

Why the Decline?

As grant money grows scarcer, blacks go elsewhere or give up

If raw numbers were all that counted, more blacks than ever would be going to college. The potential is there: between 1977 and 1984 the number of black students who finished high school jumped by 26 percent. But at the same time, the rate at which they move on to higher education has declined, from 50 percent in 1977 to 42 percent in 1985. The white rate of college matriculation, almost identical to the black rate in 1977, climbed to 59 percent by 1985. Thus, whites now go on to college at a 17 percent higher rate than do blacks. Thomas G. Mortenson, senior research associate with the American College Testing programs, calls that "the access gap"—and he says that it is now wider than at any time in the 26 years the government has collected data.

Clearly, many blacks no longer see college as an option: after years of increases, fewer blacks took the SAT in 1985 than in 1984, a trend the College Board termed "disturbing."

Why?

The most visible roadblock is money. With one eye toward the Gramm-Rudman budget-balancing law, the Reagan administration has cut back sharply on student support. According to a study by the College Board, federal aid to postsecondary students has dropped from \$22.2 billion to \$20.7 billion (in constant 1986 dollars) since 1980, and the administration's 1988 budget calls for cutting \$2 billion more. College-age blacks are more likely to need the money, since census data indicate they're more than twice as likely as whites to live below the poverty line.

These cuts will not all happen, of course; many in Congress agree with New York Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan that denying such assistance is like "eating your seed corn." But the budgetary knife will surely strike again—and simultaneously, a shift in the type of available aid will probably continue.



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Instead of outright grants, which used to constitute the vast majority of federal assistance, nearly half the money is now available only as repayable loans. Education Secretary William Bennett insists

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High schoolers visit the University of Virginia for 'Fall Fling,' a minority recruitment program

that the current formula leaves a safety net of grants in place for the neediest (defined as those families earning less than \$10,600 annually). Yet many needy black students above that bare poverty level are understandably reluctant to stake massive debt on the gamble that they will get well-paying jobs after college. For them, says Tendaji Ganges, who recruits low-income students for Project FAME/Upward Bound, a federally funded program at Chicago State, "a loan is tantamount to no money at all."

Despite the horror stories, aid analysts say that both loans and grants, while tight, are still available—and that potential matriculants should not let fear cheat them out of an education. That may already be happening; the NEWSWEEK ON CAMPUS Poll indicates that nearly a third of nonwhite collegians blame their declining numbers on financial-aid cuts. (An equal number say the problem is that minority high-school students are not trying hard enough to get into college.)

Since the Reagan administration has frequently opposed affirmative action and actively fought racial goals in employment cases, states and colleges have been largely left to their own consciences, with mixed results. Only four of the 18 states ordered to step up desegregation in a case filed in 1970 by the NAACP had managed to increase the proportion of minorities in their public colleges by 1984; according to the American Council on Education, seven of the states actually showed declines. And though civil-rights activists charge that the Department of Education under Reagan is taking almost no action against laggards, the department's Office of Civil

A Widening Black-White 'Access Gap'

