

The HBCU Revolution: Desegregation, Disintegration, Collaboration, and Jimmy Carter’s 1980 Decision to Give Black Colleges Their Own White House Office

Cheryl E. Mango



On August 8, 1980, President Jimmy Carter held the signing ceremony establishing the White House Initiative on HBCUs.

President Jimmy Carter’s 1980 creation of the White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities (WHI-HBCUs) revolutionized higher education for African Americans by reinforcing the financial foundations of HBCUs and enabling them to continue educating their majority black populations in a racially integrating America. Today, Black Colleges find themselves centrally featured on presidential candidates’ political stages and major corporations’ donation lists.¹ The national HBCU office has had a central role in that success, and since its establishment has had one major purpose: protecting the long-term survival of Black Colleges.

Cheryl E. Mango is an assistant professor of History at Virginia State University.

¹ Lauren Camera, “Trump to HBCU Leaders: No One Has Done More for You Than Me,” *U.S. News & World Report*, September 10, 2019. I use the shortened term Black Colleges as an equivalent to Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Discussion of Black Colleges and Universities in a collective sense dates from the late 19th century and officially from the Higher Education Act of 1965. In referring to Black schools prior to about 1890, I use Black colleges or Negro colleges.

The establishment of the White House Initiative was momentous because the schools' paths to becoming presidentially sanctioned symbols of American freedom and equality have been historically quite difficult.² President Carter's 1980 decision to create the White House Initiative on HBCUs changed the landscape and enhanced the viability of the schools by securing a level of federal protections the institutions had never witnessed. With the office, the president of the United States assumed direct responsibility for the continuation of Black Colleges—an unprecedented arrangement that has protected the schools to this day. The alignment between the presidency and HBCUs opened a path for the institutions to bypass many adverse federal policies, while securing much of the needed public and private resources and support.

The history of Black Colleges reflects their often-paradoxical relationship with federal and state governments. State-sponsored antiliteracy laws in the antebellum period prohibited the establishment of Negro colleges in the deep South, in places like Virginia, the Carolinas, Louisiana, and other future Confederate states.³ Yet, four Black institutions of higher education existed during the period of enslavement: (1) Cheyney University in Pennsylvania, founded in 1837; (2) University of the District of Columbia, founded in 1851; (3) Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, founded in 1854; and (4) Wilberforce University in Ohio founded in 1856.⁴ There was some level of federal commitment, short-lived and underfunded, during Reconstruction through the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (Freedmen's Bureau) 1865–1872. The Freedmen's Bureau was created by the federal government after the Civil War to assist newly freed Blacks in their transition to freedom. Led by Gen. Oliver Otis Howard, later the founder and namesake of historically Black Howard University, the Freedmen's Bureau worked with organizations like the American Missionary Association (AMA) to help establish over 30, mostly private, Christian Negro colleges between 1865 and 1872, with curriculums focused on

² The types of abuse HBCUs suffered at the hands of state and federal government included: (1) severe funding disparities between Black Colleges and majority white institutions that were rooted in the system of slavery, prohibiting African Americans from competing in the free market economy and handicapping HBCUs' abilities to secure private and public resources, grants, and contracts; (2) public policy inequities extending back to the anti-literacy laws of slavery and the Separate but Equal doctrine of Jim Crow, forcing the institutions to bear the burdens of educating and training students amid high rates of illiteracy and poverty, and; (3) the stifling of African American freedom and self-determination, thus creating overdependence on whites to secure, fund, and further HBCUs and Black education at-large.

³ Heather A. Williams, *Self-Taught: African-American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (N.P.: CreateSpace, 2009), 2–16.

⁴ Ernie Suggs, "HBCUs: Born in the North, But Most Needed in The South," *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, February 8, 2018.

training teachers and preachers.⁵

Though the Bureau was grossly under-supported and ceased to exist after 1872, the focus on the establishment of Black Colleges continued. The Morrill Act of 1890 greatly enabled the establishment of public colleges, including HBCUs, in the early 20th century that became state universities.

Approximately 19 public Black Colleges were products of the

Morrill Act. They are known as land-grant institutions because they advance the agricultural, engineering, and military training mission of the legislation. Until school desegregation efforts in the 1950s, Black Colleges remained the major path to higher education for African Americans.⁶



Cheyney University in 1903. It was the first Negro college, established in 1837 as The African Institute by Richard Humphreys, a Quaker, in Cheney, Pennsylvania.

Though the federal government, by way of the Higher Education Act of 1965, recognized an HBCU as “any historically Black College or university that was established prior to 1964, whose principal mission was, and is, the education of black Americans,” the schools faced the unexpected prospect of shutting their doors in post-Civil Rights–era America.⁷ School integration efforts from the 1950s

⁵ Reginald Stuart, “HBCUs’ Mission Rooted in Reconstruction,” *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*, February 18, 2016, <https://www.diverseeducation.com/demographics/african-american/article/15097997/hbcus-mission-rooted-in-reconstruction> (accessed December 5, 2022).

⁶ Bea Wilson, “The Tale of Two Morrill Acts: 1890 Historically Black Colleges and Universities,” *Ag Daily*, October 22, 2020, <https://www.agdaily.com/insights/tale-of-two-morrill-acts-1890-historically-black-land-grant-universities/> (accessed December 5, 2022).

⁷ The Higher Education Act of 1965 embodied sweeping federal policy and resource commitments to public education signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson on November 8, 1965, as a part of his Great Society reforms. The act was particularly instrumental in expanding the federal government’s role in providing access to higher education. Title III of the Higher Education Act addressed HBCUs, specifically, by defining Black Colleges as universities established before 1964 to explicitly educate African Americans. The distinction was significant because, unlike HBCUs, Predominately Black Institutions (PBIs) like Chicago State University continue to exist, but did not open with the expressed purpose of educating African Americans. PBIs were not officially recognized by the federal government until 2007. Hence, the term HBCU was birthed from the 1965 Higher Education Act, and the schools that met the HBCU criteria received Title III funds to assist in providing education to the institutions’ underserved populations. The legislation served as a precursor to the HBCU federal legislation that Jimmy Carter would author. “What is an HBCU?” White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities, U.S. Department of Education, <https://sites.ed.gov/whhbcu/one-hundred-and-five-historically-black-colleges-and-universities/>.

through 1970s posed a problem for HBCUs because many proponents of those campaigns believed in the virtues of complete desegregation and were largely unconcerned with the post-1954 survival of established Black Colleges. With few protective actions for preserving African American educational institutions, Black Colleges were almost decimated in the integration efforts during the 1970s.⁸ HBCUs were forced to publicly justify their continued essentiality. Issues concerning Black College survival in an ideally desegregated America catapulted to national attention during the Carter administration when a blistering ideological war erupted regarding HBCU sustainability. In a complex battle between a network of Black College powerbrokers, the federal courts, and the Carter administration, a little-known HBCU revolution occurred in the 1970s and 1980s that secured new freedoms, protections, and respect for the institutions.⁹

During Carter's one-term presidency from 1977 to 1981, frustrations with desegregation challenges and government-induced barriers preventing Black Colleges from competing financially and politically with their Predominantly White Institution (PWI) counterparts came to a volatile head.¹⁰ HBCU proponents boldly redefined and elevated arguments for Black College indispensability in America. Jimmy Carter had

⁸ Statement, HBCU Leaders to President Carter, 8/18/78, "Financial Aid to Black Colleges," folder, Box 40, Louis Martin Files (hereinafter LMF), Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum (JCPL).

⁹ Supplement, "Carter Breaks All Records in Appointments of Blacks to the Federal Judiciary and to Regulatory Boards and Commissions," 6/22/77, "[Black Colleges] [1]" folder, Box 8, LMF, JCPL; Supplement, "Minority Supplement Fact Sheet 107," 10/79, "[Black Colleges] [1]" folder, Box 8, LMF, JCPL.

