Can Black Colleges Survive?

Historic Institutions Fight for Life!

By Rufus Wells

Caught in the worst financial crunch of their long history, black colleges are facing the most serious threat to their existence since the Great Depression.

At a time when larger, richly endowed white educational institutions are cutting costs to make ends meet, many black colleges, already on a bare bones budget, hover on the brink of bankruptcy. Some have already closed their doors.

In Nashville, Tenn., Fisk University, a 110 year-old institution that ranks high in academic excellence by any standard, is struggling to avoid financial collapse. One of America's best known schools, Fisk recently announced it was laying off 11 per cent of its full time faculty and 40 staff members, and cutting the salary of remaining employees 20 per cent in a desperate effort to survive. Its annual budget is down from $10 million to $7.5 million.

Kittrell College in North Carolina closed its doors after an audit showed it was $400,000 in debt. The African Methodist Church, which operates the school, has launched a nationwide fund - raising drive in an effort to get the historic institution reopened.

While struggling with the fiscal crisis, black colleges are facing another very serious threat: the heavy pressure from the Federal government to integrate whites into their faculty and student body. This could eventually cause the predominantly black schools to lose their ethnic identity.

Some already have. West Virginia State College at Institute, W. Va., once an all black institution is now 75 per cent white, and 25 per cent black.

Lincoln University at Jefferson City, Mo., black for nearly 100 years, is now half white and half black.

Since the 1960's, two public black four year colleges have merged with white neighbors, one has become a branch of a white school, three have moved from predominantly black to majority white under pressure

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of desegregation, and three are about half and half now, but moving toward majority white.

America's predominantly black colleges are no strangers to hard times. Many of them, born in the aftermath of the Civil War to educate "the freedmen," have weathered wars and depressions and struggled along with only crumbs from the table, but still managed to educate hundreds of thousands of blacks who have become leaders in their communities.

Laboratory scene in physical science at Florida A & M University

But today's crisis, heaped on the inequities, neglect and shortcomings of years past, may be too much for even these intrepid institutions. And yet the institutions are fighting back.

Recently presidents of black colleges and universities urged the federal government to embark on a 25-year plan to increase financial support for the hard-pressed schools. The college presidents, at a meeting with F. David Matthews, Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, discussed a "Year 2000 Plan for parity in Education."

The report, emphasizing the need for the education of more black professionals, said that blacks comprise only 2 per cent of the nation's physicians, 2.5 per cent of the dentists, 1 per cent of the lawyers, and 2 per cent of the Ph.D. graduates.

Another organization seeking assistance for black colleges is TACTICS (Technical Assistance Consortium to Improve College Services), headed by Dr. Van S. Allen executive director. In a recent interview with a Washington Newspaper, Dr. Allen explained why his organization advocates continuance of black colleges at a time when so many people are urging desegregation of schools.

"These institutions must still carry the major burden for educating black people. We don't have an alternative for educating the numbers of blacks that we're educating — particularly when we deal with the kind of backgrounds that a large per cent of black students who attend our colleges come from.

"One of the unique features of the historically black colleges is that over the years they have developed an expertise in taking young people from severely deprived educational experience and helping them to qualify as effective college students."

Vernon E. Jordan, executive director of the National Urban League, in his nationally syndicated column, wrote: "To integrate it (the black college) to the point that it loses it character and those unique qualities that made it so crucial an institution for the black community would be a tragic mistake. It would amount to a death sentence that forces upon the victims of segregation the burdens of integration."

Calling for a federal program to save the black colleges, Jordan said: "Black colleges have educated generations of poor kids other schools fail with. They have developed an expertise and a successful tradition of quality education that can enable them to educate future generations of both whites and blacks who are poor. . . .Black colleges should be strengthened, expanded and encouraged to retain their historic identity."

He suggests that desegregation be managed so that black colleges "while integrating their faculty and student bodies, retain strong black leadership and much of their historic orientation."

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