

A Separate Peace

Some black colleges enjoy record enrollments—and draw top students

When Renée McDonald was a senior last year at New York's prestigious Bronx High School of Science, she applied for admission to five Ivy League colleges—plus Spelman, a small, historically black women's college in Atlanta. Her white guidance counselor, she recalls, was incredulous about the inclusion of the black school: "He felt that I would be doing myself a disservice by going there." But McDonald's parents were both enthusiastic graduates of black colleges. And, after growing up in middle-class, integrated neighborhoods and attending schools that were largely white, McDonald wanted a deeper immersion in black culture. She was impressed by Spelman's liberal-arts curriculum—and now she's an enthusiastic freshman there, majoring in math.

Her choice is one that more first-rank black students are making. The black-college trend has even been certified on television's top-rated show: Bill Cosby's TV daughter Denise (actress Lisa Bonet) agonized for a full episode last season before taking a similar plunge. "Many black parents feel that it's important for their children to have an all-black experience because they are not getting it in the communities in which they live," says Harvard psychologist Alvin Poussaint, who advises the Cosby show.

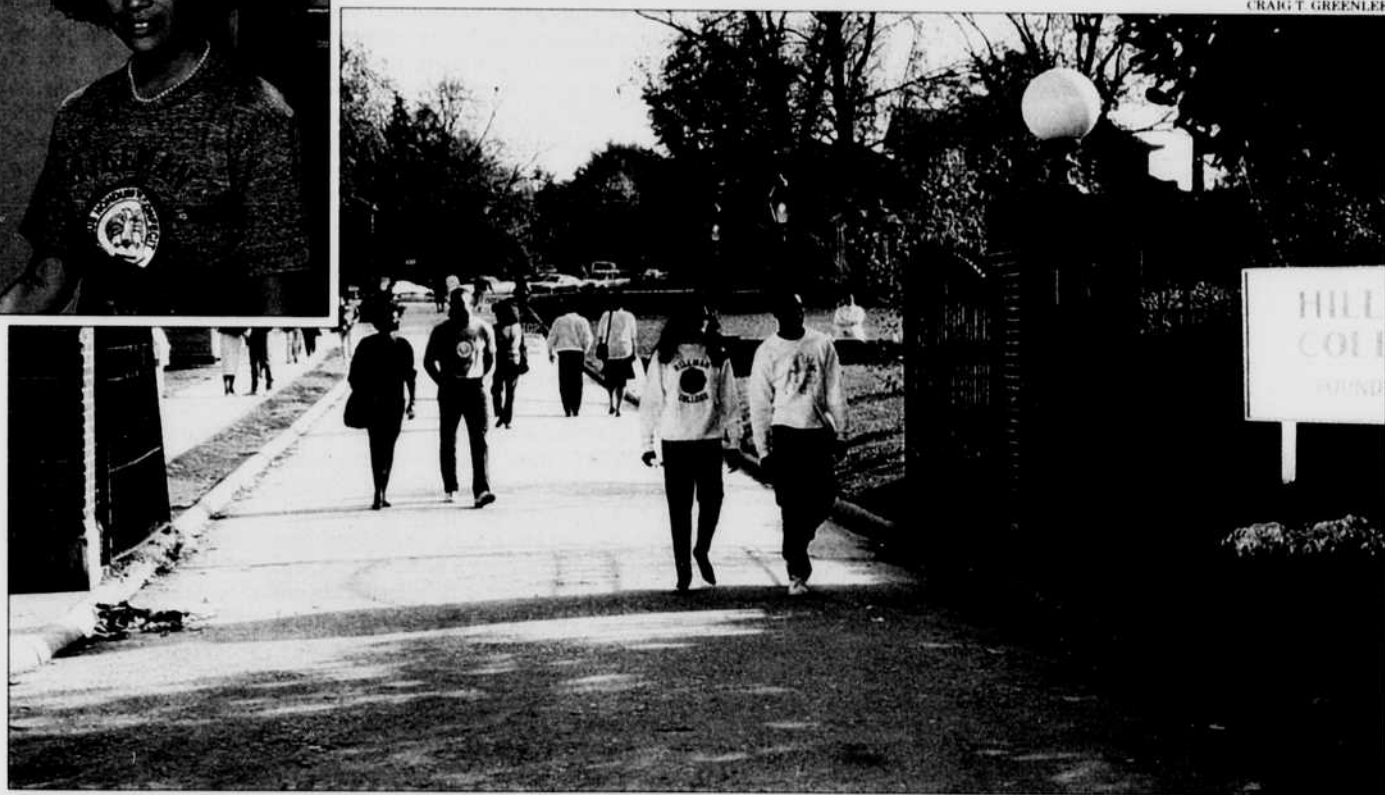
That feeling has built a boomlet for some leading black colleges. Enrollment hit record levels over the last two years for two of the oldest and best-known private schools, Atlanta's Spelman and

Morehouse, the adjoining black college for men. Attendance is also strong at coed Hampton in Virginia and Howard in Washington. Others among the nation's 62 predominantly black private institutions, however, continue to struggle in the same budgetary vise that has gripped them throughout the decade. Fisk is battling back from the brink of bankruptcy thanks to gifts from alumni and others like Cosby, who recently contributed \$1.3 million to the school. Knoxville College in Tennessee and Bishop in Texas recently lost accreditation because of financial deficiencies. And, with a few rare exceptions, the nation's 41 historically black public institutions—many small, Southern relics of segregation days—are also struggling for their lives. As a result, black schools are increasingly hard pressed to attract highly qualified faculty. C. Eric Lincoln, a professor of religion and culture at Duke University, turned down offers to become president of three black colleges last year. "It would take a martyr as far as I'm concerned to take the helm of a black college as the situation now exists," he says. "They just don't have the resources to survive."

Like women's colleges, which are enjoying a modest renaissance after nearly getting lost in the rush to coeducation, some black colleges now look attractive *because*, not in spite of, their relative homogeneity. Many young people choose the schools because they believe they will feel more comfortable. David Evans, an admissions officer at Harvard, puts it bluntly: "Some students who come from predominantly white backgrounds are just tired of all the hell that they've endured, and they want to get away from it." Others want to explore the rich troves of black history and culture that schools have accumulated. And still others go for financial reasons: to ensure access for even the lowest-income

FRANK CARROLL—NBC

Featured players:
Spelman College will costar as 'Hillman' when Cosby kid Lisa Bonet spins off to campus



CRAIG T. GREENLEE