¹⁰ Federal barriers preventing Black Colleges from receiving adequate federal treatment were detrimental to the institutions on many levels, particularly in the area of funding. For example, in fiscal year 1977 in the area of science, Black Colleges collectively received \$49,668 in federal assistance, compared to \$3,335,250 for PWIs. The inequities extended to the United Negro College Fund (UNCF), one of the leading Black College fundraising and special interest organizations. The federal government denied the UNCF access to the Combined Federal Campaign (CFC). Originating from President Dwight D. Eisenhower's 1956 President's Committee on Fundraising, the CFC enabled federal employees to automatically deduct funds from their paychecks to donate to charitable organizations accepted into the program. The CFC went on to become the largest and most lucrative employee fundraising program in existence. By 1979, the CFC raised \$89.8 million, which was a considerable increase from the \$12.9 million raised in 1964. Yet, during Carter's presidency, the CFC was highly politicized. Many controversial lobbyist groups wanted entry, leading critics to question the subjective nature of acceptance into the program. The UNCF believed the federal government should grant the organization CFC admission because the Black College lobbyist group helped to educate the poorest and most destitute students in the country. Another federal barrier involved Meharry Medical College's financial crisis. In 1977, the HBCU, responsible for training 40 percent of the nation's Black doctors, faced budgetary challenges that forced it to increase tuition from \$2,750 to \$4,000 and for the first time mandate that students pay tuition in-full when enrolling. Additionally, salaries for faculty and staff earning over \$10,000 per year were slashed by 20 percent. The Black College community believed that Meharry's problems stemmed from inadequate federal support for the school and the poor African American patients the medical college served.

to resolve whether to commit millions of new federal dollars to HBCUs during a severe economic downturn, and while fighting for his political life. At the time, the president faced daunting international and domestic issues like stagflation, the Iran hostage dilemma, and a devastating energy crisis.¹¹ Yet, he did not rush to aid Black Colleges. Decisive presidential action came only after several proponents of desegregation, like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People-Legal Defense Fund (NAACP-LDF), made school integration an untenable proposition for Black Colleges. Arguments against the continuation of HBCUs in their predominantly Black formats intensified African Americans' political passions.

This study examines the actions of an emerging, powerful Black College lobby made up of organizations like the United Negro College Fund (UNCF), focused on funding private Black Colleges; the Thurgood Marshall College Fund, representing public HBCUs; the National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education (NAFEO), advocating for leaders of institutions; along with the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation and the National Urban League, among others. Reacting to the urgencies of the civil rights movement, HBCU leaders split with the NAACP and held the White House accountable for Black Colleges' historic financial and policy struggles on the state and federal levels.¹² Ultimately, President Carter had to decide if he would provide HBCUs with an unprecedented level of federal support in an economically and politically stressed environment.

The Jimmy Carter era was revolutionary in Black College history at a moment when HBCUs became the first set of schools to receive their own White House office. This article reveals the complexity and tenuousness of that achievement, complete with political maneuvering and pressures for cooperation initiated by the most powerful non-entertainment confederation of African Americans in the nation's history—the Black College community.

This article explains how President Carter established the WHI-HBCU following three controversial catalysts. The triggers included: (1) NAACP-LDF's 1973 *Adams v. Richardson* and 1977 *Adams v. Califano* school desegregation court cases; (2) President Carter's decisive 1978 meeting with HBCU leaders; and (3) Carter's 1979 Black College Directive. In all, this research finds that Black College advocates made a convincing case for the necessity and indispensability of Black Colleges

¹¹ Erwin C. Hargrove, *Jimmy Carter as President: Leadership and the Politics of the Public Good* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1988).

¹² Laurence R. Marcus, "The Adams Case: A Hollow Victory?" *Peabody Journal of Education* 59, no. 1 (October 1981): 37–42.

and were able to achieve institutional protection for the schools in the creation of a White House office. That pivotal debate and historical movement clarified that HBCUs were essential for offering balanced and competent education in a wider world that was in the process of integrating and reforming education. The success of the Black College advocates' efforts constituted an important chapter in the modern civil rights movement.

Historical Research on HBCUs

The history of federal allocations to HBCUs and establishment of the 1980 White House Initiative on HBCUs has not been sufficiently researched. In 1928, the federal government conducted a U.S. Bureau of Education–led *Survey of Negro Colleges and Universities*, built upon a more limited 1916 study on the same topic. Federal researchers worried that the institutions, “with poorly understood fundraising organizations, frequently encounter difficulties in securing adequate incomes.”¹³ The government analysts realized that Black Colleges did not have the administrative infrastructures to compete for federal resources and insisted that the schools justify adequate funding.

After World War II, prominent HBCU educators recognized more clearly that funding disparities were wreaking havoc on Black College operations, prompting leaders like Benjamin E. Mays, Morehouse College president, to challenge the inequalities. In 1946, Mays wrote that “it is safe to say that all of the 82 private [black] institutions put together would have less than one third the endowment of Harvard University. Not one college or university for Negroes is adequately endowed.”¹⁴ He blamed the shortfalls on racial bias against the institutions and threats decrying the schools' autonomy over their curriculums. Inadequate funding was a recurring theme running through early writings on Negro higher education, which exemplified the deep-rooted state, federal, and private neglect of the institutions.

In 1965, Earl J. McGrath, who previously served as President Harry Truman's commissioner of education, assessed Black Colleges in *The Predominantly Negro Colleges and Universities in Transition*.¹⁵ McGrath favored the continuation of HBCUs after the achievement of desegregation. His calls for increased federal

¹³ J. Klein, Department of the Interior, *Survey of Negro Colleges and Universities*, Bulletin No. 7, 1928, 1.

¹⁴ Benjamin E. Mays, “Financing of Private Negro Colleges,” *Journal of Educational Sociology* 19, no. 8 (April 1946): 466.

¹⁵ Earl J. McGrath, *The Predominately Negro Colleges and Universities in Transition* (New York: Institute of Higher Education, 1965), 168.

allocations faced challenges, particularly from white Harvard professors Christopher Jencks and David Riesman in their disparaging, yet widely accepted 1967 article “The American Negro College.” Jencks and Riesman classified HBCUs as perpetual “academic disaster areas.”¹⁶ Though their research failed to thoroughly consider the racial discrimination HBCUs suffered and unfairly compared HBCUs to white colleges, they changed the scholarly conversation.

However, during the 1970s and 1980s, a wide array of writings emerged in defense of the schools, treating such topics as HBCUs’ laudable production, distinctive mission, and continued essentiality. Harvard professors Charles V. Willie and Ronald R. Edmonds’s *Black Colleges in America: Challenges, Development, and Survival* (1978) was an edited compilation of speeches given by HBCU leaders at Harvard’s 1976 “The Black College Conference.”¹⁷ The National Advisory Committee on Black Higher Education and Black Colleges and Universities also published a series of influential reports in support of the institutions, including *Black College and Universities: An Essential Component of A Diverse System of Higher Education* (1979) and *Still a Lifeline: The Status of Historically Black College and Universities, 1974–1978* (1980).¹⁸

More recent works on Black Colleges, particularly those published after the 1980s creation and formalization of the White House Initiative on HBCUs, intersect more closely with this study, yet reveal the need for a comprehensive examination of the founding of the White House office. For example, Thomas R. Wolanin’s 1998 article “The Federal Investment in Minority Institutions” discussed the contributions that Presidents Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and George H.W. Bush made to Black Colleges by way of the WHI-HBCUs. He acknowledges the executive orders presidents signed instructing the Initiative to increase federal support to the schools but forgoes offering a detailed account on Carter’s decision to create the White House office.¹⁹

¹⁶ Christopher Jencks and David Riesman, “The American Negro College,” *Harvard Educational Review* 37 no. 2 (1967): 3–60; Marybeth Gasman, “Salvaging ‘Academic Disaster Areas’: The Black College Response to Christopher Jencks and David Riesman’s 1967 *Harvard Review* Article,” *Journal of Negro Education* 77, no. 2 (March/April 2006): 316–17.

