

SELECTED PERCEPTIONS OF TRADITIONALLY BLACK INSTITUTIONS OF
HIGHER EDUCATION IN A VASTLY "INTEGRATING" SOCIETY

John L. Rhodes, Fort Valley State College

Traditionally black institutions (TBI) of higher education have served Georgia and its black communities for over a century. Despite the remarkable accomplishments of these institutions' alumni, TBI are now being threatened with possible extinction. Social legislation which banned segregation has also become a Pandora's box for many TBI. Since the doors to enter the traditionally white colleges and universities have been opened for everyone, some people have begun to question the need for traditionally black colleges. This paper will discuss the results of a survey conducted by the writer to determine certain perceptions about TBI in Georgia and their viability in a "quasi-integrated" society.

Shortly after the Civil War, several private black colleges were established under the auspices of private interest groups and church organizations to educate the black youth of Georgia. Atlanta University (1865)¹ was the first of these institutions to open its doors. Soon to follow were Morehouse College (1867)² and Clark College (1869).³ By 1883, Morris Brown College (1881),⁴ Spelman College--a college for black women (1881)⁵--and Paine College (1882)⁶ were all providing some formal education for black Georgians.

The state of Georgia did not get involved in the formal education of blacks until 1890, when on November 23 the General Assembly of Georgia "established, in connection with the State University..., a school for the education and training of Negro students." The school, named The Georgia State Industrial College for Colored Youths, served as Georgia's land grant institution for blacks until 1947. In 1950, this school was renamed Savannah State College.⁷ The Fort Valley State College (1939)⁸ and Albany State College (1943)⁹ complete the list of public four year institutions for blacks in Georgia. These schools were established when segregation was the law and blacks could not attend white schools. Today, these institutions find themselves striving to maintain their identity and keep their doors opened.

Thirty-one years ago, the Supreme Court declared that, in education, separate and equal are a contradiction in terms. During the 1970s, under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, Georgia's university system, along with many other university systems in the South, was under pressure from the federal government to integrate further.¹⁰ By 1979 Georgia had submitted an acceptable desegregation plan to the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. The Georgia plan called for "strengthening the traditionally black public colleges' academic programs and improving their facilities." The plan also called for "increasing the number of black undergraduates in predominantly white institutions by sixteen per cent."¹¹ This requirement added to the woes of TBI as affirmative action by white colleges lured many of the bright black students away from TBI.¹²

The effect of such efforts has tremendously impeded the growth of enrollment at TBI. Today, fewer than one-fourth of all black college students attend TBI. Meanwhile, white student enrollment at TBI remains small. These facts, coupled with the propaganda that black colleges perpetuate inferior academic standards for black students and award degrees that do

not meet standards of the average predominantly white colleges,¹³ cause one to perceive TBI in a negative sense.

This writer conducted a survey among professional educators to explore their perceptions of TBI. Using a State Directory of Public Schools in Georgia, the writer enumerated high schools from 1 to 315. Then with a program written for the Apple II-E Computer, 100 random numbers in the range from 1 to 315 were generated. The randomly generated numbers were then used to select schools from the ordered list in the directory. The principals and then the counselors of the selected schools were asked to participate in the survey. Also, 40 college presidents, including those of all the public colleges and 8 private colleges, were asked to participate. The respondents were from both rural and urban areas in the state. Two-thirds of the 240 people polled participated in the survey. Sixty-six high school principals, 68 high school counselors, and 27 college presidents actually participated in the survey. They were asked "Do TBI have a significant role to play in today's society?" Seventy-eight percent of all the respondents agreed that TBI have a significant role to play in today's society. Respondents commented that "In the area of motivation, [the TBI] made their greatest contribution and played their chief role"¹⁴ and are continuing to do so. Within TBI, "the students enter a classroom where the teachers are sympathetic and understanding. The students are not discouraged or made to feel that they can not achieve. They are encouraged by teachers to prepare themselves for the future."¹⁵

When asked if TBI had lost their usefulness since integration, 87 percent of the respondents disagreed. Integration is supposed to increase our choices, not eliminate them. The challenge of integration has increased the need for TBI.

Only 26 percent of the respondents agreed that predominantly white institutions are at present sufficiently meeting the needs of black students. Historically, the primary objective of TBI has been to educate students who have been traditionally denied a higher education. Many of these students are first generation college students who very often lack the sophistication that would enable them to move with ease in anything other than a supportive environment. TBI provide a supportive environment while accepting the challenge of meeting the needs of students whose prep school training was sometimes deficient. Fifty percent of the respondents, on the other hand, agreed that TBI can sufficiently address the needs of white students.

Another perception since integration has been "TBI should change their black image." The survey did not reflect a decisive opinion on this question. Of the respondents, 38 percent agreed and 42 percent disagreed. The remaining 20 percent were undecided. However, the hard facts are "black will not sell in the white community" and "the demands to integrate are already here." TBI, though proud of their heritage, must realize that change, not tradition, is the key to their survival.

The respondents were not decided on whether or not TBI need more white administrators; 31 percent agreed and 31 percent disagreed that more white administrators are needed for TBI, with 38 percent undecided. On the other hand, 44 percent of the respondents feel that TBI need more white faculty

members.

