

# BLACK PERSPECTIVE ON HIGHER EDUCATION

*Joseph Clair*

I would like to point up the uniqueness of the traditional Black college and show why that uniqueness is the rationale and basis for saying, "Black colleges must be saved." The next level deals with statistics and facts to show that the Black college is about to disappear from the American landscape.

Let me begin by relating, in hypothetical form, the true life stories of five students who matriculated at Tennessee State University in the late 1950's. Four of these students graduated from all-Black high schools in the South; therefore, it can be safely assumed, based on standards commonly employed to assess educational experiences, that these students were the products of



Joseph Clair serves as legal counsel to the U. S. House of Representatives, Subcommittee on Education. Additionally, he is president of the consulting firm, Education Projections and Associates, in Washington, D.C.

inferior education. These five male students shared an apartment in Nashville and, as such, became very close to each other and shared some of their inner-most secrets. At the end of the first grading period of their enrollment, each of the students was placed on academic probation. Subsequently, each of the students was 'put-out' of school at least twice and one was 'put-out' for a grand total of eight times. I use the term 'put-out' because there was no administrative hearing, due process, etc. — simply, the student was summoned to the office of the Dean of Students and was summarily dismissed. One of these students has never been granted permission to re-enter Tennessee State. Of these five students, four of them eventually graduated and let me now explain where these students are today.

One of the students is now the Associate Director of the Urban Affairs Department at Fisk University, a graduate of Howard University Law School, where he was an officer of his class, and is now a leading attorney in the state of Tennessee. He has worked as an attorney with the Security Exchange Commission and with a private law firm in Chicago. Incidentally, this is the student that was 'put-out' eight times.

Another is presently working towards a Master's degree in Court Administration at American University. This is the student who was never re-admitted to TSU and had to complete his Bachelor degree at another institution.

A third is a Major in the Air Force and a pilot.

One student we lost track of and as far as we know he did not graduate.

The fifth is a graduate of Howard University Law School, where he was president of his class. He is currently a lecturer at Howard University in Copyright Law and is the Director of the Upward Bound Program at Trinity College in Washington, DC.

I feel that the lives of these five students are a living testimony to the uniqueness and value of the Black institution of higher education. By all commonly accepted subjective standards, these students would now be considered "pillars of the community and solid citizens." It is further reflective of the hard work and dedication of those educators who took so little and did so much. Yet today, the very existence of these institutions is being threatened.

In a recent magazine article, Dr. Kenneth Clark, the renowned Negro psychologist, puts forth an argument to abolish Black colleges and analogizes the situation with that of Black baseball leagues. He stated, ". . . education is more important than baseball. We did something about black (sic) leagues — we now have major leagues. Why can't we do the same with education? The question is — is Howard a good university? Does it stimulate creativity? Not, is it black (sic)?"

The author of the magazine article retorted, "Clark poses a difficult philosophical problem. The black (sic) colleges were born of racial inequity, and they are symbols of segregation. Nevertheless, there is a strong case to be made, on practical grounds, for preserving and strengthening them. They are living institutions, after all. They operate plants worth hundreds of millions of dollars, and though their facilities are often old and inadequate, they turn out thousands of competent graduates every year. Despite their handi-

caps, the schools have succeeded in training a major share of the educated blacks (sic) who serve — and lead — black (sic) communities, and they will need to continue that role for the foreseeable future.” This process or quality that he refers to that allows Black people to survive and progress despite impossible handicaps, I call pragmatic creativity.

In my way of thinking, pragmatic creativity is the ability to create with a utilitarian goal in view as opposed to creativity for creativity's sake. To a large and significant degree, it becomes the creativity of survival. From my grandmother I learned that if a pair of shoes were too small and caused pain, there was a quick and simple solution: place dry black-eye peas in the shoes, then wet them and as the peas begin to swell they would stretch the shoe thereby creating a comfortable fit. I've often pondered on the source and inspiration of this knowledge. I imagined that it occurred at some time when a Black person found himself with a pair of too-small shoes and no money to get a new pair. It then became time to create a utilitarian solution — and the creative artist reached the above cited solution. I recently heard that quality referred to as the “wisdom of the race.” My real question is whether we can allow this wisdom to be destroyed.

I feel that now is the appropriate time to take issue with Dr. Clark. I submit that he has put forth a viable humanistic idea, but one that could not nurture and grow in the present social environment of America.

