

University of Michigan Commencement Address

THE BLACK COLLEGE DILEMMA

by

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It is a great privilege and a great opportunity to be asked to speak to you today, upon the happy occasion of commencement.

It is an important opportunity for me, because University of Michigan is one of the great power centers of our incredibly powerful society, particularly as regards manpower and woman power, the human power right here at the University to conduct training, education, research, and management at the highest levels, and the human power of its graduates, as they move out across the country, to affect significantly what goes on in institutions and communities across the land.

I welcome the chance to speak to you, in this great community, about the black colleges of our country. I hope that in a few minutes I can convey to you how important the black colleges are for our national life, and it could be for your own individual lives, now and in the foreseeable future.

I suppose the heart of what I have to say comes down to this, that seen from inside the black community, our country, for all its creed of equality of opportunity, an even break for all men, is still, very deeply, a racist and oppressive society. And the power of racist attitudes is deeply institutionalized in our society everywhere the black man turns, in political, economic, or social life, in education, in health, in housing, even in our great religious organizations. We are a country with a genius for organization, for institutions.

University of Michigan is a good enough example. Somehow in this place General Motors and Ford Motor Company come to mind. And right behind them the United Automobile Workers. Or the National Education Association, or the American Medical Association. Or Boss Richard Daley's organization in Chicago. Or the Southern Baptist Convention. Or the Community Chest. Or the National Football League. We have a positive national genius for organization to protect and develop particular interests. But my clearest observation, in moving from Harvard to Miles College, has been that the American black community just has pitifully few organizational arrangements for confronting the very strong, very well organized, basically racist white society around it.

So, part of my case to you today is that there is such a thing as a black community, that it must have some institutional strength of its own to represent black community interests in this most effectively organized of all societies. And I see the black college, small as it is, weak as it is, as such a center of power and representation. The

black church, too, of course, and black political and economic groupings, too. But today I want to talk about the black college.

In short, the black college is far more than just a college. I do not think the black community can afford to lose the black college any more than the automobile workers or the steel workers of this country can afford to give up their unions. And for the same basic reasons. Our society is mighty tough on unorganized, powerless people. Ask the submerged poor.

When I selected as our topic the Black College Dilemma, I had in mind that just 30 years ago now, Gunnar Myrdal was finishing up his searching and fundamental study of the plight of black people in our society. Myrdal called his book "An American Dilemma" because he found a basic conflict between America's deeply rooted creed of freedom and equality on the one hand, and how we have oppressed our black brothers and sisters on the other.

Myrdal called this a "raging conflict" in our nation, and noted that "the moral struggle goes on within people and not only between them.

Now the dilemma of the black college---I had better say the several dilemmas of the black college---grow out of the surrounding general dilemma of American society as a whole.

I would like to turn here to describe briefly a few of the meaner dilemmas, the conflicting choices, conflicts of principle if you will, that plague the American black college today.

One of the dilemmas we in the black college must face is in the eye of beholders, people like yourselves looking at us from outside. Is the black college an anachronism, a segregated anachronism, running against the grain of a society which is trying to head toward desegregation and integration. A good many thoughtful and serious people, including thoughtful and serious black people, are troubled by this question. Though personally I am not troubled by it, and consider the resolution clear, I am aware that the future of the black college depends upon a general and growing awareness in American society of what we do, of how we are working with the national grain, and not against it.

Internally in our work with students in a black college, we have our own conflict which is related to the general dilemma. Should we foster black community awareness, and identity, and equip our students with the militancy and social skills to go out and fight the general society on behalf of an oppressed minority? Or is it our responsibility to teach our students the skills and information and attitudes they need to achieve individual success in the technological, corporate, organized institutions that surround them?

Put more harshly: Do we teach our students to fight the surrounding power structure, or to participate in it?

As I am sure you are aware, we have strong voices within the black community calling for one alternative or the other. And some of the most thoughtful guesses about our future estimate that there may well come to be a good deal of variety among black colleges in the years ahead, according to the way individual institutions answer that question.

