

A Timeline of Racial and Political Challenges Experienced by Historical Public Universities in North Carolina

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Abstract

Higher education in North Carolina expanded dramatically in the nineteenth century. The advancement of white and black institutions differed due to a social hierarchy based on race and the white supremacy campaign that took form in the late 1800s. While several state colleges and universities attracted both black and white North Carolinian students, race circumscribed their respective pedagogical experiences. This research project explores the struggles and successes that UNC-Chapel Hill and North Carolina Central University, the first white and black post-secondary institutions in North Carolina, respectively, encountered in a century's time. In today's society, individuals looking to further their education have a plethora of higher institutions to choose from. In North Carolina, there are seventeen public colleges and universities that comprise what is known as the University of North Carolina system, along with thirty-six independent universities and fifty-nine community colleges. However, it took the state legislature and North Carolinians years of hard work and determination to grow higher education into the entity it is now. In 1789, the first publicly funded institution in the state and first state institution of higher learning in the nation (specifically for white men at the time) was established at what is now known as the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC). It wasn't until the 20th century that present-day North Carolina Central University (NCCU), the first public four-year liberal arts college for black students, obtained the capacity to accommodate a fraction of the students that other white universities received. The project takes a closer look at the differences in funding, curriculum, and recognition between UNC and NCCU, as well as what it took for the two to become a part of North Carolina's intrinsic university system.

Keywords: North Carolina, post-secondary education, race

1. Introduction

Nowadays, it is not unusual to find a plethora of post-secondary institutions that strike the interest of a wide array of people. From schools that specialize in a certain discipline to those devoted to liberal arts, individuals looking to further their education have a wide selection of places to choose from regardless of demographic or socioeconomic barriers. However, the history of how higher learning in America came to serve as a gateway to the professional world has been lost throughout the years. Society has grown so accustomed to the sheer number of community colleges, universities and technical schools that exist in the community that many people fail to reflect on the political, economic, racial and social hardships that institutions faced to offer higher education to the masses.

The push to create curriculum beyond the high school level was tedious and lacked support early on. Private and public schools alike shared in the challenges of seeking adequate appropriations, recognizing geographic limitations and creating equal opportunities amongst races; however, private schools carried less of a burden socially due to the fact that they were not compelled to succumb to the stipulations set forth by the government regarding education.

While private colleges experienced the difficulty of finding reputable and long-lasting beneficiaries to keep operations afloat, public entities had to ensure that their pedagogical purpose and proposed population, which was predominately white in the beginning but amended in the mid-20th century, was sound enough to convince the state to take a financial risk on them.

North Carolina's contribution to higher education is a unique one that is worth investigating as it includes the inception of the first publicly funded state institution in the nation and embarked on providing equal learning opportunities for African-American students, allowing North Carolina to possess the largest number of public historically black colleges and universities in the United States to date.

2. Origin of University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

In 1776, North Carolina, along with the other 12 colonies, had just declared independence from Great Britain and was looking to come up with a set of rules and regulations for their state. Hence, the state constitution was drafted. Included in the new constitution was a focus on education, stating that "All useful learning shall be duly encouraged and promoted in one or more universities".¹ Christopher C. Fordham, chancellor of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1985, recounts the history of the school's founder in his speech to the Newcomen Society:

William Richardson Davie, graduate of Princeton University, Revolutionary War cavalry officer, delegate to the Philadelphia constitutional convention of 1787, lawyer and orator, and fairly called a statesman, was the undoubted father of the university. It was Davie who persuaded the new state's legislature to charter the university, and ratification took place just twenty days after North Carolina ratified the Constitution of the United States.²

Davie's contribution to chartering the university did not result in any support financially at first, but soon became a stepping-stone in becoming the institution of higher education that it is today. Much like the schools being built in the 20th century, UNC had issues with getting sufficient appropriations to get started. Davie went to the General Assembly to request a loan to begin erecting buildings for the university, but there was much debate on whether or not the state should grant said loans. From a political standpoint, there was a difference in opinion between those who supported a strong national government and those who believed that the states should be left to make their own decisions. It wasn't until December 1791 that the loan Davie had asked for was finally granted, and the only form of funding that the university received until the post-Civil War era.