One of the basic undergirdings of a democratic society is the belief that each individual must be allowed to develop to his fullest potential. This, we have declared, is an inalienable right — one that must be protected and provided for at all cost. An outgrowth of this concept is the basic philosophical premise of American education. As a result, educational institutions have developed to provide an arena for this growth. But somewhere along the way something went wrong. We did not live up to our commitments nor did we properly discharge our responsibility. As a result, we have declared that most urban and predominantly Black schools are inferior. I tend to agree with this notion only so far as it pertains to the physical plants and materials. I humbly submit that in the areas of educational philosophy and methodology, the above cited schools fare very well. Consequently, I'm saying that, basically, the general public did not and do not provide the funds to equalize educational opportunities and to give credence to their oft-pronounced concept of universal education.

In the much heralded Supreme Court decision of March 17, 1954, integration of schools became the mandate of the country. Yet today, less than 11 percent of the students in the South attend integrated classes. In the recently published Kerner Commission Report on Violence, it was declared that we now exist in two societies, separate and unequal. This in itself is a throwback past the Plessy V. Ferguson case, decided in 1896, which established the separate but equal doctrine as a major philosophical base of American education. And yet, the Kerner report concluded we are now separate and unequal which means that we did not live up to the dictates of that otherwise sinister concept.

We must be realistic and understand the arena in which the game is being played, and begin to develop ways of changing the rules, or at least begin to find ways to win with the present rules.

I am sure that most of us are stunningly aware that education has been the traditional way out of socio economic deprivation. In 1968, a person with less than an eighth grade education could expect to earn \$196,000 in his entire lifetime; the completion of eight years of school brings his lifetime earning up to \$258,000; completion of high school brings \$350,000 and a college degree enables him to earn \$586,000. The importance of education was well instilled in most Black families and though many of the parents were not exposed to education, they insisted that their children continue — often at untold hardship and burden. Many Black families skimp and stay in debt for years to send their children to college.

Not long before South Carolina State sophomore Henry Smith was killed by highway patrolmen at Orangeburg in 1968, he wrote his mother: "When I got the meats you sent, they were spoiled so I spent part of the \$5.00 you sent me to buy some meats and take some of my clothes to the cleaners. If you can, send me some hamburger meat this weekend." More than a year later, Mrs. Elizabeth Smith, who was an .80¢/hour domestic worker when her son was killed, finally paid off a \$400 loan she had secured from a local small-loan firm for Henry's tuition. Her payments to the firm totaled \$600. In the fall of 1970, Mrs. Smith was still paying on Henry's funeral bill.

The predominantly white institutions have not proven their preparedness to deal equitably with the Black student population. Many of these schools have, at most, an insignificant number of Blacks on their faculty; most of the students are concentrated in special programs, which simply adds to their sense of frustration, thereby making the transition from high school to college almost impossible. Under these conditions, the student often becomes a drop-out/flunk-out victim of these frustrations and simply ends up another statistic to bolster a claim of Black peoples' inability to cope with higher education. It could only take a Tennessee State or a similar institution to understand my friends to whom I alluded earlier.

To place the situation in proper perspective and focus, let's take a look at a few statistics:

#### *FACTS*

1. In academic year 1970-1971, of 37 Black private colleges surveyed, only eight did not show an operating deficit. This means that 79% of our private Black colleges are in financial trouble.

2. Howard University, the largest and probably the most respected of Black colleges, reported the highest deficit: \$1,800,000. Lane College worked with a deficit of \$55,000, the lowest deficit figure reported.

3. The college with the highest endowment, Hampton Institutes (endowment of \$30,500,000) had an operating deficit of \$300,000. The lowest endowed (\$100,000), Tougaloo College of Tougaloo, Mississippi, had an operating deficit of \$150,000. This ratio depicts a very serious survival problem.

4. The eight schools exhibiting a surplus are:

|                        |          |
|------------------------|----------|
| Morris Brown .....     | \$15,000 |
| Johnson C. Smith ..... | 26,000   |
| St. Augustine .....    | 6,000    |
| Clark .....            | 38,000   |
| Morehouse .....        | 90,000   |
| Philander Smith .....  | 79,000   |
| St. Paul's .....       | 30,000   |

5. The average tuition at white colleges is \$2,000 per year. The average tuition at Black colleges is \$1,000 per year.

6. In fiscal 1969, of the \$4 billion spent by the Federal government on education and campus research, only \$122 million or 3% went to Black Colleges and universities.

7. In fiscal 1969 - 1970, white public land grant schools received \$650 million. Black public land grant schools received only \$70 million during the same period.

8. Bennett College had an endowment of \$2,500,000 but an operating deficit of \$75,000.

Now, what is the meaning of all this? Basically, Black colleges are in trouble and their very existence is threatened. Consequently, it is incumbent upon Black college administrators, faculty, staff, student body, public and private sources, and alumni to come to the aid of Black colleges.