As for me, I think we must do both things. We must teach our students how to survive, how to participate, how to get ahead in the general society, and how to position themselves so that they can manipulate the levers of power on behalf of the black community. As I see it, this is no more than General Motors does every day for its stockholders, and the UAW for its members. Nowadays we even have great university centers teaching labor union officials how to negotiate effectively, how to manipulate the system. Why is it, I wonder, that we get so uptight about this old-fashioned American idea just when the black community starts putting it to work?

Professor Henry Bullock, now of the University of Texas, an outstanding historian of black education, puts it this way: "The black college must be two schools in one: First, it must prepare its students for full and efficient participation in a WASP dominated society from whose overpowering influence they can never escape; second, it must train them for a world of blackness in which they must live. It must provide them with the latter preparation because of the problem of racism that most certainly appears in the first situation. These colleges must accept the responsibility of transmitting two cultures rather than one."

Well put.

Here is another tough dilemma for you. We have some exceedingly bright and capable students in our college. University of Michigan has far superior resources for stretching those students and moving them along to professional goals. Should we send such students on to Ann Arbor after freshman or sophomore year to their advantage and yours? In so doing we would strip ourselves of the leadership potential we must have if we are to be a good college. This may be the toughest of all our conflicts of principle. I confess I do not know the answer to this one. I suspect the proper resolution is for the black college to play it strictly neutral, to give the student all the facts, and let him decide for himself.

Here is yet another dilemma. If we are to serve the black community well, we in the black colleges must search out and discover and bring into college thousands upon thousands of young men and women who are undereducated, many of them dropouts, many of them turned off and frustrated by the society around them. In 15 deep black counties of Alabama, something like five per cent of black youth go on to college, compared to 50 per cent for college age youth across the county. By my figuring, in the Deep South alone something like 75,000 black boys and girls standing in the top half of their high school classes, or able to stand there if they were still in school, do not get to college. They have to be our concern. Indeed they may be our main concern. But they are badly prepared for college.

You would not admit them to Michigan. They will not get into University of Alabama either. We have to care about them. With our limited resources, do we set our priorities to provide for these students, or do we concentrate on a quality education for more capable students, already identified, who we know can make it through to graduate school?

Now, before I start trying to deal with these dilemmas and some other problems we have as well, let me set just a few facts before you as a context for our discussion.

There are some 120 predominately black colleges, historically black colleges, in the United States, most of them in the South. Thirty are publicly supported, and 90 are private. Many of our colleges go back nearly a hundred years, to the period right after the Civil War. Of the ninety private colleges, 57 are church related, like Miles. Miles was founded at Birmingham about 1900 by the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church. This was a poor congregation of workers and farmers, and they founded Miles, starting it out as a grammar school, simply because there was no school for black boys and girls to go to. It was like that at the founding of most of our group of colleges.

I would add by the way, lest this seems like ancient history, that down until 1967, four years ago, Miles was the only four year college within 50 miles of Birmingham open at all to black students. And Birmingham is a metropolitan area of some 750,000 people, about 35 per cent black. So if you were a black student in Birmingham, and did not have the money to go away to live at college, you came to Miles College. It was all there was. Down to four years ago. We are not dealing with ancient history here. Not at all.

The black colleges are large and small, old and new. The largest is Southern University in Louisiana, with some 10,000 students. The most complex is Atlanta University, with 6,000 students, a complex of four colleges, a graduate school, and an interdenominational theological school. Howard is in our group, with a famous law school and medical school. So is Tuskegee Institute in south Alabama, 90 years old this year, Booker Wahington's college, with which Michigan has a special and very important relationship.

Down until recent years, most black students going to college in this country went to black colleges. In 1950, 80 per cent of all black students attending college were in our group. In 1967-68 there were some 270,000 black students in American colleges, and about half of them were attending black colleges. In 1970 there were 450,000 black students in college, of which 150,000 were attending black colleges.

So you can see what is happening. The absolute number of black students going to college in the U.S.A. is increasing very rapidly. In 1964 the overall number was about 230,000; in 1967 it was 270,000; by last year it had reached 450,000. The best guess is that by 1978 there will be 750,000 black students in college in our country, with some 250,000 of them enrolled in black colleges.