The idea of creating a public-school system began to take shape well into the 1800s, when people such as Joseph Caldwell and Archibald DeBow Murphey began campaigning for its advancement "...to render the white male populace literate".³ However, the outbreak of the Civil War stifled the growth of the amount of white males attending school because several of them went to fight. This caused a devastating decline in funding for the university, and they eventually had to close their doors in 1870 because they simply did not have the money to pay the debts they owed. However, through "...legislative financing for the university's reopening" during the Reconstruction era, they were able to enroll sixty-nine men in September 1875.⁴

In the years to come, the university created the nation's first summer school and started graduate programs in medicine, pharmacy and education. Women were first allowed admission in 1897, and had over 500 students by the end of the century. Edwin A. Alderman, president of the university from 1896-1900, praised the school for its accomplishments thus far, claiming, "No southern institution on so small an income can exceed this result".⁵ Chapel Hill went on to become a part of the University of North Carolina system along with the Women's College at Greensboro (now the University of North Carolina at Greensboro) and North Carolina State College at Raleigh (now North Carolina State University) in the 1930s, and continued to expand culturally, academically and economically.

3. Introduction of Black Universities

As with many other social and economic attributes rewarded to white citizens of the state during that time period, their black counterparts were not given the same opportunities. It took the nation until 1868 to draft the 14th Amendment, granting citizenship to former slaves and 28 more years to enforce the "separate but equal" doctrine, granting separate facilities for blacks and whites as long as they were each offered equal opportunities. This approach recently being

approved by the Supreme Court only increased the yearning of black people to have equal education, employment and living accommodations.

It is important to note that the establishment of a publicly supported institution for African-Americans was not a novel one. In fact, talk of an "...institution of learning, fostered and controlled by the State, of equal dignity of the State University of Chapel Hill" stirred up Congressmen as far back as the Reconstruction Era, and possibly much earlier.⁶ There was much debate on the topic of whether or not to provide state aid for a school for Negro youth that offered the same opportunities as Chapel Hill; the first few attempts failed, however. To no one's surprise, the whites in North Carolina did not support this particular movement, but all of that changed when the Morrill acts of 1862 and 1890 were passed.

The proposal to incorporate training in agriculture and mechanics and for appropriations to be "...equitably divided between the two races in states where separate schools were maintained" (the objectives of the Morrill acts of 1862 and 1890, respectively) made the possibility of a state-supported school more tangible.⁷ These acts got the ball rolling on the establishment of an agricultural and mechanical school for the Negro citizens of the state, but it was not the only contributor. There was still the matter of where the school would be located. Competitors included Durham, Raleigh, Winston-Salem, Wilmington and Greensboro, and each city offered subscriptions of various amounts as well as land area for different buildings. In the end, a little over a year after the Second Morrill Act of 1890, the Agricultural and Mechanical College for the Colored Race (present-day North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University) in Greensboro was created by the General Assembly in March 1891. However, this institution focused on agriculture and mechanical education, and was not necessarily representative of the same type of curriculum that Chapel Hill offered. In fact, state superintendent Charles Coon made the claim that schools like the A&M school was not a college.⁸ Another type of institution needed to be made that offered the liberal arts and formal instruction that matched that of Chapel Hill. Nearly twenty years later, the South's first public four-year liberal arts college for African Americans fulfilled the need that the black community so desperately needed.

4. Origin of North Carolina Central University

James Edward Shepard, founder of present-day North Carolina Central University located in Durham, had a vision for the future of black education in the state of North Carolina. Shepard was born in Raleigh in 1875, and his ancestors were slaves to Governor Charles Manly. Despite his family history, he was able to graduate from Shaw University in 1894 with a degree in pharmacy. He then went on to practice in Durham and Charlotte, and was later one of the first investors in North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company that became the largest black-owned business in the South.⁹ In 1898, Shepard was appointed a clerkship in the Recorder of Deeds Office in Washington, D.C., as well as Raleigh's deputy collector for the Internal Revenue Service the next year, miraculously remaining in office with the IRS until 1905. Nonetheless, with disfranchisement rearing its ugly head at the turn of the century, Shepard began to encourage African-Americans to "reclaim their citizenship through moral and educational development rather than through public agitation, northern migration, or legal recourse".¹⁰