¹⁷ *Black Colleges in America: Challenges, Development, and Survival*, eds. Ronald Edmonds and Charles Willie (New York: Teachers College Press, 1978).

¹⁸ National Advisory Committee on Black Higher Education and Black Colleges and Universities, *Black Colleges and Universities: An Essential Component of a Diverse System of Higher Education* (Washington, DC: National Institute of Education, 1979); and *Still a Lifeline: The Status of Historically Black Colleges and Universities, 1974–1978* (1980).

¹⁹ Thomas R. Wolanin, “The Federal Investment in Minority Institutions,” in *New Direction for Higher Education. Minority-Serving Institutions: Distinct Purposes, Common Goals, Representation and Reality*, eds. Jaime P. Merisortis and Colleen T. O’Brien (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Inc. Publishers, 1998), 22.

This study follows the HBCU advocacy and institutional history model laid forth by lauded Black College scholar Marybeth Gasman in *Envisioning Black Colleges: A History of the United Negro College Fund* (2007). Building on Gasman's explanation of the 1970s Black Colleges' radical, self-promoting turn, this study focuses on HBCU leaders' concentration on Carter's White House. As Gasman notes, affluent whites controlled the UNCF from its earliest days. Yet, a shift emerged in 1970 when Vernon Jordan became the organization's president. Jordan, a Howard University Law School graduate and mentee of Thurgood Marshall, skillfully posited the Black Power Movement's radical calls for African American self-determination through methods that did not categorically offend the UNCF's white corporate funders. Yet, Jordan's efforts to "Blacken" the UNCF changed the organization, as Gasman writes: "In 1970, the UNCF began to expand its role from a mere fundraiser to a more active agent of social progress . . . speeches moved beyond asking for funds to discussion of the crucial role of black colleges in this change." Extending such inquiries, this study follows influential HBCU graduates as they aggressively lobbied the Carter White House for a federal policy that would respect the unique African American character of Black Colleges and highlight the schools' struggles, rooted in the same racial injustices that all African Americans faced.²⁰

President Carter's educational accomplishments were the subject of Deanna L. Michael's *Jimmy Carter as Educational Policymaker: Equal Opportunity and Efficiency* (2008), though she does not mention his 1980 creation of the WHI-HBCUs.²¹ Like Michael's historiographical overview, Gasman's extensive research on Black Colleges could have reconsidered the history and success of federal funding to the schools by way of the Initiative. In the "Federal Funding of HBCUs" section of her 2010 policy brief "Comprehensive Funding Approaches for Historically Black Colleges and Universities," Gasman accepts James T. Minor's questionable 2008 viewpoint that the WHI-HBCUs "had not produced notable results."²² This article departs from Gasman's and Minor's interpretation of the ineffectiveness of the WHI-HBCUs and centers on the Initiative, through Executive Order (EO) 12232, and Jimmy Carter as the actual saviors of all Black Colleges in post-*Brown v. Board of Education* America.

²⁰ Marybeth Gasman, *Envisioning Black Colleges: A History of the United Negro College Fund* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 153–54.

²¹ Deanna L. Michael, *Jimmy Carter as Educational Policymaker: Equal Opportunity and Efficiency* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2008).

²² Marybeth Gasman, "Comprehensive Funding Approaches for Historically Black Colleges and Universities," (Philadelphia: Trustees of the University of Pennsylvania, 2010), 1.

HBCUs as Revolutionary Institutions

In the post–Civil War decades, the Black College community managed to turn approximately one million formerly enslaved and their descendants into a burgeoning educated class of “New Negroes,” tenaciously reversing the debilitating effects of slavery via the arts; humanities; and training in the sciences, technology, engineering, and mathematics. The 1920s Harlem Renaissance revealed an explosive diversity of talent and achievement that HBCUs had made possible. Not only did Black Colleges bring literacy to the great majority of the Black community, but they also served as intellectual nurturing spaces that encouraged exploration of the African American story through philosophy and creative works. Many leading Harlem Renaissance figures, like Langston Hughes and Zora Neal Hurston, were educated at HBCUs by professors such as Mary McLeod Bethune and Horace Mann Bond, who challenged the foundations of American society in books and scholarly journals.²³

Black College academics shaped the future leaders of major national and international movements that helped Blacks adapt to and define their newly freed status in life and politics. A New Orleans, Louisiana, Black college, now known as Dillard University, guided the direct action of Homer Plessey that led to the decisive *Plessy v. Ferguson*, “Separate but Equal,” Supreme Court decision in 1896. Plessey acted on behalf of the Citizen’s Committee when he challenged the constitutionality and legality of the Separate Car Act of 1890. He also challenged Louisiana’s Black Codes with backing from his Citizen’s Committee colleagues.²⁴ Jelani Favors examines other HBCU-spurred Black activism in his *Shelter in a Time of Storm: How Black Colleges Fostered Generations of Leadership and Activism* (2019).²⁵

Moving ahead to the late 20th century, this study examines the activism of Black College leadership and prominent HBCU alums at the federal, and primarily, presidential levels. It posits that Carter’s 1980 creation of the White House Initiative on HBCUs culminated from one of the final legal and political battles of the 1960s civil rights movement. The question at hand was the status of Black Colleges in an integrated America. HBCU leaders decided to test the potential of their newly assembled political

²³ Debra Newman Ham and Cheryl Mango, “Mary McLeod Bethune,” in *Black Women of the Harlem Renaissance Era*, eds. Jessie C. Smith and Lean’tin Bracks, (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2013), 23–25.

²⁴ “Strait University’s Ties to Plessy and Ferguson,” Strait Up History, Preservation Resource Center of New Orleans, last modified November 2, 2017, <https://prcno.org/straight-university-plessy-ferguson/> (accessed November 10, 2022).

²⁵ Jelani Favors, *Shelter in a Time of Storm: How Black Colleges Fostered Generations of Leadership and Activism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019).

power in 1980 to fashion a long-term strategy to keep the “Black” in Black Colleges. Their plan involved using the sociopolitical gains African Americans like themselves received from the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965 to advantage their institutions, particularly through empowerment from the HBCU graduates employed in the Carter administration. By 1970, the HBCU brain trust had assembled the educational and political muscle to engage in an ideological confrontation with the president of the United States over the future of Black Colleges.

The group, baptized in the unique milieu of Black College culture, successfully confronted persistent Victorian, white educational and cultural standards to demand Black control in the development and operation of its own higher educational institutions. The Black College mission was and still is a difficult undertaking because it combines the strategic pragmatism of HBCU pioneer Booker T. Washington with the adamant immediatism of his rival and Black College professor W. E. B. Du Bois to advocate for African American self-determination and success.²⁶ Prevailing without offending the educational establishment in America, with its long-standing, inherent racial biases, often placed Black Colleges in a compromising position of acquiescing to unbalanced notions of HBCU inferiority. Yet, when all HBCUs faced demise during the Carter administration, conciliatory patience diminished. Instead, the Black College community suggested that Jimmy Carter would lose his reliable Black vote unless his administration released federal resources that protected and strengthened HBCUs.

NAACP’s 1970s Calls for HBCUs to Desegregate

In the 1970s, the question of HBCUs and desegregation emerged amid calls for racial equity on a number of fronts. The gains of the long civil rights movement confronted the existing norms of racial segregation across political, educational, and many cultural landscapes in the United States.

The courts became the arena for challenging the systematic racism present in numerous segments of society, particularly in matters regarding affirmative action. In the 1978 *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* case, the Supreme Court upheld affirmative action overall, but declared racial quotas unconstitutional.²⁷ The NAACP-Legal Defense Fund (NAACP-LDF) found the decision “profoundly

²⁶ Jacqueline M. Moore, Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois and the *Struggle for Racial Uplift* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc, 2003).