How you read these figures depends on whether you are a percentage man or an absolute numbers man. If you are a percentage man, you see bad news in these figures for the black colleges. Whereas the black colleges had 80 per cent of the business in 1950, we have only 35 per cent of the business now. For a lot of people, that is an un-American curve, sloping downward. I will have you know there are serious people in our country who read the decline and fall of the black colleges in that percentage curve. That un-American curve.

If you are concerned not with percentage points but with numbers of individual people, you see that we had 90,000 students in the black colleges ten years ago, 135,000 five years ago, 150,000 last year; and we face a projection of some 250,000 by 1978. I just do not read decline and fall into these numbers. Rather, what I see ahead are thousands upon thousands of young men and women coming to us who never would have thought of college before. There is enough work in this, joyous work, for all the concerned and dedicated colleges we have in this country, and many more colleges yet to come.

The fact is, I see the need for many more colleges, black and white, and not fewer. And as a quick answer to people who want to phase out the black college as an anachronism, I will say I am ready to do that when they will also phase out white colleges as an anachronism, and lily white churches, and white corporate structures, and white communities.

But I am diverging here from my little set of facts. A last few details will set our stage. It is an important fact that the black colleges have been the source of education for 80 per cent of the black leadership of our country today, and for all the hundred years since the Civil War.

And it is another important fact that black colleges from the beginning have been desegregated institutions, welcoming white as well as black students and faculty. In fact the only truly desegregated faculties in the U.S.A., with anything like a fair representation of black scholars, have been in the black colleges.

Let me insert here, quickly, a few facts about our society in general. In our free and rich society, if you are black, because you are black:

- twice as many black babies will die before age one;
- four times as many mothers will die in childbirth;
- between the ages of 30 and 60 twice as many blacks will die;
- if you are black there is three times the chance you will drop out of school before sixth grade, and about one half the chance you will finish high school or college.

As you know full well, we could go on. The litany of statistics of the oppression of the American black community are all too familiar.

We could go into the matter of jobs, of income levels, of opportunity for real management positions; into housing, what it is like to be confined in a ghetto; we could go into the bloody figures of the military draft and the great white sanctuary of college and graduate school; we could, if we wished, document over and over again

the behavior of white policemen in black neighborhoods.

It is 100 years since emancipation, and somehow our white society goes on year after year comfortably living with these ugly facts about our society.

What I am trying to say here, quickly, with this sketch, is that there is such a thing in this country as a black community, and it is very seriously oppressed by the surrounding society, and badly needs institutions to help it fight its way into a position of dignity and equal opportunity. As I have suggested, I easily make an analogy between the position of the black community, and the position of American workers before they became organized in the 1930's. I will not be so foolish as to claim that the black colleges can do for the black community what the Auto Workers Union or the Coal Miners Union did for their members. But I do say I would consider it foolish to think of dropping such institutions as the black community possesses, on some theory that the white power structure institutions are going to do the necessary job for black America. Our history as a society runs to the contrary.

Let me give you three quick examples of how we represent the black community from the recent history of Miles College.

In 1963 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and SCLC and thousands of brave and determined black men and women in Birmingham staged what can only be called a revolution in the streets of our city. They marched in the streets of the most tightly and viciously segregated city in the U.S.A., and braved Bull Connor's cops, and his police dogs, and fire hoses---in the name of simple human dignity---the chance to eat at a downtown store lunch counter or go to the bathroom in the store washrooms, (a matter of some convenience if you are a customer in a store); and for the beginning of better job opportunities for black men and women downtown in Birmingham. The brave and determined black men and women won their battle in Birmingham. The city has been a far better place for everybody ever since. What is not generally known is that a year earlier Miles College undergraduates put on a devastating black boycott of the downtown stores at Easter time, 1962. They were encouraged and supported in their effort by the college. Martin King and his colleagues studied the Miles College student effort and concluded that Birmingham was ready. And the rest is history. Miles had a hard time raising money in Birmingham for some years after that famous event, but I am sure you will agree that Miles College did its job well in 1962 in representing the suppressed fury of 250,000 oppressed, segregated, otherwise unrepresented black people.