After 1905, Shepard's hunger for finding new ways to lead led him to the church, where he was a field superintendent for the International Sunday School Association for four years. However, the encounters that he had with fellow white religious leaders made it difficult for him to continue in the profession without establishing his own institution that would stimulate black leadership during a time when the ideals of white supremacy were at an all-time high. These series of events led to the founding of the National Religious Training School and Chautauqua for the Colored Race in 1910. There was no better place in the South for a school such as this one than Durham, North Carolina because of the astounding stream of black businesses populated throughout the city.¹¹ Known as the "Capital of the Black Middle Class", Durham had gained an affluent reputation for economic and educational growth in the region, which no doubt aided in the attention that Shepard's training school received. Both W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington visited the campus, and Shepard began being pegged as "one of the South's rising black educational leaders".¹²

Shepard's belief in creating a "black counterpart to the University of North Carolina" resulted in quite a few controversial arguments.¹³ Some believed that Shepard was doing nothing but adding fuel to the fire that was segregation with the establishment of a university specifically for African-Americans and not interested in fighting for equal admission at UNC, while others argued that he "upheld the color line but resisted white efforts to maintain it on the cheap".¹⁴ With several other private black colleges in the state already, it goes without saying that the black community needed the recognition and support from public benefactors more than ever. It would put them in a position to advance as a people in the workforce and beyond, which is why it was so important for Shepard to take the next

step by providing the opportunity of public education that paralleled what the white community had been privileged with for over a century.

During the same time, there were already a few public normal schools and land-grant colleges for black people. However, these institutions either taught trade skills or primarily high school level courses. This disadvantage definitely did not give these students the proper post-secondary education that they so desperately needed, and state appropriations for these schools only exacerbated this issue. Between 1885 and 1941, non-white public colleges and universities in North Carolina were receiving between 8.3 and 21.8 percent of the total amount of funds.¹⁵ Due to this devastating fact, colleges began to suffer because they simply did not have the money to support the few programs that they offered. Shepard's institution was no different, and he proposed that the recently renamed National Training School be taken over by the state as a public school in 1920. The choice was not easy, especially when Shepard weighed what he would have to give up in order to turn the school over to the Department of Public Instruction. However, he knew that this was the best decision in order to keep the school afloat as he could given the circumstances.

Renamed once more, Durham State Normal School was taken over by the state in the fall semester of 1923. Along with a new board of trustees, the changes that the school went through resulted in Shepard having no choice but to take a back seat in the logistics of the school's success. Shepard's ultimate goal was to build the school into a four-year institution that offered the type of college coursework found at other undergraduate schools, but the state legislature did not have the same vision, going so far as to do away with teaching college level coursework altogether and subjecting the curriculum to equal that of high schools. Shepard was completely against the change in direction that the state had, but pressed on in a diplomatic manner. His hard work started to flourish two years later when the North Carolina General Assembly passed a bill that promoted his school to a four-year teacher college to train high school teachers. It was not the full-fledged liberal arts school that Shepard had always dreamed of presiding over, but it was most definitely a start. The bill passed on February 20, 1925, and the school was again renamed the North Carolina College for Negroes. Of course, there was the stipulation that the president and board of trustees were to be appointed by the governor and state superintendent, who were mainly all white men early on.¹⁶

Shepard continued to fight for his school's politics and finances, and ended up achieving his goal of "Durham...being the home of the only state-owned Negro college of liberal arts" in 1929 after twenty years of failed legislature and racial barriers.¹⁷ There were no graduate or professional programs offered there until 1939, when Pauli Murray sought admission into UNC Chapel Hill's sociology program at the graduate level but was denied because of her race. She wrote to the president at UNC, but to no avail. Eventually, her frustrations with not being able to do graduate work at the schools in North Carolina at the time that offered them, along with a previous Supreme Court case involving another student being denied admission at a graduate school based on race, graduate programs in law, library science, and liberal arts at the North Carolina College for Negroes and in agricultural and technical fields at A&T were established. In addition, the Murphy Bill was passed to grant out-of-state aid to students who were looking to study graduate programs that were offered at UNC but not at NCC or A&T. Even still, the graduate programs were not nearly up to par with the level of education that UNC offered, and the "separate but equal" façade reared its ugly head yet again, but did not stay for long.

