain of being in the white setting, as well as to meet other black student needs. First, it may perform many of the functions of the peer group. It may provide a place and a group which is not white, and therefore one in which relaxation, security and "escape" from the pressures of the university are ostensibly possible.

Further, the organization may help in the individual adjustment of black students to the college. It may be a source and sponsor of alternate educational experiences to those offered elsewhere on campus. Not only does the union provide a variety of social, cultural and recreational events, it also often provides a forum, formal or informal, for discussion of social and political issues. In its role as forum,

the union frequently has provided a kind of collective reinforcement and legitimation for beliefs and behavior, especially those critical of white society in general and the white college in particular.

At the same time, the union often has also attempted to play a "coercive" or controlling role (consciously or not) in the realm of beliefs and behavior, rewarding the expression of certain views and actions, and negatively sanctioning others. This insistence on ideological and behavioral conformity can be, and often has been, a major force for disunity, a point to which we shall return shortly.

In addition, the union may be important in black students' sense of collective competence and ability to achieve their objectives as a a group. By its very existence it can be (and often has been in the past) a tangible symbol of ideological beliefs about black unity and solidarity. Further, the union may provide a continuing sense of corporateness. This is important in maintaining a sense of efficacy in confronting and managing the social and political world of the college or university.

Finally, the union has been, and remains, the vehicle through which discontent with the college is expressed and student efforts at producing change in the institution are generally channeled. In short, the black student organization has been the vehicle for protest and the heart of the black student movement since 1965.

The goals and demands put forth by black student unions, despite differences in language and detail, have stressed several aims: 1) increasing the number of blacks in the college or university at all levels, from student to top administrator; 2) curricular changes and additions; 3) achieving some kind of black control in the above, and

in the affairs of the institution; 4) increasing college sensitivity
and service to the local off-campus black community (if any); and 5)
eliminating institutional racism within the university or college inso-
far as this is possible.

The success of black student unions in achieving these aims has
varied widely from campus to campus. In almost all cases there has
been increased recruitment and admission of black students.[5] However,
this increase seems to have been much more ambiguously maintained in
the 1970's, with evidence for both continued increase and for signifi-
cant decrease in black enrollment.[6]

Black student efforts, in conjunction with Federal Affirmative
Action requirements, have resulted in more black faculty and adminis-
trators in white colleges and universities. However, attacks on Af-
firmative Action from many quarters combined with an apparent waning
of governmental vigor in implementing equal rights efforts of all kinds
raise the possibility that these hiring gains may not be increased
or even maintained in coming years.

Nationally, black students seem to have been rather successful
in getting at least some changes and additions to curricula. By the
end of the 1970-71 school year, 62% of all American colleges and uni-
versities offered some kind of program of black, Third World, or ethnic
studies (Bayer and Astin, 1971). By the end of the 1971-72 school
year, half of all colleges and universities offered at least one black
studies course (Allen, 1974), and one hundred eighty-two offered degrees
in black studies (Obatala, 1974). However, students failed to achieve
black studies programs on some campuses (Exum, 1974); some programs
have folded, and despite the vitality of some (Wilkins, 1975), many
others are in serious difficulty. Once again, the question of the

permanent institutionalization in the white college of gains and chanres achieved by black student efforts must be raised.

In many colleges and universities black students sought to gain some kind of black (often student) voice in the affairs of the institution. Though such efforts represented a rather direct challenge to the status quo in the colle e, as long as the role black students sought to play was an initiating and consulting/advisory one, by and large colleses have had relatively little difficulty in taking steps to meet or respond to these interests. (This is not to say, of course, that colle es did not often resist initially such aims of black students.)

However, where black students were not content with a merely advisory role in new programs and in institutional affairs and sought either total black control or a significant voice in control in such programs, etc., they met with very little success. Indeed, in those few instances where such power was conceded to black students (e.g. all-black dormitories, or participation in hiring and promotion decisions), such gains have been very short-lived.

Increase in the service and sensitivity of the white college or university to the local off-campus black community has been a frequent goal of black students.[7] In Vincent Harding's words (1969: 142), "at its best the black student organization became a means of developing strategies of service to the local black community." However, as with other black student efforts during the peak period of activism in white colle es, the college-initiated responses and chan es in relations between the colle e and local black communities have been more limited, less permanent and often different than students intended.