²⁷ “Regents of the Univ. of Cal. V. Bakke,” Cornell University Law School, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/438/265>. (accessed January 23, 2022).

disturbing.”²⁸ African American advocacy organizations like the NAACP-LDF wanted to protect affirmative action because they believed the legislation was critical for achieving Black equality and securing constructive progress.²⁹

During the 1970s, Black Colleges faced surprising hostility from the NAACP-LDF in the form of pressure to “desegregate.” “Segregation is Wrong, No Matter Where Says NAACP Opposes Black Colleges,” announced a January 6, 1979, *Cleveland Plain Dealer* newspaper editorial by Michael Meyers, NAACP New York City director of research.³⁰ Meyers summed up the national NAACP-LDF’s 1970s position on the schools. He also laid out the theoretical context that set the stage for the contentious battle between Black College leaders and the Carter administration. From Meyers’s and the LDF’s perspective:

The issue at stake in the current controversy over all-Black Colleges is how far are we prepared to go to reject segregation. Unless the civil rights movement is prepared to go all the way, we will have compromised the goal of integrating into all phases of American life—a goal that is our charter and our life blood.³¹

The LDF’s targeting of Black Colleges and majority white educational institutions was a multilateral attempt to end school segregation nationwide. While the HBCU community maintained that punishing their schools for trying to educate African Americans in a racially segregated society was no fault of their own, the LDF argued that reducing the Black majorities in the schools was necessary to achieve full racial harmony.

In 1977 Jack Greenberg, a white attorney who was the NAACP-Legal Defense Fund’s director-counsel, filed another lawsuit to desegregate schools with nondiversified racial demographics like Black Colleges. The case of *Adams v. Califano* (1977) was a continuation of the 1973 *Adams v. Richardson* dispute. Both involved the LDF suing the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) for failing to enforce school desegregation as ordered by the Civil Rights Act of 1964.³² The

²⁸ Telegram, Leonard L. Jack Greenberg to President Carter, 9/5/77, “Greenberg, Ja” folder, WHCF-Name File, JCPL.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Michael Meyers, “Segregation is Wrong, No Matter Where Says NAACP Opposes Black Colleges,” *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, January 6, 1979.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² In the 1973 *Adams v. Richardson* case, Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, cited by the NAACP-LDF to support their suit against the Department of Health Education and Welfare. The NAACP-LDF argued that Title VI prohibited the operation of racially segregated systems in post-secondary education. The organization believed the structure of the HBCU system fell within the “segregated” category, and therefore, their existences broke the law.

LDF argued that the federal government was in violation by continuing to provide financial resources to segregated institutions, including HBCUs. Ten states were implicated in the case: Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, North Carolina, Florida, Arkansas, Pennsylvania, Georgia, Maryland, and Virginia. Judge John Pratt of the U.S. District Court of the District of Columbia ordered Carter's HEW to terminate federal education disbursements in the 10 states until they submitted suitable desegregation plans.³³

HEW responded by requiring each state's department of education to either adhere to its office's desegregation guidelines or lose federal support.³⁴ A forfeiture of federal funds would have gravely damaged Black Colleges and likely closed many of the institutions. Several possible consequences emerged for HBCUs as a result of the *Adams* cases. They included planned mergers of Texas Southern and Prairie View Universities into nearby white colleges and the 1979 merger of predominantly white University of Tennessee-Nashville into Tennessee State University. The suit also compelled Carter's Secretary of Education Joseph Califano to seriously consider suspending North Carolina's federal educational funds due to the state's continual failures to comply with HEW's desegregation order.³⁵ The Carter administration was aware of the grim implications of the *Adams* cases for HBCUs. "The plan to turn Texas Southern University and Prairie View University into white schools!" was written on an internal White House communication that highlighted a July 29, 1980, *New York Times* article that discussed the implications of attempts to desegregate Black Colleges.³⁶ Black College leaders believed that President Carter's desegregation policies were trying to transform HBCUs into white schools. The potential consequences of HEW's Black College desegregation plans were dire, and included: school mergers, discontinuation of academic programs, forced increases in white student enrollment and changes in the racial composition of faculty and administration, or a loss of federal funds.

The HBCU community consequently defended its schools against *Adams* and the Carter administration's HEW desegregation proposals with the same intensity as the NAACP-

³³ "Adams v. Califano, 1977," The State of History, <http://history.ncsu.edu/projects/ncsuhistory/items/show/290>, (accessed July 14, 2020) suitable desegregation lansey submitted o continue funding higher education

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ "About the UT System," University of Tennessee <http://tennessee.edu/aboutut/history/index.html> (accessed July 17, 2020); Tony Brown, "Education Department Stabs Black Colleges," *The News World*, August 12, 1980.

³⁶ The internal communication note is typed directly onto the lower-right corner of the forwarded July 29, 1980, *New York Times* Rosenbaum newspaper clipping on Black Colleges 7/29/80, "Black Colleges [1]" folder, Box 8, LMF, JCPL; David. E. Rosenbaum, "US Will Seek Plan from Texas on Desegregating State Colleges," *New York Times*, July 19, 1980; Wayne Urban, *Essays in Twentieth-Century Southern Education: Exceptionalism and Its Limits* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 215.

LDF defended its position. Elizabeth City State University Chancellor Marion Thorpe declared, “We’re not interested in any mergers, we don’t want to see these programs shifted around, and we don’t want any institutions closed. We need them all, but we want enhancement of the predominately black institutions.”³⁷ The apprehension also prompted leading civil rights activists to rethink the bounds of segregation. Benjamin Mays of Morehouse College vowed that “integration must never mean the liquidation of Black Colleges. If America allows Black Colleges to die it will be the worst kind of discrimination and denigration in history.” Vernon Jordan, UNCF) president, followed by arguing that closing Black Colleges would invite more African American hardship.³⁸ The National Advisory Committee on Black Higher Education and Black Colleges and Universities also weighed in on the implications for private HBCUs, in particular. The group, which served as the informal precursor to the WHI-HBCUs, had been assembled by the Gerald Ford administration to assist with Black educational matters. Its research and voice were crucial. The committee warned that:

Having low endowments (an average of \$2,412,134 for UNCF institutions) and marginal surpluses (and in some cases, deficits), private HBC’s [sic] are allowed little room for error when calculating their future survival . . . The [1977] *Adams* decision in desegregating State institutions is bound to affect them . . . a bleak forecast emerges for private black colleges.³⁹

In the advisory committee’s opinion, the *Adams* cases would invite the demise of many private HBCUs because they were already fragile and had fewer federal and state dollars to rely on than their public counterparts.⁴⁰ A successful 1980 lawsuit filed by Cheyney University against Pennsylvania and the federal government, which alleged that “a forced segregation plan weakens and threatens its survival,” reflected the height of the tensions and HBCU attempts to fight back.⁴¹ Cheyney’s apprehension was supported by a 1970s U.S. Student Association report that warned that due to desegregation, “Black Colleges would not survive beyond the

³⁷ Newspaper Clipping, “5 Carolina College Heads to Press Integration Plan,” undated, “*Black Colleges [1]*” folder, Box 8, LMF, JCPL.

³⁸ Tony Brown, “Black College struggle: court rulings ignored,” *The News World*, July 2, 1980.

³⁹ National Advisory Committee on Black Higher Education and Black Colleges and Universities, *Black Colleges and Universities: An Essential Component of a Diverse System of Higher Education* (Washington, DC: National Institute of Education, 1979), 47, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015061149053;view=1up;seq=5> (accessed July 21, 2020),

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ “Black College Day,” *Tony Brown’s Journal* (1981), last modified 2016, <http://www.tonybrownsjournal.com/black-college-day> (accessed May 1, 2020); Dianne Hayes, “Cheyney University Coalition to File Lawsuit to Save School,” *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*, <https://diverseeducation.com/article/67628/> (accessed July 19, 2020); “1980 Federal Civil Rights Lawsuit,” Heeding Cheyney’s Call, <http://www.heedingcheyneyscall.org/> (accessed July 18, 2020).