Take one more instance. In the spring of 1969 two black women suffered severe indignity and abuse at the hands of the authorities. That is nothing new or unusual in the Deep South, but this case was such as to arouse the anger of the black community, most especially the anger of a number of black returned veterans, fresh home from Vietnam. The city was moving toward a serious showdown. At a crucial moment our president at Miles College, Dr. Lucius Pitts, put

together a remonstrance signed by twenty-one of the leading black citizens of Birmingham, protesting the police behavior, warning of the danger of a sharp response, and telling the city fathers not to expect any help from this group of the leadership if a crunch came. The negotiations around this document resulted in the establishment of a strong, representative human relations action committee for the city.

One chairman of the committee was the president of South Central Bell Telephone Company. The other chairman was the president of Miles College. The committee has functioned well for two years now, ventilating grievances and seeking solutions. My point is that once again, in a situation where black men and women had no formal representation in the power structure, Miles College became a vital instrument of communication.

Miles brought the first Head Start program into Alabama, when nobody else was interested; and the first Manpower Training Program; and the first Vista Volunteers. Miles now runs an office that helps newly elected black officials anywhere in the state, to settle in and do their job. I could go on and on with this recital.

Dr. Samuel Nabritt, formerly the president of Texas Southern University in Houston, now Director of the Southern Fellowship Fund in Atlanta, a former member of the US Atomic Energy Commission, has observed that historically, "From the black colleges communication was established with the controllers of power in our country. The loss of these institutions may cut this line of communication."

Exactly so. And I would like to add that it is vitally important for the health of our whole national community, not just the black community, that there be strong, responsible, outspoken institutions representing the agony and frustrations of black men and women.

It is considerations such as these which arouse concern in the black community when well intentioned people like David Riesman describe the black colleges as an "academic disaster area." Or when a great newspaper like the New York Times, says, as the Times did in a news story just two weeks ago, that there is an "apparently spreading conviction---shared by both believers in integration and segregationists resigned to a new order---that black colleges have lost their chief reason for being and all but the strongest should be allowed to die."

Surely the New York Times, as one of the great switching points of the white power structure, knows better than that. Why does the Times think we have riots in our great cities, and Black Panther shoot-outs with the police? It is because a huge black community of millions of men and women in this country is sick and tired of being oppressed, but has very little organized institutional strength with which to fight back. Under such social conditions it is the most conservative suggestion a man can make, that our society see the black college for what it is, and take it seriously, and support it to new levels of effectiveness. Surely it is idiotic, not to say suicidal, to talk of phasing out the few effective black institutions we now have.

I say it is idiotic, but in saying that, it occurs to me that our racism has been quite generally idiotic from the start, and all our talk of phasing out our colleges just as we appear to need them most, may be one more extension of our famous national malady.

Now, I would like to say a few words about how all of you in this room could help us in the black colleges, and in helping us, as I see it, help our national community, and it may be help to each of us as individuals. I recall the wise words of Gunnar Myrdal that our great national moral struggle between our proclaimed ideals as a nation and the realities of our fears and behavior, goes on inside each one of us.

Money is one of our primary needs in the black colleges, as it is for all colleges. But I am not crazy enough to come to a college looking for money, even to Michigan. You have your own problems in that direction. And all you new graduates are facing your own problems with money. So money is not my quest today.

Our black colleges today, as badly as we need money, just as badly need help with manpower. We must change very rapidly our old patterns of instruction, away from preparing our young people to be mainly teachers and preachers---now to prepare them for all the professions, all the graduate schools, all the new career opportunities opening up.

In the face of a situation where there are nowhere near enough black professors to start with, and where the big universities are trying hard to integrate their faculties, we in the black colleges must find new, capable, flexible, professionally sound people to teach sociology, business, psychology, economics, political science, black history and literature, the arts, philosophy and religion, the basic sciences. In short, the whole works.