Finally, a major goal of black student unions in the late 1960s

was the elimination, or at least significant reduction, of institu-
tional racism within the white college or university. As with other black
student efforts, the accomplishments in this regard are ambiguous
and problematic. On the one hand, perhaps some ground has been gained.
There are more black students, faculty and administrators than at the
start of the decade, curricular changes and new programs have been
instituted, and many of the more overt racist and discriminatory prac-
tices on campus have been reduced. At the same time, racism, institu-
tional and personal, is still an important fact of life on campus.
Certainly black students continue to perceive and experience the white
college or university in these terms (Boyd, 1974; Walters, 1974; Yan-
kelovich, 1972).

To conclude: ten years of shifting effort and activity by black
student unions have produced real, though variable success in student
admissions, faculty and staff recruitment, and curricular and program-
matic changes. Community outreach goals were more limitedly and less
successfully fulfilled, while institutional racism remains a signifi-
cant, if less, visible, reality on campus. In important respects,
black student unions through their activist efforts have played a
major part in developments in white colleges over the last decade,
despite the fact that many of the fundamental structures and processes
of these schools remain largely unchanged.

In the last few years black students seem to have adopted a
more careerist, individualistic and privatistic, though not necessari-
ly less "militant" stance (Boyd, 1974; Walters, 1974). Black student
unions have become less political and less activist, in some insti-
tutions declining nearly to the point of disintegration (Exum, 1974).
For many black students the union seems much less salient, its poli-

tical power and effectivenss much reduced. In many respects the black student union seems to have been transformed into an organization more concerned with cultural and social activities than with political activism and efforts to change the university. Where this transformation has not been total, the union seems to serve primarily a political "watchdog" function--the importance of which ought not be underestimated--striving to maintain gains already made. The final section of this paper examines some of the various reasons for the decline of the black student union from the 1967-71 period, perhaps the period of its peak activity, strength and significance.

Factors in the Decline of the Black Student Union[8]

Several factors have been instrumental in the decline of the black student union and its transformation from an activist, politically oriented organization into the essentially cultural, social and recreational organization it seems to have become on many campuses.[9] Here we concentrate on those which are internal to the organization, though it should be stressed that external factors may be just as significant in producing the outcome under discussion. Four such internal factors seem especially important: 1) the character of the black student union as a movement organization; 2) the heterogeneity and internal division within the black student population in any college; 3) internal dynamics and processes within the the union; and 4) "battle fatigue."

First, black student unions are what Zald and Ash (1966) term exclusive social movement organizations. Such organizations have rigid criteria for membership, demand a high level of initial commitment, a high level of continuing involvement, and a high level of ideological

conformity. A significant result of this is that "exclusive organizations are more likely than inclusive organizations to be beset by schisms," largely because inclusive organizations have "looser criteria of affiliation and of doctrinal orthodoxy" and do not demand such constant participation and involvement in organizational activities (Zald and Ash, 1966: 331).

Black student unions clearly have been exclusive organizations of this type; many attempt to remain so at present. The primary membership requirement, being black, was and is inflexible; almost as inflexible has been the expectation that all black students on campus should belong, at least nominally, to the union. A continuing commitment to the organization and its program was expected and required after entry. The pressures for ideological and behavioral conformity which occurred, and may still occur, in black student unions and which have often involved "blacker-than-thou" games (cf. Donald, 1970; Napper, 1973), may be seen as additional indication of the character of the black student union as an exclusive movement organization.

A major problem in such movement organizations as black student unions is that constant pressures for commitment, ideological and behavioral conformity tend, over the long run, to lead to discontent, factionalism, and disaffection, problems which have plagued black student unions around the country. In short, one source of the decline of the black student union has been its character as an exclusive organization.

Second, the tendency to schism inherent in exclusive organizations is likely to be enhanced when the population from which organizational members are drawn is itself highly heterogeneous (Zald and Ash, 1966). Despite the often monolithic appearance of the black student union,

and despite the commonly held stereotype that all black students
come from the same kind of background--the black student population
in any white college or university is a highly heterogeneous one.
The heterogeneity of the black student population may be seen as
an additional factor in the decline of the black student union in
recent years through the enhanced potential for dissensus inherent
in such diversity.