Vernon Jordan (right), president of the United Negro College Fund, meets with President Jimmy Carter in the White House on February 15, 1977.

year 1990.”⁴² It was evident that HBCU desegregation became the unexpected post-civil rights struggle of the 1970s. Black College proponents and civil rights leaders like Benjamin Mays and Vernon Jordan did not expect the federal government to force them to close their schools to achieve equal rights. Many Blacks cherished HBCUs, and Black leadership was fully engaged in the fight to save the institutions.

The *Adams* cases also led to a bitter legal split between the National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education (NAFEO) on one side, the NAACP on another, and President Carter on the other; all three parties had differing positions. The stakes were so high for Black Colleges that NAFEO became one of the first mainstream Black organizations to challenge the historic civil rights group and its push for desegregation.⁴³ NAFEO maintained in a 1977 *Adams amicus* brief that punishing HBCUs for centuries of whites’ sins was unfair to the schools. The organization concluded that instead of helping Black Colleges, *Adams* actually threatened the life of the institutions. To Greenberg and the LDF’s credit, they maintained in their legal complaint that HBCUs should not suffer

⁴² “Black College Day,” *Tony Brown’s Journal* (1981), last modified 2020, <http://www.tonybrownjournal.com/black-college-day> (accessed May 1, 2020).

⁴³ Marcus, “The Adams Case,” 37–42.

from desegregation. Contrarily, Herbert O. Reid, Howard Law dean and general counsel for NAFEO, believed that

HEW, the federal policy, the state plans, and the plaintiffs in the *Adams* litigation have all shifted the major and primary interests of the desegregation policy to changing the character of the predominately Black Colleges and universities to a new and different mission, with a new and different student population.⁴⁴

The HBCU community interpreted the *Adams* cases as assaults on the character of Black Colleges. Judge Pratt agreed with NAFEO and concluded that “the process of desegregation must not place a greater burden on black institutions or [a] black student’s opportunity to receive a quality public higher education. . . . Desegregation is a potential danger to black colleges.”⁴⁵ The court’s opinion only complicated the matter because desegregation was the law of the land, and the Carter administration was legally responsible for integrating the American education system.

The Black College community held President Carter and his administration responsible for any unwanted consequences of the NAACP-LDF and HEW’s desegregation policies. HBCU leadership directed its attention to policy change. The Carter administration had the power to rectify the matter by providing targeted federal support to HBCUs and relaxing HEW’s Black College desegregation requirements. Integration would leave Black Colleges vulnerable to widespread mergers and closures. The conundrum placed HBCU leadership on the defense and ready to confront the NAACP, President Carter, and all other perceived opponents of Black Colleges. The HBCU community gathered support from members of other Black advocacy organizations like the National Urban League and the Black Leaders Forum.⁴⁶ More importantly, the National Advisory Committee on Black Higher Education and Black Colleges and Universities assembled by the Ford administration worked from within the federal government on behalf of HBCUs. Externally, UNCF and NAFEO supported and advanced the Advisory Committee’s claims with their own interpretations of the legality and morality of Black College desegregation. With Black political pressure mounting over the issue and the continued financial deprivation of historic Black Colleges, HBCU

⁴⁴ Tony Brown, “More Blacks Stay in School If They Attend Black Colleges,” *The News World*, July 15, 1980.

⁴⁵ Tony Brown, “Black College Desegregation Leads to White Dominance,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, July 23, 1980.

⁴⁶ Telegraph, Jesse Jackson to President Carter, 11/18/77, “National Advisory Committee” folder, WHCF-Name File, JCPL; Memo, Jack Watson to Bunny Mitchell, 3/16/78, “Jordan, Vernon [1/77–12/87]” folder, WHCF-Name File, JCPL.

activists demanded that the Carter administration remove federal barriers that served as threats to the racial makeup of the financially threatened institutions.

The Administration's Initial Assessment of HBCU Problems

The reality of HBCUs' desegregation and financial problems also concerned Carter administration staff. They were apprehensive about the political consequences of Black Colleges folding under their guard. A May 22, 1978, memo written by Anita Allen, an HEW education financial manager, titled "Black Colleges in Distress," conveyed their concerns to Leonard H. O. Spearman, acting associate deputy commissioner for Higher and Continuing Education, and Alfred Moye, deputy commissioner for Higher and Continuing Education. In the memo, Allen provided a history of HBCUs, characterizing them as schools that train poor students who are "starved financially" and survive by "Borrowing from Peter to pay Paul." Allen acknowledged HBCUs' socioeconomic challenges. She also criticized the federal government's role in driving the potential downfall of Black Colleges. According to Allen, "The Administration is in the position at this time of being able to close down most of the historically black, private institutions [that] receive more than 90 percent of their support from the Federal Government, most of that from student financial aid grants."⁴⁷

HBCUs were at the mercy of the Carter administration because an overwhelming majority of their funds came from the federal government. Allen explained,

the authority of the Bureau of Student Financial Assistance (BSFA) to stop the withdrawal of any federal funds through the Departmental Federal Assistance Financing System (DFAFS) gives the Bureau in fact the authority to close down the institutions.⁴⁸

BSFA provided an additional level of support to higher educational institutions through funding programs like grants and loans on which the African American student population desperately relied. Thus, private HBCUs' 90 percent dependency rate on government assistance left the schools financially unstable, with risky liabilities, and susceptible to closures. Black College activists, however, did not view HBCUs' financial dependence on BSFA assistance as the main issue. They believed the problem resided in the federal barriers the institutions encountered through decades of racial bias and the *Adams* cases. Allen's opinion was in line with the

⁴⁷ Memo, Anita Allen to Alfred Moye and Leonard H. O. Spearman, 5/22/78, "Financial Aid to Black Colleges" folder, Box 40, LMF, JCPL.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

arguments of Black College leaders.⁴⁹ She insisted, “It is my position that the black community does not support or condone the elimination of [HBCUs] . . . in the name of desegregation . . . [or] in the name of efficiency in the collection of loans.” The Carter administration disbanding HBCUs would have been an unpopular position within the Black community and would have endangered African Americans’ educational futures. She asked, “What other subgroup of four-year colleges is going to take on an 80 percent welfare student body?”⁵⁰

Allen and HBCU proponents urged federal officials to remove barriers that prevented the schools from reaching their full potential. They both wanted a national increase in federal support. She summed up her memo by stating:

If the policy of OE is to close down the historically black institutions or to look the other way while they are being closed down, it would be helpful to know that. If the question of survival of most of these institutions is important to the Commissioner of Education he needs to take quick, effective coordinated action at once.⁵¹

Allen’s declaration conveyed the urgent challenges that confronted HBCUs and captured why Black College leadership blamed the Carter administration and the federal government for their schools’ difficulties. Her memo was especially significant because it demonstrated that the Carter administration initially failed to aggressively advocate for HBCU federal protections to offset the schools’ financial and legal challenges. Instead, HEW fueled the tensions by implementing HBCU desegregation policies that damaged the schools.

With federal departments like the Office of Education, the Departmental Federal Assistance Financing System, and the Bureau of Student Financial Assistance haphazardly punishing and destabilizing HBCUs for their monetary shortcomings, Allen’s memo explained that a comprehensive Black College federal policy was now necessary because of decades of federal and state neglect. Their student population’s socioeconomic shortcomings were also aggravated by the same historic national and state second-class treatment. Lastly, Allen’s memo revealed growing demands from within and outside of the Carter administration as an intricate web of coordinated action from HBCU advocates and Black College lobbyists solicited the government. Importantly, Allen’s depictions of Black Colleges’ problems and recommendations were notably similar to those

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

later proposed by HBCU leaders. The parallels suggest that the two parties were possibly working together to develop a strategy for saving Black Colleges. The space for internal and external collaboration was present due to the high number of Black College graduates working in the Carter administration. HBCUs were on life support and needed assistance from Carter officials and a wide range of groups to survive.