Several major changes in education for the races in North Carolina (as well as the nation itself) began to take form in the 1940s. For instance, state appropriations for white institutions were lower on average while black institutions noticed a temporary increase on average from the 1937-1938 to the 1939-1940 school year. More specifically, Chapel Hill experienced a decrease from \$197 to \$168 per capita while NCC had the largest increase of the five black public schools in North Carolina: an almost \$100 increase, from \$92 to \$191.¹⁸ There continued to be issues centered on whether or not graduate facilities could survive at NCC. Shepard pushed for the expansion regardless, looking to hopefully add a medical school to the mix in 1941. However, he wanted the school to be of the same degree as the one that UNC offered, refusing to be "second-rate" by any means. The idea of expansion raised questions by many, especially Durham's *Carolina Times*, who said in their paper, "If the state had 'at last realized the injustice which its Negro citizens have suffered under the unequal educational system... then it is time to rejoice.' But if the state planned to offer 'makeshift graduate courses,' then grief was in order."¹⁹

5. Integration at UNC

Across the nation, the argument was that blacks simply might not be prepared for integration, which was what spurred the choice between separate institutions and mixing of the races. One of the most notable courses of action that helped to change that mindset was the Supreme Court case in June 1951 that promoted the desegregation of UNC's law

school. NCC law student Floyd McKissick, one of several protesters who were demanding equal conditions at their law school, said that there were not enough books, space or facilities to accommodate the students.²⁰ The protests were enough to grant the school twenty thousand dollars in the fall of 1949 for repairs to buildings for law school facilities, and eventually led to a Supreme Court case that began desegregation at UNC's law school in June 1951. That summer, the first black students were admitted to the university. The four black students: Harvey Beech, J. Kenneth Lee, Floyd B. McKissick, and James Lassiter, were involved in a case in 1952 that claimed that "...UNC harassed black law students to prevent them from graduating and discouraged others from applying".²¹ One of the students, Kenneth Lee, stated that professors weren't trying to discriminate against them, but their previous education made it difficult for them to keep up with the curriculum taught at UNC.

As one could imagine, desegregation was accepted with much reluctance at UNC, where there was gradual acceptance of students and perpetual segregation in certain places. It wasn't until 1961 that the city of Chapel Hill even allowed black students into the town's movie theaters and some restaurants, making it "the most integrated of any town in the South".²² It was clear that, as the state strived to become more progressive in all other aspects, it still had a hard time moving forward in regard to race relations. Dr. Joseph C. Sitterson, president of Chapel Hill in 1969, spoke at the University of Mississippi and predicted "both racial integration and racial separatism eventually will be accepted as desirable", insinuating that there would be a place for both.²³ However, the truth of the matter was that in order for racial integration to work, there would be no room for separatism (at least not widespread).

6. Conclusion

The 1950s and 1960s began to give black students more freedom in choosing where they sought higher education as more universities opened their doors to them. However, there are several black students who decide to attend historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), not because they do not have the option to go to predominately white institutions, but because they appreciate the rich tradition that can be found there. HBCUs are important because of their rich heritage, tradition and culture. They are teeming with experiences that are relevant to all populations, emphasizing the importance of equality, unity, understanding and acceptance of differences. African-American students who decide to attend HBCUs should not be viewed as individuals who are seeking separation from the majority; rather, they are emerging adults who value integrity and take solace in knowing that the institution that they have chosen was established with them in mind. There is controversy amongst the role of HBCUs in today's society because they are believed to promote disparity and exclusion. However, this is far from the truth. HBCUs exemplify equality. They recognized a need for quality education, coalesced and protested for the establishment of equal conditions until there was reform. Many movements lobbying for human rights today function similarly and can learn from the course of events that created HBCUs in North Carolina and beyond to generate radical change. Each campus has a unique story in their maturation and have developed a sense of pride that simply cannot be surpassed. The fact that the black community has been able to make such great strides in education and elsewhere is awe-inspiring and limitless so long as future generations continue to build upon the ideals that those before them possessed.

7. Acknowledgements

The author wishes to express appreciation to the History Department at Western Carolina University that offered the course that generated research on this topic, the Hunter Library at Western Carolina University and the J. Murrey Atkins Library at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte for references, the National Conferences on Undergraduate Research for acceptance of the abstract, the University of Memphis for hosting NCUR 2017, the Honors College at Western Carolina University for funding the trip to NCUR 2017, and the University of North Carolina at Asheville for the opportunity to publish this work in the 2017 NCUR conference proceedings.

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