

THE CULTIVATION OF THE BLACK EXPERIENCE:
Student Voices at William and Mary, 1954-2014

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Following the Civil War, literacy for African Americans in the United States became the crucial difference between subordination and freedom. With the emancipation of enslaved Blacks following the onset of the 13th Amendment to the United States Constitution outlawing slavery in the United States, southern whites made it their goal to ensure that their black counterparts understood that emancipation had not rid them of their perpetual role as laborers, and that a “polite education” would be of no use to the black race.¹ African-Americans, however, understood that the objections to black literacy was directly related to the desire to relegate blacks to their status prior to emancipation; however, African-Americans remained anxious for education because of its direct relationship to power in society.² Andrea Heather Williams argues that African-Americans are responsible for educating themselves, and that self-help is the only means by which blacks in American society are able to demand social and civic equality. Carter G. Woodson, however, argues that African-Americans will remain mis-educated because their schoolbooks and curriculum are embedded with teachings that the black man is subordinate. Despite institutional changes introduced to combat racism, African-American students at the College of William and Mary nonetheless remain disconnected from the College and campus community due to historical perceptions of race that permeate the minds of faculty, students, and staff at the College of William and Mary.

SELF-HELP

¹ Andrea Heather Williams, *Self Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 180.

² Andrea Heather Williams, *Self Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 42, 197-198.

Black motivations for seeking education was not only to equalize the power structures in American society during Reconstruction but to establish and demand the rights that African-Americans were granted in the United States with the passing of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments as well as the overturning of the Dred Scott Decision. Freedman realized after the Civil War that the only way to guarantee governmental protection was to become educated, and the increase in literacy rates among freed people would eliminate white southern arguments that blacks were incapable of actively participating in the government.³

Fully aware of black suppression by the southern white population, when it came to governmental protection of African Americans in the south and throughout the rest of the United States following the Civil War, convention delegates urged black people to establish their own schools and to take full advantage of educational opportunities provided by other blacks and northern associations.⁴ Missionaries from the northern associations, however, often harbored their own opinions towards blacks and did not act in a way that suggested equality between the races.⁵

BLACK MIS-EDUCATION

In his *Mis-education of the Negro*, Carter G. Woodson argues that even in black colleges the inferiority of the Negro is drilled into him in every classroom and in every book that he is given to read. Woodson gives the example:

At a Negro summer school...a white instructor gave a course on the Negro, using for his text a work which teaches that whites are superior to the blacks. When asked by one of the students why he used such a textbook the instructor replied that he wanted them to get

³ Ibid., 69-70.

⁴ Ibid., 75.

⁵ Ibid., 118.

that point of view. Even schools for Negroes, then, are places where they must be convinced of their inferiority.⁶

Southern whites perpetuated the subservient role of African Americans by denying access to education to eliminate threats to white supremacy. Denying black access to education also provided poor whites' with the compensation of being white despite their socioeconomic status; these beliefs extended throughout the Civil Rights Movement.⁷

METHODS

Following the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of 1954, the Supreme Court case responsible for integrating and providing equal access to education to students of color, many public institutions were closed, limiting African American access to education. In the schools that did become integrated, African American students were still subject to harassment and discrimination within these public institutions; an experience different from that of their white counterparts.

The College of William and Mary was no stranger to this institution. What remains unanswered in this research is the extent to which structural changes to United States law enforcing integration have worked to make students at the College of William and Mary comfortable matriculating at the College and how in turn, this affects their relationship with the College of William and Mary upon graduation.

Closely following the denial of admission letters to well-qualified African-American students applying to the College following the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of 1954

⁶ Carter G. Woodson, *Mis-Education of the Negro* (Washington, D.C.: The Associated Publishers, 1933), 2.

⁷ Andrea Heather Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 42, 178-179.

provides evidence of a time in which our Alma Mater was overtly discriminatory in their admissions policies. Addressing this history provides evidence of the social climate of the faculty, staff and student body employed by the College following the Civil Rights era and how much race relations has permeated the experience of future generations of African Americans in the generations to follow the Brown v. Board of Education desegregation decision of 1954. With digital access to a newspaper entitled “The Black Presence at William and Mary” issued in 1985, access to two oral history transcripts from 2005, and four interviews with current William and Mary students, I am able to track the experience of the black student body throughout the decades.

