



Public Black Colleges and Desegregation

Although desegregation emerged as a prominent general educational issue almost fifty years ago, higher education has been slow to address this issue. America's public black colleges and universities have become more prominent in recent years, but the fate of these institutions raises important desegregation policy issues. M. Christopher Brown, assistant professor of Educational and Organizational Leadership, has used historical, legal, and social science research methods to investigate how to resolve the competing interests of desegregation policymakers and public historically black institutions.

What this Research Tells Us:

A dual system of education was created in the late 19th century when public black colleges and universities were established in nineteen southern and border states. Although these institutions were created specifically to segregate African Americans from mainstream educational opportunities, they have sustained the black community through long struggles for equal educational opportunity, have educated a large proportion of African American leaders, and continue to serve regional populations that otherwise might be deprived of educational opportunity.

Brown has identified several issues surrounding desegregation compliance that have not been fully addressed. Although legislation and court rulings have given policymakers the task of addressing issues of higher education desegregation compliance, success has often been measured by the inadequate criterion of changes in student enrollment figures. Such a focus fails to consider students' freedom of choice to attend historically black institutions or admissions policies originally designed to keep African Americans out of predominantly white institutions. Policymakers have also done little to address the discrepancy between the focused regional missions assigned to black institutions and the flagship comprehensive roles given to predominantly white institutions. Black colleges and institutions are caught between desegregation policies that recommend change and state governing practices that often seek incremental steps to preserve things as they are. States consistently under-fund black institutions, resulting in inadequate facilities and underpaid faculty. When states seek to reduce budgets, historically black institutions are often threatened with closure without regard to the consequences.

What this research means for educational policy:

Brown's research offers six guidelines for developing policies and practices that will be effective in collegiate desegregation:

- Study desegregation policy impact on student enrollment, staff, institutional mission, surrounding community, and state coordination of existing programs.
- Assign prominent roles to historically black institutions equal to those of other institutions in research, graduate studies, public service, and other important areas.
- Recognize that enrollment numbers alone do not measure racial integration well; examine instead how institutions retain staff and students throughout state systems.
- Use affirmative action to diversify governing bodies and making them accountable to the desegregation planning and implementation process.
- Recruit from a diverse pool of faculty and students to stress academic competitiveness and highlight the historical uniqueness of individual institutions.
- Develop long-range plans that focus not just on enrollment numbers, but on the development, funding, and implementation of educational policies that eliminate vestiges of segregation and promote educational opportunity.

To read more about this research:

Brown, M.C. (forthcoming—to appear late 2000). Collegiate desegregation and the public black college: A new policy mandate. *Journal of Higher Education*.
Brown, M.C. (1999). *The quest to define collegiate desegregation: Black colleges, Title VI compliance, and post-Adams litigation*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.

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