HBCU Leaders and Carter’s Decisive 1978 Meeting

By summer 1978—amid the rising tensions between the federal government and Black Colleges—HBCU leaders shifted their focus to President Carter. African American political allegiance to Carter wavered because many HBCU proponents held the president responsible for the possibility that members of his administration were attempting to close the schools. Because of the duress numerous Black Colleges experienced from federally imposed financial and administrative actions, the schools’ backers believed that Carter should take more initiative to repair the damage.⁵² On July 6, 1978, over 200 U.S. senators and representatives, HBCU presidents, and prominent Black College supporters bombarded Carter with urgent mailgrams and letters requesting that he meet with NAFFEO and UNCF. The strategically crafted messages demonstrated the HBCU community’s convictions of the imperative of this meeting and of Black College unity. Over 50 HBCU presidents’ mailgrams expressed basically the same message:

Dear President Carter,

I support the urgent request for a meeting with you and the National Association of Equal Opportunity and Higher Education and the United Negro College Fund.

Our reasons are as follows:

- 1. A negative policy shift in this administration’s actions toward Black Colleges and universities.*
- 2. Pronouncements by Secretary Califano which caste [sic] a pall on the integrity and stability of the black institutions.*
- 3. Officials and bureaucrats in this administration are articulating anti-Black College positions never before espoused in recent history by any administration.*

⁵² The specific policy sources of the duress suffered by HBCUs stemmed from disputes over UNCF’s failure to receive access into the Combined Federal Campaign (CFC), the failure of the National Advisory Committee on Black Higher Education and Black Colleges and Universities to be rechartered by the Carter administration, and questionable Health Education and Welfare audits of Black Colleges that led to the 1980s closure of Bishop College, an HBCU in Texas.

4. *Seemingly Black Colleges have been singled out for excessive scrutiny and ridicule as no other set of institutions.*

*We are not sure that you are aware of the shock that gripped the Black College community and alumni. A meeting with you by a delegation of Black College presidents I consider to be most critical.*⁵³

The HBCU community spoke candidly about the federal government damaging their schools' abilities to thrive. They also garnered outside support to challenge the Carter administration's alleged unfair targeting of and lackluster assistance to Black Colleges.⁵⁴ Leaders like Martin Luther King, Sr., Benjamin Mays, Jesse Jackson, Vernon Jordan, U.S. Representative Parren Mitchell and the Congressional Black Caucus, and U.S. Senators Lloyd Bentson, John Tower, and Jim Sasser were among those joining with NAFEO, UNCF, and HBCU presidents.⁵⁵ Within the administration, officials like Stuart Eizenstat, Bunny Mitchell, Mary Frances Berry, and Andrew Young expressed support for the meeting and decisive action.⁵⁶ Berry even pointed to the wide backing for the meeting to justify why Carter should honor the request.

Meanwhile, Elizabeth Abramowitz, Carter's assistant director for education, expressed her understanding of HBCUs' problems and the source of tensions in a July 14, 1978, memo. In it, after discussion with Chris Edley, UNCF national president, she reported on a wide range of issues that fueled the anxiety. Abramowitz listed a number of problems. The HBCU community, for example, believed that Carter sent a poor signal to Secretary of Education Califano about Black Colleges by failing to address the schools' concerns. Another complaint pointed to Califano's explicit statement in a recent press conference that he intended to close faltering Black Colleges. But according to Abramowitz, the major issue for Black College proponents was HBCUs' limited access to federal research grants and contracts. She summed up her memo by stating that Black College leadership

⁵³ Mailgram, HBCU Presidents to President Carter, 7/6/78, "NAFEO" folder, WHCF-Name File, JCPL.

⁵⁴ The HBCU community considered Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare Califano's public statements insisting that he intended to close unstable Black Colleges unfair targeting of the schools. A number of federally driven, financial audits of HBCUs were transpiring during Califano's anti-Black College pronouncements.

⁵⁵ Letters, Black and Congressional Leaders to President Carter, 7/78, "NAFEO" folder, WHCF-Name File, JCPL.

⁵⁶ Memos, Carter Administration Officials to the President Carter, 7/78, "UNCF" and "NAFEO" folders, WHCF-Name File, JCPL.

wanted the Carter administration to provide “cooperation and recognition” and “a clear policy statement” on HBCUs, and for the “the Federal Government to be helpful.”⁵⁷ A few Carter officials started to believe that the meeting was imminent. Stuart Eizenstat and Bunny Mitchell sent a memo to Carter urging him to approve the meeting because, they stated, neither HEW nor the administration had been on the side of HBCUs.⁵⁸

Carter followed their advice and agreed to the meeting. The Black College community understood the importance of having the president stand firmly behind their schools—their survival depended largely on the president’s support. On August 18, 1978, at 2:30 p.m. in the Cabinet Room, the highly anticipated meeting transpired between Carter, NAFEO, and UNCF. HBCU representatives first addressed the damaged relationship between the Carter administration and their schools, insisting that there was “a serious threat to Black Colleges.”⁵⁹ They blamed Carter administration members who had stated that HBCUs’ reliance on federal support subjected the schools to potential closures. In their opinion, the unflattering rhetoric hurt Black Colleges’ reputations and their abilities to thrive. HBCU representatives were quick to inform Carter, “if Black Colleges have survived all of their trials and tribulations only to be undone by disputes with the federal government,” the African American community would be outraged.⁶⁰

Blacks were Carter’s strongest voting block; the community believed that Carter would champion their political interests. With Carter losing credibility among American voters at-large, he could not afford to lose his Black political support. Black College leaders even referenced the large number of HBCU graduates serving in his administration, while noting that three-fourths of African Americans employed by the federal government were Black College alumni. At the time, the schools also held a record of producing 70 percent of all college-trained African Americans. The leaders even addressed Black Colleges’ roles in desegregation by insisting, “Instead of being an anachronism, instead of being a symbol of desegregation, [HBCUs] are actually an asset to the process of integration.”⁶¹ In their opinion, HBCUs prepared black students to enter a diversified workforce.

⁵⁷ Memo, Beth Abramowitz to Stu Eizenstat, Bert Carp, and David Rubenstein, 7/15/78, “NAFEO” folder, WHCF-Name File, JCPL.

⁵⁸ Memo, Phil and Fran to President Carter, 7/28/78, “UNCF” folder, WHCF-Name File, JCPL.

⁵⁹ Statement, HBCU Leaders to President Carter, 8/18/78, “Financial Aid to Black Colleges” folder, Box 40, LMF, JCPL.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Radio Transcript, Samuel Meyers on NPR, 8/22/78, “Financial Aid to Black Colleges” folder, Box 40, LMF, JCPL.

More notably, they used these perspectives to insist that an infusion of federal dollars into HBCUs to ensure financial stability would demonstrate how the federal government could reverse negative trends like colleges operating on deficits and suffering from enrollment decline. They also explained to the president that his legacy on race depended on HBCU policy because in their calculation the schools' "fate affects the fate of racial progress and justice" in America. They cautioned the president that if he failed to repair HBCUs' problems, "we fear a tragic, unnecessary rupture between our colleges and your administration."⁶² From their perspectives, Black Colleges were the economic and educational center of the Black community; therefore, federal investment into the colleges would alleviate short- and long-term African American suffering.

Countering arguments that questioned the viability of HBCUs was a shrewd strategy because it forced the Carter administration to rethink the direction and substance of federal support for Black Colleges and their unique role in an integrated society, while charting a new vision for their future. HBCU representatives had constructed a plan that included increased federal support for public and private HBCUs, a Black College advisory committee, and improvements in African American education at-large, which envisioned a high degree of Black collaboration. The HBCU leaders' proposal was a unilateral attempt to strengthen Black education in the long term, while placing the federal government at the helm of ensuring that their schools flourished. If the Carter administration formally agreed to commit the federal government to assist and protect Black Colleges indefinitely, then HBCUs could remain open and greatly benefit society in the decades ahead.