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

When Miss Miriam J. Carter, a school teacher from Philadelphia who moved to Gloucester, Virginia to pursue her graduate education, applied to the College in 1955, she was denied admission on the basis that:

...the College of William and Mary is a State institution, therefore, we must conform to State law, regulations, and pertinent official rulings. In view of the fact, therefore, that the graduate program of the type in which you are interested is offered at Virginia State College we are unable to accept your application...⁸

Miriam Carter replied to the school explaining that as she is living in Gloucester, Virginia on sabbatical leave from the public schools of Philadelphia and that since she is living on half of her normal salary, it is most affordable to go to the school nearest to her, the College of William and Mary. She also brought attention the Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court Case,

⁸ Folder 34, box 33, series 1, Office of the President, Davis Y. Paschall Records, Special Collections Research Center, Earl Gregg Swem Library, College of William and Mary.

and asked that her application be given further consideration. The school replied that the State of Virginia is currently conducting studies regarding the Supreme Court decree and once those investigations are complete, it will be necessary for the College to re-examine its admission policies. When President Chandler went on vacation, the College never responded to Mrs. Carter's application.⁹

With the progression of time and the emergence of a culture of acceptance, more African Americans began to be admitted to the College. The growth in numbers of African Americans at the College and the development of black organizations on campus, however, was not enough to battle misconceptions held about the black race or their organizations. In a newspaper article written by Rebecca L. Clark in 1985, a student named Angela Cody recalled being asked if her black Greek-letter organization "was a real sorority" despite having bylaws, dues, and service functions just as the larger white Greek organizations at William and Mary.¹⁰

Mitzi Glass, Class of 1981 had a similar experience. In her interview in 2005, Glass states:

It was amazing to me to live in the dorm with white girls who had never lived near or seen black people before. You know, I still find this amazing. I found that just so amazing. They had never shared space; they had never been in a neighborhood with African Americans. They may have seen African Americans on TV, but never had been in close proximity with black people.¹¹

⁹ Folder 34, box 33, series 1, Office of the President, Davis Y. Paschall Records, Special Collections Research Center, Earl Gregg Swem Library, College of William and Mary.

¹⁰ Series 1: Office of Minority Student Affairs, Center for Student Diversity Records, Special Collections Research Center, Swem Library, College of William and Mary

¹¹ University Archives Oral History Collection, Special Collections Research Center, Earl Gregg Swem Library, College of William and Mary.

When asked if she experienced racial tensions, Mitzi Glass stated that at her time at William and Mary, there was a professor that was open about “his opposition about having Black Students at William and Mary.” Glass stated that the professor, Dr. Edmonds, believed that a different standard was used to admit students of color to the college, and he voiced his opinion publicly to the press. Mitzi went on to say that she does not remember the issue being resolved and that she believes that he remained a Professor at the College. At the conclusion of the interview, Glass went on to say that she does not feel a connection to William and Mary as a result of her experiences, but “I have affection for who I became while I was there and the people that touched my life while I was there.”¹²

One black student, Mike Powell, class of 1985 and President of Theta Delta Chi Fraternity, had a different experience at William and Mary, finding his place among the white student population and working to alleviate minority student concerns by fostering a community between the two groups of students. Powell says, “I work with the majority to foster the kind of understanding of problems we need in order to solve them... There’s a linking (of black and white) that really needs to take place.” Powell concludes by saying “This campus is not an ‘us against them’ situation... That won’t work here. Everybody at William and Mary has to learn what others are about.”¹³

Even with these changes in society and curriculum in the College of Arts and Sciences, you wonder whether these changes are enough for the African-American students at the College. Carter G. Woodson would justify Powell’s experience by saying that the white student

¹² University Archives Oral History Collection, Special Collections Research Center, Earl Gregg Swem Library, College of William and Mary.