Among the various dimensions of this heterogeneity, certain
ones seem particularly important as potential, and actual, sources
of dissensus: differences in socioeconomic background, i.e. class
differences (cf. Boyd, 1974; Donald, 1970; Walters, 1974; Willie
and McCord, 1972); gender (cf. Donald, 1970, 1971);); differences
in political beliefs (cf. Edwards, 1970; Trow, 1970); differences
in the degree to which individuals' careerist orientations and mo-
bility aspirations take precedence over or supplant political beliefs
and a willingness to engage in direct on-campus political activity
cf.
(Edwards, 1970; Obatala, 1972; Walters, 1974); and on some campuses,
ethnic differences (cf. Exum, 1974).

Third, given a heterogeneous membership base and a character
as an exclusive organization, constant pressures for consensus and
conformity within the black student union have probably been inevi-
table and universal. However, this "passion for unanimity" (to bor-
row a term from Schein, 1969) served over the long run to enhance
rather than to reduce internal division. For one thing, some members
may be lost through a kind of "excommunication" for "heresy" or
"apostasy." Others came to resent such pressures, creating both mani-
fest and latent alienation from the union.

Further, since union success in achieving change goals has

rarely been total on any campus, some members may have become dis-
affected as a result of failure to achieve important group goals.
In addition, when faced with intramural friction, diverse interests
and pressures for conformity simultaneously, many students appear
to have resolved the conflict between individual and collective norms
in favor of their own individual, often careerist, interests. In this
situation where individual and group needs may be highly incongruent,
constant pressures for solidarity may in the end create greater dis-
sension, particularly if not accompanied by effective means through which
individual interests might be satisfied.[10] A consequence is even more
disagreement within the union, especially over goals and tactics.

Fourth and finally, observers of social movements have often
noted that a very frequent occurrence in social movements is a kind
of "battle fatigue" (Coles, 1964; Turner and Killian, 1972), especially
1)
likely when the discovery is made that much of the relevant reality
one sought to change remains fundamentally unchanged even after much
effort and important "victories"; and 2) the organization or group
which spearheaded activism is suffering internal difficulties of con-
sensus and goal setting.

Such battle fatigue has been an almost universal experience at
one time or another for black students. The consequence for students
is exhaustion, frustration and often, withdrawal from the "field of
battle," accompanied by much bitterness. This fatigue and bitter
withdrawal seems to have been a major factor in the decline of the
black student union in recent years. It may also help explain recent
research findings which show current levels of discontent, alienation
and criticism of the white college among black students to be as high
now as during the late 1960s, but without the activism which accompanied

such feelings a few years ago (cf. Boyd, 1974; Walters, 1974).

Summary and Conclusion

Black student unions have been a central and nearly universal feature
in white colleges and universities during the past ten years. In
this paper we have examined some of their important functions, activi-
ties and impact on the white college, and factors producing their
current state of decline. In suggesting factors leading to this
lessened visibility, political activism, and marginal viability, our
discussion has focused primarily on black students' traits, the charac-
ter of the union and certain internal dynamics within it, and the
"battle fatigue" experienced by many students. In short, we have
stressed internal factors which have influenced the decline of the
union.[11]

Finally, we should be cautious about interpreting the current
apparent absence of activism and decline of the black student union
as the end of the story. Nor should it be taken as an indicator that
the ultimate fate of black student unions is either to disappear, or
to become "simply" a social organization like other, more traditional
student groups. Recent research on nationwide samples of black
students in a variety of institutions indicates that black students
are still markedly alienated and disaffected from white society and
the white college (Boyd, 1974; Walters, 1974). This disaffection
may turn to activism, and may serve to revitalize black student unions
whenever strongly salient issues arise.[12] Protests by black students
at Boston College, Brandeis, Brown, City College of New York, Cornell,
Harvard, Hunter College, the University of Michigan and the University
of California at Santa Barbara during the spring of 1975; at the Uni-

versity of Alabama at Tuscaloosa, Berkeley, UCLA and the University
of California at San Diego during the fall of 1975; and at the Uni-
versity of Massachusetts at Amherst during the spring of 1976--all
indicate the potential on any campus for a re-vitalized black student
union and black student movement.

FOOTNOTES

1. cf. Barlow and Shapiro (1971); Pinkney (1975); Strout and Grossvogel (1971).

2. The development of black student unions was so rapid that by December, 1966, a northeastern regional conference of black students and black student organizations held at Columbia University was attended by three hundred delegates representing black student unions and students at thirty colleges and universities (Pinkney, 1975).