Carter's 1979 Failed Black College Directive

Carter responded favorably to the majority of the Black College leaders' suggestions. Days after the meeting, Carter issued a memo to all federal department and agency heads announcing his upcoming "Presidential Directive to Increase Black College Participation in Federal Programs."⁶³ Presidential directives had been around since the beginning of the federal government. They allowed a president to establish new policies, initiate new plans, and mark new declarations. Proclamations, executive orders, military orders, and homeland security directives were among

⁶² Statement, HBCU Leaders to President Carter, 8/18/78, "Financial Aid to Black Colleges" folder, Box 40, LMF, JCPL; NAFFEO Conference Program, President Charles Lyons Introductory Letter, 9/5-7/78, "Black Colleges [O/A 9510] [2]" folder, Box 9, LMF, JCPL.

⁶³ Press Conference Transcript, President Carter on Black Colleges, undated, "Black Colleges [O/A 9510] [1]" folder, Box 9, LMF, JCPL.

the most popular presidential decrees.⁶⁴ However, Carter's directive to increase federal support to Black Colleges was a momentous development. He ordered it while HBCUs faced great uncertainty.⁶⁵

Carter's support of the Black College community signaled that he understood the urgency of the HBCU crisis and the need for federal protection for the schools to avert any further damage. Carter and HEW officials honored the Black College community's wishes and kept communication open. On September 26, 1978, NAFCO, UNCF, and other HBCU leaders submitted their "Proposed Presidential Directive on Black Colleges," which outlined the structure and implementation of the directive. The HBCU lobby assured Carter that their draft "captures and preserves . . . the spirit of the commitment [to HBCUs] that you expressed."⁶⁶ Most importantly, the HBCU leaders developed a strategy that circumvented housing the directive in the Department of Health Education and Welfare or under the administration of any other government agency. Instead, they urged placing the directive's office directly under the White House. By doing so, HBCUs could avoid negative actions from an anti-Black College secretary of education or Congress. The hierarchical structure proposed by Black College leaders called for increased participation from every government agency and the meeting of concrete federal funding goals for presidential review. Thus, the president would have the final word over federal appropriations to HBCUs. Black College officials were also instrumental in the naming of the White House official who would oversee the Black College Directive (BCD), Louis Martin, a newly hired official and trusted member of the African American community. On January 17, 1979, approximately 55 agencies received Carter's orders to increase support to Black Colleges in a message that announced the federal government's expanded role in Black College affairs.⁶⁷

Carter's Black College Directive promised to increase federal resources to HBCUs, although the directive was not responsible for distributing funds to the schools. Instead, with the help of the president, the BCD advocated that federal agencies and private corporations invest millions of dollars yearly into Black Colleges. The strategy

⁶⁴ Congressional Research Service. 2008. Presidential Directives: Background and Overview. <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/98-611.pdf> (accessed July 19, 2020).

⁶⁵ Black College Directive Memo, From President Jimmy Carter to Heads of Federal Departments and Agencies, 1/17/79, "Black Colleges [2]" folder, Box 8, LMF, JCPL.

⁶⁶ Proposal, HBCU Leaders to President Carter, 9/5/78, "Financial Aid to Black Colleges" folder, Box 40, LMF, JCPL.

⁶⁷ Proposal, Black Colleges Leaders to President Carter, 09/25/78, "Black Colleges [O/A 9510] [1]" folder, Box 9, LMF, JCPL. STOPPED HEREitz to talifanoAssistance"und and Overview.

was created to emulate the major research model of the Predominantly White Institution (PWI) because those schools received large federal and private investments that helped advance both the universities and American society. Among the directive's early achievements were requesting the Justice Department to remove the desegregation suits that adversely affected the Mississippi and Louisiana HBCUs, helping the UNCF secure a position in the Civil Service Commission's United Campaign, and expanding the National Science Foundation's engineering and science centers at Black Colleges.⁶⁸ Initially, the HBCU community welcomed the victories, but the outlook soon changed.



Meldon Hollis served as the first executive director of Jimmy Carter's 1979 Black College Directive and played a major role in the Carter administration in helping to establish the 1980 White House Initiative on HBCUs.

After failing to meet all of its highly anticipated goals, in early 1980 the directive faced an onslaught of criticism from Black College powerbrokers. On March 18, 1980, NAFEO Executive Director Samuel L. Meyers sent a letter on behalf of HBCU presidents to President Carter and Shirley Hufstедler, secretary of the newly created Department of Education. Meyers described Black College concern over the directive's disappointing outcomes. He acknowledged that Carter and his staff had made "enormous good will and effort" to expand federal support to HBCUs. However, he contended that Title III and other federal resources had declined since the 1979 creation of the directive. He blamed the drop in federal funds on congressional retribution against Carter's new Department of Education (created October 17, 1979). Meyers also informed Carter that "total federal funding to the historically Black Colleges, since your pronouncement, has gone down in spite of the strong and capable leadership of Mr. Louis Martin and his staff," who worked to implement the Black College Directive to prevent drops in federal allocations to the schools.⁶⁹ Meyers and Black College leadership were not only displeased with the directive's outcomes; they were also upset about federal cuts to their institutions. The 1978–1979 decreases only added to their previous anxieties, and many feared Black Colleges would close indefinitely.

⁶⁸ Memo, Hollis Martin to White House Staff, Undated, "Black Colleges [2]" folder, Box 8, LMF, JCPL.

⁶⁹ Letter, NAFEO to Shirley Hufstедler, March 28, 1980, "Black Colleges [O.A 9510] [1]" folder, Box 9, LMF, JCPL.



The official seal of the White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

Carter's 1980 Formation of the White House Initiative on HBCUs

Both the Carter administration and the HBCU community recognized the necessity for stronger action. Following the Black College Directive model, NAFEO, UNCF, and leading HBCU officials submitted their plan for moving forward. They wanted Carter to issue an executive order to escalate federal appropriations to Black Colleges, which would carry more political weight than a presidential directive. The *Federal Register*, the federal government's official journal, published all EOs, and they provided more legal guarantees for federal policy. Furthermore, executive orders were more widely circulated to high-level federal attorneys and other officials.⁷⁰

The Carter administration agreed to issue an EO, but took the idea a step further. On July 20, 1980, White House official Bill Nichols maintained in a memo titled "Executive Order to Establish a White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges" that because the directive's "results from the first year of operation were not particularly encouraging," a new office was necessary.⁷¹ He wanted to replace President Carter's Black College Directive with the White House Initiative on HBCUs (WHI-HBCUs). Though the directive operated from 1978 through 1979, due to the previous missteps, Nichols believed the new office would give the federal government's Black College efforts "stronger footing." Regarding the benefits of issuing an executive order, he maintained that it "clarifies delegation of authority to carry out the Black College Initiative from the president to the secretary of education. It also clarifies agency and departmental obligations to set and meet goals for substantially increasing Black College participation in their programs."⁷² The Carter administration wanted to ensure that federal employees understood that the president and secretary of education had the authority to initiate increases in federal appropriations to HBCUs without congressional approval. According to Nichols, the purpose of the new WHI-HBCUs was to improve the communication and participation breakdowns between the president and federal agencies and departments. Nichols's suggestions were well-received.

⁷⁰ Steven Aftergood, "What is the Difference Between an Executive Order and a Directive?" *Federation of American Scientists*, February 14, 2013, http://fas.org/blogs/secretcy/2013/02/eo_pd/ (accessed July 20, 2020).

⁷¹ Memo, Bert Camp to Bill Nichols, 7/30/80, "[Black Colleges] [2]" folder, Box 8, LMF, JCPL.

⁷² Ibid.

After reaching a consensus, on August 8, 1980, both the Carter administration and the HBCU community commemorated President Carter's official signing of EO 12232, which formally established the White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities. In a celebratory signing ceremony on the White House lawn, HBCU leaders, White House officials, federal government agency and department heads, and other guests gathered to witness the triumphant and historic occasion.⁷³ The HBCU office has survived in a similar format for almost 40 years until Donald Trump's presidency (2016–2020), when the official name changed to the White House Initiative on Advancing Educational Equity, Excellence, and Economic Opportunity through Historically Black Colleges and Universities.⁷⁴ The new name seemed to reflect the ideas of President Donald Trump and his secretary of education, Betsy DeVos, on the perceived utility and national direction of Black Colleges.