¹³ Series 1: Office of Minority Student Affairs, Center for Student Diversity Records, Special Collections Research Center, Swem Library, College of William and Mary

population is requiring him to conform quickly to white standards, but the black population is not asking for the same in return. This, in turn, won't reveal the talents of the black community on campus. In his *Miseducation of the Negro*, Carter G. Woodson states:

They [educated people] hope to make the Negro conform quickly to the standard of the whites and thus remove the pretext of the barriers between the races. They do not realize, however, that even if the Negroes do successfully imitate the whites, nothing new has thereby been accomplished. You simply have a larger number of persons doing what others have been doing. The unusual gifts of the race have not thereby been developed, and an unwilling world, therefore, continues to wonder what the Negro is good for.¹⁴

Not much has changed since Angela Cody and Mitzi Glass' experience in the 1980's, however. In 2005, an African American student named Tunisia Riley was interviewed regarding her experience at the College of William and Mary. Touching on her experiences with the concert band, Tunisia states:

I was in the concert band and, it just seemed very, I'm not the one to put race as the reason people act the way they do, but it just seemed kind of odd and suspicious that I was the only black person in the band and like, when we went on tour, like only out of fifty of the musicians who are in the band, only like five tried to interact with me. This was true also when we weren't on tour, and it just felt very, I guess like lonely and not a real ensemble, and the only thing I could think of that maybe it was race, but I mean

¹⁴ Carter G. Woodson, *Mis-Education of the Negro* (Washington, D.C.: The Associated Publishers, 1933), 7.

people told me later on it might have been because I wasn't in the band fraternity or sorority, but that's some bull.¹⁵

In interviews conducted with current William and Mary students, I received similar results. Not much has changed since the fourteen years following Tunisia Riley's experience. The first respondent, a Sophomore Chemistry and Theater double major from Trinidad and Tobago, when asked if she felt that the College of William and Mary has made the necessary adjustments to make the multicultural student body feel comfortable on campus responded that she feels like the administration tries to accommodate and account for the experiences of the colored population on campus, however, "America has encouraged a society where racial, ethnic and cultural differences are highlighted and often ridiculed instead of celebrated."

When a sophomore biology major from Hanover County, Virginia was asked the same question, he responded:

I think the college has some programs that could be really great however I feel like a lot of the programs are almost failed attempts. For example, I participated in the PLUS-S program during the summer where prospective Biology majors were introduced to the department on campus. The professor running the program when I participated was asked why we were chosen and he said we were students that needed help adjusting to the college due to being first generation college students, coming from poorer school systems, or coming from poorer families. Wasn't that just the adjustment I needed coming to William and Mary, a professor looking at me like I was some charity case.

Well if I am such a charity case why doesn't the college throw me a scholarship for

¹⁵ University Archives Oral History Collection, Special Collections Research Center, Earl Gregg Swem Library, College of William and Mary.

tuition or my summer study abroad program? If I am such a charity case why do both of my parents have multiple professional degrees. He continued to say that his kids wouldn't need this program because they have four incomes, high incomes at that, due to him being divorced and remarried. What a shocker there, someone talking to me about being disadvantaged when his kids come from a household where a divorce took place.

When a Senior Neuroscience major was asked if she was ever made to feel uncomfortable by student, staff or faculty on campus, she described a situation in which the Black Student Organization at the College of William and Mary hosted their annual cookout in 2010 and she invited one of her white friends from her freshman dormitory. She described an instance in which her friend was afraid to walk over to where the group of black students were assembled, and she had to walk her into the cookout. This interviewee also described a more pressing, recent memory in which after the Wiz Khalifa concert she went to one of the new fraternity houses, Kappa Sigma, invited by one of her peers who is a member of the fraternity and happens to be black. She mentioned that in her experience a white member of the fraternity mistaked her and her group of friends for people who were not invited to the party and asked them to leave. When they said that they were indeed invited to the fraternity complex, the white fraternity member ordered her to state who she was invited by and only believed her when she said the name of the one black member of the fraternity. When asked if anything else could be done she replied that the college should have a more diverse faculty so that students of color can feel comfortable with professors when seeking advice for career paths. She also replied that the college could also be more open about their past connection with slavery as well, because in her opinion, the subject is consistently avoided.