3. cf. Anthony (1971); Barlow and Shapiro (1971); Donald (1970, 1971); Edwards (1970); Exum (1974); Hedegard and Brown (1969); Matthews and Prothro (1969); Napper (1973); Willie and McCord (1972).

4. Boyd (1974); Donald (1970, 1971); Exum (1974); Hedegard and Brown (1969); Proctor (1970); Walters (1974); Willie and McCord (1972); Wisdom and Shaw (1970).

5. Before the mid-1960s, there were relatively few black students in white colleges and universities. By 1968, 64%, by 1970, 66% and by 1972-73, 75% of all black college students were enrolled in white colleges and universities (Blackwell, 1975; Hechinger, 1971). Recent figures from HEW and the Bureau of the Census indicate that black student enrollment has grown every year since 1965. For example, government and other statistics show that there were 236,000 black men in college in 1969, 422,800 in 1975, and that black college enrollment in the fall of 1974 was 19% higher than in the fall of 1973 (Freeman and Hollomon, 1975; Winkler, 1975).

6. While there is much evidence for continued increases in black enrollment in white institutions, there is also much evidence which indicates that black enrollment peaked in 1972, when blacks were 8.7% of all students, and has fallen since then: to 7.8% of all students in 1973, and 7.4% of all students in 1974-75. Black freshman enrollment dropped from 13% of all freshmen in 1972 to 9% in 1973. Total black enrollment appears to have dropped some 15% between 1972 and 1974, most importantly for black males (American Council on Education, 1973; Harvard Magazine, 1975; A. Henderson and J. Henderson, 1974; V. Henderson, 1974; Institute for the Study of Educational Policy, 1975). In short, though the evidence is ambiguous, it indicates that increased black admission may not have been fully sustained since the fall-off in black student activism in recent years.

7. Here we are referring to service efforts different and separate from those undertaken by individual students or by student groups acting either on their own or as part of an on-campus student service organization.

8. Since 1971, a dramatic decline in student activism, both white and black, has occurred in American colleges and universities.

In general terms, the decline of student activism may be attributed to several factors: the end of the draft; a new generation on campus with different political socialization; the realization that campus activism in itself has not brought about fundamental change either in the university or the larger society, and is not likely to; a tightening job market in an economy experiencing both inflation and recession simultaneously; and the rising costs of education, making education a more serious commitment, at least in economic terms. Further, if critical mass has been a factor in the development of the black student union, then what appears to be declining black enrollment since 1972 may be seen as an additional element in the decline of union.

9. Decline as used in this discussion refers to: loss of members; loss of solidarity and consensus along with increased factionalism within the organization; reduced, if not the complete absence of, activist efforts on campus; greatly lessened role as arbiter and symbol of black student belief and action; reduced political power on campus, though not necessarily total loss of effectiveness (cf. Obatala, 1972).

10. Donald (1970, 1971); Edwards (1970); Exum (1974); Gamson (1968, 1975); Napper (1973); Turner and Killian (1972); Zald and Ash (1966).

11. However, it may be argued that certain other factors external to black students per se have been equally important in this decline. Briefly, these may be summarized as: 1) conflict between the role of student on the one hand, and the role of member of the black student union on the other; 2) constant turnover of student population and the problems of continuity, shared experience and socialization it presents; 3) value conflicts between the sociopolitical "black" values stressed by the union, and the more careerist, universalistic and/or individualistic values fosterd by the university; 4) the availability of other groups and activities on campus to which black students may give their time, energy and allegiance; 5) great asymmetry in power and resources between students and university authorities; 6) both the successes and the failures of activism; 7) the ultimately effective social control efforts of university authorities; 8) the fragmentation of the larger civil rights movement along with the decline in political and ideological consensus which has occurred among off-campus blacks during the last ten years; 9) the current economic situation in the larger society creating financial (and other) pressures which reinforce a careerist and vocationalist, rather than political, orientation among black students; and 10) lessened media coverage of black student activities (cf. Bayer and Astin, 1971).

12. Such issues include: perceived drastic reductions in financial aid; greatly declining black enrollment; threats to the existence of black-oriented programs already established, or to promised programs which have yet to be implemented; CIA recruiting efforts aimed at minorities; as well as a variety of other issues, both national and local.

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