And we need a special breed of teacher. We need the teacher of sociology who will see the special concern of our students and our college for the community we are trying to serve, and the urgent need to develop reliable information about that community, and to initiate remedial programs. We need people in education and psychology who will be concerned not only about sound teaching and training, but about research as to the educational needs of our community and how to meet them. In the humanities, what we do not need is library scholars, book scholars; what we do need is teachers with a living sense of how the arts, the live arts, express the feelings, attitudes, and truths of human existence--with a corresponding respect for the artistic expressions of the black community.

We need teachers of black studies, truly Afro-American studies, who will know how to relate the colonial experience of African men and women under European domination to the exploitation of black Americans, and the social and psychological consequences of each of these wretched streams of history.



We need a special breed of teacher who will recognize the ability and deep concern of our students, and do them the favor of expecting and demanding a solid performance. In other words, a special breed of college teacher, fairly rare these days, who is as much interested in teaching students as in teaching a subject.

Now, such teachers, young and old, do exist in our great universities. And part of what we can say to them is that we need them not forever, but for a limited time only. As I see it we need help, and a good deal of it, for a five or six year period, ten years at the most---long enough for us to get our strongest undergraduates moving toward graduate study, and through to their degrees, and back. It's the next five to 10 years that will mean the most.

I am not exactly sure how best to work out the mechanics and economics of such a program. It may well be that the economics will work best if we base our plans somehow on the sabbatical leave system. Something like one seventh to one tenth of the professors of our great universities go out on leave every year. That's a lot of talent. Just a fraction of the number of people would help us enormously, and the expense of such a plan would be manageable.

I am not sure whether we should press for a continuation and intensification of the kind of one-to-one relationship that Michigan now has with Tuskegee Institute, and that many of the black colleges now have with other universities under the provisions of Title III of the Higher Education Act. Or perhaps we should try to form a national clearing house for placement, or perhaps encourage relationships smaller in scale than at present, say from a department of Sociology at University of Alabama to our division of Social Sciences at Miles. That idea has a certain promise in it.

It is of consequence to my theme to report to you that the National Alliance of Business Men is now moving with remarkable earnestness and efficiency, to put new energy and vitality into its so-called Cluster Program whose object it is to associate local and national business concerns with each black college, in such a way that the concern of the business community can be expressed in concrete action to help the colleges, any way the colleges think best. The National Alliance is realistic about this effort, and has placed in charge a fast-moving, very alert young black man, on loan from the Bank of New York, to supply initiative and the electric energy necessary to make this program go.

The business community sees very clearly the need to help us reorient and strengthen our preparation of students for administrative careers in business. And one plan they have in mind is to find ways to station at some of the black colleges for at least one academic year, a professor of business administration and an experienced business administrator, to work as a team in helping the college to strengthen its instruction and program.

It seems to me the National Alliance of Businessmen is on just the right track, and will be concretely helpful to us in the years ahead. I hope our great national educational power structure will do its part as well.

One thing is clear in the academic area. We all need, the whole country needs, a very rapid increase in the number of black students going on to graduate schools, not only in medicine and law, but also in the arts and sciences. The need is every bit as crucial as the need to develop well trained black young men and women for business careers.

In 1968 just two per cent of all the students in American graduate schools were black. In the five years 1964-69, less than one per cent of the Ph.D.'s awarded went to black students. The Ford Foundation estimates we need to multiply at least by a factor of seven, the number of black students in our graduate schools.

One way to bring this about is for the great universities to join with us in the black colleges to help us staff programs in important, growing fields. Give us five or six years, and we will be getting our own graduates back as teachers.

I am keenly aware of Michigan's long and effective relationship with Tuskegee Institute. It is one of the best, most energetic, and most effective relationships of its kind, and to the immense credit of everyone concerned, it was one of the first, dating back to 1963. Indeed, the Michigan-Tuskegee relationship was one of the models for the federal support for such relationships established in 1965. I was at Tuskegee last week, and was privileged to talk to your Dr. John Chavis about the program. Having met John Chavis, and sensed his ability and enthusiasm, I understand why your exchange arrangements have worked so well.