CONSEQUENCES

Comments by William and Mary faculty, especially regarding the case of Mitzi Glass and the sophomore biology major from Hanover County, Virginia, regarding the place of black students at the institution severely impacts black student experience at the College. If students are told by faculty that the reason they are at the College is because admissions policies take extra measures to accommodate a demographic that “has less”, students begin to distance themselves from the people at the College that are supposed to guide them and show them that their career goals are attainable. Secondly, if students are surrounded by faculty that resemble the staff who communicate feelings of displacement to students of color, black students remain disconnected from the entire faculty; having no faculty from their racial and cultural background to show them that success is within reach severely falters many black students’ connection and success at the college, compared to their white counterparts.

White student inexperience with interacting with people of other races, especially black students, where they claim that the only other time they have seen another black person is on television or harbor a fear to participate in a gathering hosted by black students at the college instills in black students a sense of disconnect from the dominant student population on campus. If black students are made to feel as if the white population will never truly be comfortable around them or that the white student population is afraid of the black race, the perceptions of black students on campus will begin to promote self-segregation and in turn, never provide black students with the feeling of community that their white counterparts experience on campus.

LIMITATIONS

Limitations to my study are directly related to the sample that was chosen at the time of research. Two sophomores and two senior African-Americans were chosen to participate in this analysis to determine the effects of the College of William and Mary’s past and present racial

history on black students' experiences throughout the decade. However, according to each of the respondents, they were very involved in the black community on campus. The experiences of the four students interviewed in no way describes the experiences of all African-American students at the College, and interviews with students more involved in the white community and white-student organizations would allow for a more well-rounded study that can be attributed to the entire black population at the College.

Secondly, for the black students that have matriculated at the College in decades past, I was completely reliant upon the oral interviews available through Swem Library's special collections. While access to the oral transcripts provided me with pertinent information regarding African American experience at the College prior to my time in Williamsburg, the amount of alumni interviewed was limited to the number of interview records that Swem Library had available in their Special Collections.

FUTURE RESEARCH

In order to be able to attribute my research to the entire black community at the College of William and Mary, I would have to use a campus-wide survey to be sure to reach all students of color and to account for variations in experience. Having a survey for the entire campus to access would also account for white opinions of the racial relations on campus and provide insight into the roots of the problem, may one still exist.

CONCLUSION

As a senior at the College of William and Mary, it is important for me to create a forum for current and future African-American students that will walk the campus. Although the College has made great strides to ensure that their African-American students are represented throughout William and Mary, have the structural changes within the United States and the

campus been enough to ensure a space free from discrimination for students of color while still striving to highlight the gifts of each African-American student that is matriculated at the College? Tracking the experiences of African-American students following *Brown v. Board* (1954) at the College of William and Mary through Swem Library's Special Collections along with interviews of current and past William and Mary students, I sought to highlight the experience of the African-American student at the College.

APPENDIX

What interested you in the College of William and Mary and led to your decision to matriculate here as an institution of higher education?

What made you choose to attend a Predominantly White Institution as opposed to a Historically Black College or University?

In what ways do you feel that your experience would be different at a Historically Black College or University, if at all?

As a student of color, do you feel that the College of William and Mary has made the necessary adjustments to make the multicultural student body feel comfortable on campus?

Do you feel that the student population at the College of William does all that it can to make students of color feel welcome in their social circles?

Do you feel comfortable going to events that are not hosted by students of color (arenas such as events hosted by the Pan-Hellenic council, etc.)? Why or why not?

How do you feel about the white populations' perceptions of you on campus?

Do you think the College can do anything else to ensure the comfort of the multicultural population on campus?

Describe any instances in which you have or have not felt comfortable by students, staff, or faculty on campus.

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