

How Did African Americans Rate Black Colleges 50 Years Ago?

BY PROF. MCKINLEY BURT

The following opinions appeared in the "Negro Digest Magazine" for July, 1945. Readers may find this important issue as controversial as ever. The Portland Observer would be very interested in hearing the reader's opinions, and will publish several of the most responsive replies.

Mixed: From a freshman at Lincoln University. Her home is Kansas City, Kansas.

I believe that Negroes should accept democracy whenever it is offered. I believe that Negro students should attend mixed colleges even if it were possible to obtain an equal education in a Negro college. Free colleges, open to all irrespective of race or color, are no more than what is to be expected in a democracy. In semi-democratic America, the free college can be a powerful instrument for the attaining of real democracy in other aspects of American life.

Today the word "democracy" is used to glibly. Negroes especially are forever prating about it; yet by our very actions we prove that we do not in reality want democracy at all. Complete consolidation of the school systems in America is essential if we mean to practice democracy; yet some of us prefer to attend Negro colleges.

This means, of course, that if Negroes do not attend in large numbers the existing mixed colleges, the contribution that higher education can make to the integration of the Negro into American society will be pushed farther and farther into the future. As long as Negro students make demands upon the various states for "separate but equal" education, Negro colleges will be enlarged. As Negro institutions grow, Jim Crow education becomes more firmly rooted.

Negroes can get equal educational opportunities only by attending mixed schools because there is no

such thing as "separate but equal" education. The very undemocratic spirit which segregates us also provides us inferior make-shift schools operated on limited budgets.

In most mixed schools, Negroes are free to use all equipment and facilities, and are taught by the same professors as are the whites. Therefore, they have equal educational opportunities. There can be no double standard. An "A" earned in a mixed college by a Negro student will be accepted at face value by any college. Students transferring from Negro to mixed colleges sometimes find that some of their credits are not acceptable and they are not acceptable and they are therefore admitted on condition.

In mixed colleges where little or no attention is given to the Negro problem, the Negro student can render a service to democracy by urging that courses in the social sciences pay adequate attention to the role of the Negro in the development of the nation. Only then can white students gain sufficient knowledge of the Negro's background, and only by such a knowledge can he realize the common destiny of all American citizens. God speed the day when the realization of that common destiny will make it unnecessary for colleges to teach anything but American history.

Another reason for attending a mixed college is that Negro students strive to excel in mixed colleges because they realize that they are competing with the best. They also realize that they are representing a racial group to white students who have never known any Negroes on their intellectual plane.

Negro students know that if the white student has had any personal contact with Negroes at all, usually he has met only the domestic worker with whom he has very little in common. If the attendance of Negroes at mixed colleges did nothing

more than to show white students that all Negroes are not domestic workers, it would have served a useful purpose. Such acquaintances will give white students an opportunity to know, at first hand, that the stereotype presented to him in the movies, on the radio, and in a certain type of fiction are entirely false.

However, all the enemies of democracy are not white people. Negroes themselves need to be educated in race tolerance, there are many Negroes who, whether with good cause or not, actually hate all white people. The mixed college can

million unknown American citizens who want to believe that democracy is intended for all of the people in America.

Black: From a junior at Fisk University. Her home is in Huntington Valley, PA.

Although Negro students have been faced with the question as to whether they should attend mixed or Negro colleges since 1856 when Wilberforce was started, a solution is of great concern today. With the increased flow of money, more Negro students have found themselves in position financially to consider

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Negroes are a mystery to white people. Hardly a Negro can say that he has not at any time been approached by a white person who, with the utmost sincerity wants to ask such questions as these: (1) Are Negro babies born white and turn dark very soon after birth? (2) Why are Negroes so many different colors? (3) How do Negro girls fix their hair? (4) Do Negroes want to marry white people? (5) What kind of life does a Negro expect to live after death? (6) Are Negro men and women sexually better, but with less mentality than white men and women?

The mixed college provides an excellent opportunity to help educate white people respecting 13

attending mixed colleges. The fact that more mixed colleges have opened their doors to Negro students in the last decade adds further complexity to the problem. In order to arrive at a wise solution it is necessary to examine some of the outstanding factors involved. The place of Negro students on the college campus and the effects produced must be considered.

Negro students can adjust themselves more readily at Negro colleges.

They are not subjected to a strained environment dominated by race prejudice. From past actions it is quite obvious that Negro students are not wanted in the best white colleges. By 1936 Vassar had graduated but one Negro and was ignorant of it at the time. Princeton has never admitted a Negro to its undergraduate school; Johns Hopkins admitted

Negro students but refused to let them participate in field trials for the Olympic meet.

Such examples of discrimination show that in the mixed college the Negro student has to spend time breaking down barriers often in preference to his studies without assurance of favorable results. A college education is too serious to take such chances. In the Negro college the students have greater opportunities for social and extracurricular activities. Their sex associations are natural, and they may become members of Greek letter organizations if they desire. When Negroes on mixed campuses do establish fraternities, they have no representation on the Inter-Fraternal Council.

Since the Negro student belongs to a minority group, his social and economic background demands special attention. This the personnel departments of Negro colleges can do better, for they can secure the information with which to work. The student does not feel that someone is prying into his private affairs when questions are asked by his own group. Negroes have a natural tendency to give illusive information when approached by a white. Once a friend of mine filing out a questionnaire described his race as "human race" and his color as "high brown."

In attending Negro colleges the Negro student comes in contact with the best of his race. Some of the nationally recognized Negroes have been or are now instructors in Negro colleges—Dr. W.E.B. DuBois at Atlanta University; Dr. George Edmund Haynes, Dr. St. Elmo Brady, Dr. Charles S. Johnson, and Dr. James Weldon Johnson at Fisk; Dr. Charles Wesley and Dr. Alain Locke at Howard. Not only is there contact with prominent faculty members, but there are usually exceptional young people in the student body. Negro colleges are interested in the development of the race; therefore

the student learns to understand his race and to appreciate the contributions Negroes have made to culture. These he would not be likely to learn in mixed colleges.

In his "Dusk of Dawn," Dr. DuBois says: "At Fisk, the problem of race was faced openly and essential racial equality asserted and natural inferiority strenuously denied..."

At Harvard, on the other hand, I began to face scientific race dogma...It was continually stressed in the community and in classes that there was a vast difference in the development of the whites and the 'lower' races; that this could be seen in the physical development of the Negro."

It is often argued that the Negro college does not prepare the student for life—first because his training is inferior and second because he cannot adjust himself to a mixed society. However, Negro education cannot be much inferior, for statistics show that graduates of Negro colleges have met the requirements for higher degrees of the leading universities. Between 1876 and 1936 one hundred forty Negro college graduates received Ph.D. degrees. Even granting the fact that mixed colleges have better organized curricula does not mean that Negro education is inferior. Education is not a mere matter of high scholarship; it is also developing a well-rounded personality that will best fit a student to meet the problems of living. As far as society is concerned, the Negro is only a segregated part of the mixed culture, so there is little adjusting to be done. All his close friends and associates will belong to his small world within.

Since Negro colleges were established for Negro students, and since they afford greater opportunities for character building, leadership, and service than do mixed colleges, Negro students should attend Negro colleges.

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