On the matter of quality education, the respondents were asked if graduates of TBI were well qualified: 52 percent agreed that the graduates of TBI were well qualified while 27 per cent disagreed; 22 percent were undecided.

Sixty-six per cent of the respondents believed that TBI should continue to serve the black community although many of them indicated that this service should include the white community as well. TBI are economically feasible and are easily accessible to the areas of Georgia they serve.

Only 13 per cent of the respondents agreed that Georgia's colleges and universities are fully integrated. Perhaps "quasi-integrated" would have been a more acceptable term. Obviously there are still some areas left to be addressed across the entire university system on this subject.

On the subject of finance, 16 per cent of the respondents perceive TBI to be sufficiently funded while 45 per cent of the respondents disagreed. TBI were "founded on short grass" according to Dr. Benjamin Mays, former president of Morehouse College, "and they still live on short grass." Traditionally, it has been assumed that black people can survive on less than white people and that black colleges need less than white colleges.¹⁶ It was this kind of reasoning that perpetuated the inferiority complex among TBI. According to an article in Jet magazine (April, 1985),

A special study team headed by Attorney Herbert O. Reid and Kenneth Tollett, director of the Institute for the Study of Educational Policy, pointed out that the Higher Education Act of 1965 (Title III) contained the phrase (developing institutions) referring specifically to Blacks.

However, by not using the term Black, the vague language has created difficulty in establishing criteria, targeting funds, and evaluating institutional progress. As a result, funding for Black colleges has been erratic and inadequate.¹⁷

The lack of scholarships in sufficient number has crippled TBI's ability to compete for the brighter high school seniors who are being steered more and more toward predominantly white colleges that have more to offer in scholarships.

Although all TBI in Georgia are accredited by the Southern Association of Secondary Schools and Colleges, 65 percent of the respondents did not know it. Only 32 per cent of the respondents acknowledged TBI accreditation. Finally, 45 per cent of those surveyed agreed that the potential resources of TBI had not been tapped to any significant extent in Georgia.

In closing, TBI have a significant role to play in Georgia's vastly "integrating" society. This role, however, like all the predominantly white institutions, is to serve and provide a quality education to the citizens of Georgia, black or white. TBI should continue to offer quality education in an environment that encourages, supports, and communicates in a number of ways that the institutions do care about the students' success.

The faculties of TBI are perhaps the most integrated part of the university system; however, across the entire system there are monetary shortages at all levels. The image of TBI will change as the problems of funding gradually disappear. TBI still need improved facilities and they should demand that these facilities be fully equipped with all the resources necessary to provide and sustain desired levels of quality in all programs. TBI have much to offer, but not until there is total acceptance of these institutions will the full value of TBI be realized.

NOTES

¹Benjamin E. Mays, "Black Colleges: Past, Present and Future," The Black Scholar (September, 1974), p. 32.

²The College Blue Book, 19th ed., New York: MacMillan publishing Company, Inc., 1983, p. 146.

³Ibid., p. 140.

⁴Ibid., p. 146.

⁵Spelman College Catalog (1976-77), p. 5.

⁶Paine College Catalog (1978-80), p. 8.

⁷Savannah State College Catalog (1980), p. 10.

⁸The Fort Valley State College Catalog (1983-85), p. 9.

⁹Albany State College Catalog (1979-81), p. 19.

¹⁰Time (October 12, 1981), p. 90.

¹¹Lorenzo Middleton, "Georgia Desegregation Plan Approved," The Chronicle of Higher Education (10 February 1979), p. 13.

¹²Time (12 October 1981), p. 90.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Mays, "Black Colleges," p. 33.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 32.

¹⁷Jet (April, 1984), p. 23.

The following is a survey of the perceptions of Georgians about the value of Traditionally Black Institutions (TBI) of Higher Education in Georgia since integration. The results of this study will be presented at the Georgia Association of Historians meeting in Athens, Georgia in connection with the University of Georgia's bicentennial celebration.

Selected Perceptions of Traditionally Black Institutions
(TBI) of Higher Education in Georgia

Personal Data:

Sex - M or F

Age Group - under 25 25-40 40-45 56 and over

Instructions: Encircle the appropriate number according to your own perceptions of TBI in Georgia. The scale is as follows.

1 = Strongly Agree

2 = Agree

3 = Undecided (Do not know)

4 = Disagree

5 = Strongly Disagree

- | | | | | | | |
|----|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| A. | TBI have a significant role to play in today's society. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| B. | Since integration, TBI have lost their usefulness. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| C. | Traditionally white institutions now sufficiently address the needs of black college students. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| D. | TBI can address sufficiently the needs of white students. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| E. | TBI should change their black image. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| F. | TBI need more white administrators. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| G. | TBI need more white faculty members. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| H. | Graduates to TBI are usually well qualified. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| I. | TBI should continue to serve the black community. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| J. | Georgia's colleges and universities are fully integrated at all levels. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| K. | TBI are sufficiently funded. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| L. | TBI are fully accredited by national accrediting agencies. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| M. | The potential of TBI in Georgia has not been fully exploited in your community. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

Comments: [Adequate space for comments was provided on the actual survey form.]

PLEASE NOTE: The results will be presented in summary form only.