In most instances, Black college alumni have not had the resources or the desire to make contributions to their alma mater as their white counterparts. In 1969 a survey showed that the average graduate of Howard University contributes approximately \$27.00 in his lifetime, to the school. This situation must be improved. There are prospects for improvement as Black college graduates become more sophisticated in their awareness of tax laws, and how they can help themselves, while at the same time helping their favorite charity — hopefully, Black colleges.

But this in itself is not enough — we must do more. We must become politically aware, so that we can become aware of the politics being played with Black higher education — especially with Black state supported colleges. The newest tactic adopted by many state legislatures and boards of education is to merge the Black school into the white university system, and simply watch Black education fade away. Arkansas A&M is now a part of the University of Arkansas; Maryland State is now the University of Maryland — Eastern Shore. The law schools at Florida A&M, Texas Southern and South Carolina College no longer exist. My primary question here is, "If and when the white colleges decide to no longer accept Black students into their white schools, where do we go then, if we have given away our Black institutions?"

In recent years, state-supported Black schools have turned increasingly to foundations and other private sources for help, which has had the damaging side effect of drying up the support that was going to private Black colleges. At the same time, many established Black public colleges are being

put into competition with new white colleges that are being erected nearby. There is a new branch of the University of Tennessee, where, traditionally, Black Tennessee State has stood since 1912. Alabama A&M (with an enrollment of 1,880 Blacks and 10 whites) is now confronted by the University of Alabama at Huntsville (10 Blacks and 958 whites). Savannah State College (2,184 Blacks, 20 whites) now faces Armstrong State College (37 Blacks, 1,236 whites). Virginia State College at Petersburg (2,588 Blacks, 20 Whites) now competes with Richard Bland Community College (5 Blacks, 325 Whites). Similar pairings have taken place in Norfolk, Virginia; Albany, Georgia, and elsewhere. Not only does such a development seem to assure continued separate and unequal opportunities, partly with the help of the federal government through its cooperation in financing the new constrictions, but there is the chance that later the Black schools will be put out of business and replaced by the white schools.

A scheme with such an ultimate effect is now beginning to take place at Tennessee State University. The school is under court order to become a part of the University of Tennessee. To make matters worse, the attorney general created a plan, which the courts bought, that would force the school to be integrated from the top administrative level down — to the point of the ultimate demise of Tennessee State University as an institution of Black higher education.

The Black colleges will need all the help they can get in this and coming decades. Costs are rising all along the line, and so are needs. At one time, instructors at Black colleges had no alternative to accepting low pay, in effect, they subsidized Black education. Now, qualified Black teachers are in demand, particularly young ones in the social science areas that include Black studies, and Black schools must compete with white ones for these teachers. The competition has required Black colleges to increase faculty salaries by 50% or more during the past five years. Even with these increases, their pay scales still lag behind those of other institutions, particularly for senior professors.

The schools must also improve the quality of their administrative staff, which again means higher salaries. Traditionally, Black colleges have been subjected to one-man rule, with presidents who made all decisions, hired faculty, signed all checks, raised funds, and masterminded development. In a recent interview, when asked if he had a development director, one college president replied, "Yes, he makes appointments with the foundations and then I go and talk to them." Because of the current crisis and the increasing complexity of running even the small Black colleges, there is a greater need than ever to expand administrations to include sophisticated managers, fund-raisers, development experts and curriculum innovators.

As with most games played in a capitalistic arena, the winning combination is usually to a large degree predicated upon money. It has become incumbent upon the Black college to shed their conservatism and begin an all-out search for funds. One suggested source of help is to hire fund-raising consultants whose fees are paid out of the funds raised — this plan has a

built-in incentive, and will cost the college nothing. Another attack would be to hire persons who have worked as financial development officers with various government agencies and private foundations, and allow them to put their expertise to work on the other side.

As I view the future, the major task of providing adequate educational opportunity for a significant segment of our population will be borne by Black colleges and universities. In other words, there is still a need for the traditional Black colleges of the South and the border states. Most of these schools have done their best in executing the yeoman task that befell them. Often with inadequate resources they served a segment of the population that had nowhere to go — if to go at all. Now these colleges are faced with the struggle for survival. If they are to survive, it will require the resources of corporations, state and federal governments, and all other sources of funds. Most of this will have to be self-generated initiative. But they will survive. Spurred by the pragmatic creativity and the “wisdom of the race”, they will meet their mission with commitment and zeal. If we lose Black colleges, then hopelessness will almost inevitably begin to prey on the minds of our young Black men and women.