Conclusion

President Jimmy Carter's August 8, 1980, signing of EO 12232 signified the culmination of an HBCU revolution for Black College survival. The victory materialized into a permanent federal office that came to be known as the White House Initiative on HBCUs. Though Carter lost his November 1980 re-election bid to Ronald Reagan three months later, the HBCU-federal apparatus and infrastructure that he created became so accepted that six presidents and 43 years later (2023), the WHI-HBCUs continues to protect the schools' educational and financial interests.⁷⁵ The Initiative has enjoyed loyal political support from presidents from both parties, which emerges in the form of much-needed federal and private dollars and resources. Just as with other political offices, the president appoints an executive director of the WHI-HBCUs, tasked with carrying out the president's position on Black Colleges. Remaining true to Carter's initial design, the office has maintained an HBCU liaison from every government agency who is responsible for communicating with the schools and the Initiative on matters concerning grant, research, and contract opportunities for Black Colleges lobbied for by the president and set aside by Congress. The office, currently located in the Department of Education, also helps to formulate private partnerships for schools,

⁷³ Presidential Transcript, Executive Order 12232 Signing Ceremony, 8/8/80, "[Black Colleges] [2]" folder, Box 8, LMF, JCPL.

⁷⁴ "About Us," White House Initiative on Advancing Educational Equity, Excellence, and Economic Opportunity Through Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Department of Education, last modified May 19, 2021, <https://sites.ed.gov/whhbcu/about-us/>.

⁷⁵ As recently as November 2021, the Joe Biden administration faced public criticism for failing to select an executive director of the White House Initiative on HBCUs. Almost two years into his presidency, Biden named a new leader on February 25, 2022: Dr. Dietra Trent. Critics claimed that Biden weakened the Black College office by failing to provide the office with leadership.

and advises the president, Congress, and HBCU leaders on policy matters affecting the institutions.⁷⁶ Black Colleges continue to endure their share of government-caused inequities and resultant financial troubles, but the office helps HBCUs thrive despite the ever-diversifying and competitive higher education market. In March 2022, Susan Adams examined the funding disparities in a *Forbes* article titled, “How America Cheated Its Black Colleges.” Adams pointed out the massive underfunding of HBCUs that she estimated to be at least \$12.8 billion for the 19 land-grant Black Colleges alone. She explained that the calculations were based a dollar-for-dollar comparison of the funding granted for students at white land-grant institutions to their HBCU counterparts since 1987.⁷⁷ Fortunately, the White House office for HBCUs was created by Carter to handle such injustices from a governmental framework.

The issues, people, organizations, and events that created the White House Initiative converged in a historic moment that redefined what Black College education means in a desegregating society. Carter’s unprecedented actions expanded presidential intervention into racially particularized sectors of American higher education. His HBCU reforms and accommodations with the Black College community marked a definitive moment in the historic relationship between the federal government and HBCUs. The formation of the WHI-HBCU formation arose out of the federal government’s long-standing financial and policy mistreatment of Black Colleges. The troubles not only encouraged HBCU leaders to construct and outline a new direction for their schools, but also to enhance the popular perception of Black Colleges. During the 1970s, the institutions were on the verge of total collapse, and transformative action was critical. The conflict forced HBCU policy makers to unify and develop an aggressive, coordinated action plan that bypassed state governments in exchange for long-standing national commitments and protections. Millions of dollars in federal and state funds were awarded to the institutions through the 1980s and 1990s, creating an HBCU Golden Era.⁷⁸ After 1980, many Black Colleges achieved “university status” due to increased federal support and expansion of their academic programs, including new graduate programs. In 1981, Morehouse University chartered its School of Medicine, which was fueled in large part by increased federal support of Black Colleges.⁷⁹ Cheyney State College initiated the change in 1983 to Cheyney State University, while in

⁷⁶ “Mission,” White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities, U.S. Department of Education, <https://sites.ed.gov/whhbcu/>.

⁷⁷ Susan Adams, “How America Cheated Its Black Colleges,” *Forbes*, April/March 2022.

⁷⁸ M. Christopher Brown II, “The Declining Significance of Historically Black Colleges and Universities: Relevance, Reputation, and Reality in Obamaamerica,” *Journal of Negro Education* 82, no. 1 (Winter 2013): 13.

⁷⁹ “History of MSM,” Morehouse School of Medicine, https://www.msm.edu/about_us/msm-history.php.

1984 Hampton Institute earned its Hampton “University” standing. In 1985, the trend continued with the change from Tuskegee Institute to Tuskegee University. The trend continued in 1988 with Bowie State College’s change to Bowie State University. In 1992 South Carolina State College also earned its university status and became South Carolina State University.⁸⁰

With the end of enslavement, when illiteracy plagued the Black populace, the majority of HBCUs initially created graduate programs in Education departments, while land-grant Black Colleges were strategically positioned to add graduate programs in Agriculture and Engineering. The schools’ steady expansion of programs and training made possible the remarkable transition from enslaved persons to professional African Americans. That exceptional service demonstrates the historical indispensability of HBCUs and highlights the schools’ critical social role that eventually fueled the debates around the schools during the Carter presidency. Black Colleges enabled the difficult transition from the horrors of enslavement to the promise of social and racial equality, and citizenship, and thus promoted broader societal stability and prosperity. No other set of schools in the United States embodied such a mandate.

The progress toward social inclusion and equality continued during Jimmy Carter’s presidency, when HBCU graduates put their education and influence to the test. They formulated an effective strategy that would ensure that their schools had the federal resources necessary to continue educating African American youth in America years after Carter’s presidency. Evidenced by the continuation of the White House Initiative on HBCUs and other acts to advance the schools, the HBCU supporters and Carter administration’s efforts were successful. In the 1990s, Black Colleges reached their highest enrollments and dazzled television audiences as central features in sports, movies, sitcoms, music, and fashion.⁸¹ The action had real results for real people outside the elite doors of the White House as

⁸⁰ “Cheyney At A Glance,” Cheyney University, <https://cheyney.edu/who-we-are/cheyney-at-a-glance/> (accessed June 26, 2022); “History,” Hampton University, <http://www.hamptonu.edu/about/history.cfm> (accessed June 26, 2022); “History of Tuskegee University,” Tuskegee University, <https://www.tuskegee.edu/about-us/history-and-mission> (accessed June 26, 2022); “Bowie State University History,” Bowie State University <https://www.bowiestate.edu/about/history/> (accessed June 26, 2022); “South Carolina State University History,” South Carolina State University, <https://scsu.edu/about-sc-state/> (accessed June 26, 2022).

⁸¹ James T. Campbell, “The Americanization of South Africa,” in *Race, Nation, and Empire in American History*, ed. James T. Campbell et al. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 131; David J. Leonard, “A Different Sort of Blackness: A Different World in a Post-Cosby Landscape,” in *African Americans on Television: Racing for Ratings*, eds. David J. Leonard and Lisa A. Guerreo (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 141–46.

numerous underprivileged Black students continue to receive their college degrees from HBCUs due to Carter's unprecedented commitments. Without the successful ideological outcome of an HBCU revolution during Jimmy Carter's presidency, it is highly unlikely that most Black Colleges would have survived and continued to serve and socially and educationally elevate the African American community.

Picture credits: White House ceremony, courtesy of Meldon Hollis; Cheyney University, Wikipedia; Vernon Jordan, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum; White House Initiative seal, White House Initiative on Advancing Educational Equity, Excellence, and Economic Opportunity through Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

© Society for History in the Federal Government. Readers can download Federal History articles and share them but must credit the journal and author. They cannot change the articles in any way or use them commercially. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND).