

Back to the future:
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 curriculum and model
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students, private black colleges have kept tuitions at about two-thirds the national average for all private colleges.

Black colleges have also refused to abandon their historic mission of providing higher education to students from inadequate secondary schools. Bearing that burden is expensive; a study by the National Institute of Independent Colleges and Universities shows that the average cost of educating students at black colleges is often higher than at white private schools because of the added expenses of remedial courses, placement testing and other special services. Black private schools also have few financial resources to fall back on. Since their pool of wealthy alumni is small, their average endowment per student is less than half the average for private colleges.

The financial load falls most heavily on the public colleges. Most grew out of attempts by states to avoid admitting blacks to existing institutions after the Civil War. Severely underfunded throughout their existence, many are still essentially vocational schools. None had graduate schools until well into the 1960s and only five have them today. As a result of a landmark desegregation decision in 1972, 19 Southern and border states were obliged to dismantle their separate and unequal higher-education systems and put more money into the black schools. Some have complied, but many have dragged their feet—and the NAACP charges that the Reagan administration has virtually halted enforcement efforts. "The states have gotten the word that the Feds are not serious about desegregation," says NAACP counsel Elliott C. Lichtman.

Even so, the situation is not without hope. Pennsylvania's Lincoln University, which claims to be the oldest black academic school, has a highly rated curriculum. The majority of Lincoln's 1,150 students come from low-income families. Because the average freshman's SAT score is 825, Lincoln requires all new students to take proficiency tests in reading, composition, math and speech. The school must place about 30 percent of each freshman class in its model remedial courses. "Many of our students may have less than stellar academic backgrounds, but they can do the work," says Darrell C. Davis, dean of admissions. "Our main concern as an institution is to give the nurturing that they can't get in the mainstream."

The supportive atmosphere attracts top students as well. The first in her family to attend college, senior Barbara Tyler turned down Northwestern to attend Lincoln. She has studied two years of Russian and Mandarin Chinese, studied in Taiwan for a year and is now the vice president of student government at Lincoln. She says she would never have had similar opportunities at a white college. "I wanted to go to a black college so that I could be in a competitive environment without being considered inferior," she says. According to Harvard's Poussaint, this could make all the difference for Tyler as she pursues a career in medicine: "If a black student graduates from an all-black college feeling more confident, that's a critical factor in success."

Yet some critics still question the opportunities at even the most highly rated black institutions. While he acknowledges the crucial



COURTESY LINCOLN UNIVERSITY

historic role that black colleges have played, Glen C. Loury, professor of political economy at Harvard, insists that "there is no point in pretending that these institutions are somehow in the forefront of small liberal-arts colleges." "Howard is not Princeton, and Morehouse is not an Oberlin," he says. Perhaps not, but a Carnegie Corporation study found that black institutions do a better job than white colleges of retaining black students through all four years of school. Though these institutions attract only 16 percent of the nation's black college students today, they still grant nearly 40 percent of the bachelor's degrees earned by blacks. Several recent studies have also documented career results. Jomills Braddock, a sociologist at Johns Hopkins, found that female grads from black colleges actually make higher average salaries than black female grads from white colleges. (The results were the opposite for black males.)

For all the benefits, even the happiest students at black colleges acknowledge trade-offs. Demetriouse Russell, for instance, transferred with great trepidation from Middlebury to Morehouse because he yearned to relax and be himself. "I wanted more of a social life and a chance to develop a strong sense of identity, but I also had this belief that a black college could not prepare me as well as a predominantly white college could," Russell says. The physical surroundings dismayed him at first; three days after he arrived at the spare, urban campus, he called Middlebury and was all set to return. "There was nothing but concrete, the facilities were not what I had been used to at Middlebury and the food was horrible." He stayed, however, after a Morehouse senior from his hometown convinced him to look beyond the facilities to what was being taught. Russell is glad he stayed. "They instill a strong sense of responsibility and direction in you," he says.

Just a short walk away at Spelman, Renée McDonald enjoys similar satisfactions—with few of the drawbacks. Spelman is blessed by a healthy \$41 million endowment and a generous, distinguished roster of alumnae—including novelist Alice Walker and civil-rights attorney Marian Wright Edelman. There's a real sense of belonging; all 1,700 students are formally inducted into "the Spelman sisterhood." Each Thursday morning freshmen and sophomores must attend lectures in Sisters Chapel given by civic and business leaders—most of whom are black. "You get to see such a wide range of black talent," says McDonald. "It has straightened out a lot of my misperceptions about black people." Spelman also enjoys a picturesque, leafy campus. That made it a natural for on-location taping of "Hillman," a planned Cosby-show spinoff about Denise Huxtable's life at a fictional black college. When it debuts next fall, the rest of the country may be in for some consciousness-raising of its own.

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