What I am suggesting here is a substantial extension of such arrangements the next five to 10 years, with an explicit emphasis on helping us in the black colleges to re-orient our programs toward rapidly changing social and educational needs.

What's in all this for the white university? Long ago I learned that no deal is a good deal unless there is something substantial in it for both parties.

What's in it for the white university, for one thing, is a strong, reliable source of black graduate students we need so badly if we are to meet reasonable norms. What's in it further for the white university is the chance for its professors to work directly, in research and teaching, on problems of enormous consequence to our society.

What's in it finally for the white university is the opportunity for numbers of its faculty members, young and old, to work and live in the black community, in a black institution, with black colleagues and students---to find out for themselves what America is really all about, to resolve withing themselves once and for all the raging conflict of idealism and racism that, as Myrdal so well noted, we all must somehow confront and work through.

A great white faculty so involved and so committed will never be the same again.

Dr. Rudolf Schmerl, of your faculty, spent a year at Tuskegee in 1966-67, and wrote a perceptive and moving account for your Quarterly Review, of what the experience did for him. Dr. Schmerl said he had a hard time sorting out for himself just what Tuskegee was all about until in the spring of 1967 he chanced to visit Jackson State College in Mississippi, on the occasion of a student demonstration and a National Guard response.

Dr. Schmerl said he found out what Tuskegee was all about over there in Jackson, Mississippi, looking up the wrong end of a .30 caliber National Guard machine gun.

On the night when the National Guard occupied the campus, and people were killed and hurt, Dr. Schmerl learned about back professors and students who were pressing on for freedom, unafraid. One student said, "I'd rather die right here than in Vietnam." At that moment, Dr. Schmerl recognized what he had been seeing at Tuskegee: "Out of the agony borne too long, out of a duality described memorably by W. E. B. DuBois, pride and courage were emerging, a pride that accepted the past, and a courage to make the future different."

Every white teacher who has been privileged to work in a black college will sense exactly what Dr. Schmerl means. A hundred incidents crowd my own mind.

One memorable day in a freshman English class, out of the blue, out of the pain in her life, an intelligent, lovely black girl asked me simply: "Mr. Monroe, tell us, why do white people hate us so much?" I looked at her for a long minute, I remember, and she looked at me. And the whole class looked at me. I was their expert on this central problem. I had to tell her, finally, "I just do not know. I honestly don't know."

There was another occasion, the awful day after Martin King was murdered in Memphis. I don't have to try to describe what that day meant to the black community in Birmingham, to all my friends at Miles College.

For a long time that day I just walked around the campus swallowed up in a personal nightmare of grief and guilt. Until one of my black colleagues came up and put out his hand and said: "My friend, don't take it so hard. Nobody here is blaming you." What can a white man say to compassion like that against the background of what black America has been through?

I am trying to say that what is in the proposed arrangement for white faculty members, for each of us as individuals, and for our institutions, is release from the angry torment and nightmare of American racism.

It is a substantially worthwhile deal for both sides.

Let me conclude by a thought that the dilemmas of the black colleges are probably not dilemmas at all, really, but just problems that we must face squarely and work through.

If the dilemmas as I have sketched them are in fact dilemmas, it is only because we must tackle these seemingly conflicting problems in a general surrounding context and habit of racial feeling that shapes our use of words and our ideas. In a rational society we would be no more troubled by the idea of a black college than we are by the idea of a white college. The real question is, is the college doing its job, serving its young people well, and serving society well?

I see the black college as an institution which has served the realities of America, as well as the American dream, incredibly well over the past 100 years, and which is positioned now, as few institutions are positioned, to help our country, to help our black community, to help our white community, to help each and every one of us---to work our way thoughtfully and prayerfully toward a new day of equality and justice, to a day when everybody gets an even break in our society, perhaps God willing, even to a new day of brotherhood---when once again our great country may become a shining model and respected leader among the nations and peoples of a deeply troubled world.

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