

Separation Anxiety

By ABIGAIL THERNSTROM and STEPHAN THERNSTROM

Fisk University is in such dire financial straits that it is considering selling off part of its valuable art collection. The Nashville, Tenn., school is one of the nation's 103 historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), and its money problems raise an obvious question: Half a century after *Brown v. Board of Education*, should we still support an institution of higher education that is less than 1% white?

In 1992, the Supreme Court held in *U.S. v. Fordice* that racially identifiable institutions of higher education in Mississippi were a holdover from the state's Jim Crow past. The plaintiffs wanted more state funding for historically black schools, but the court turned them down, seeing the ghost of "separate but equal."

The district court, which then had to fashion a remedy for the dual system, proposed eliminating all but one of the traditionally black colleges in the state. If only one of the HBCUs in Mississippi remained, that would solve the problem of racially separate campuses, since it would force almost all black students to attend schools that were majority white. This prompted the NAACP, in the summer of 1994, to organize a civil-rights march to save Mississippi Valley State University. In a strange turn of events, the preservation of an allegedly "segregated" institution became a black cause. "It's important . . . for blacks to hang onto something and call it their own," one student explained to the Chronicle of Higher Education.

Almost all of the HBCUs were created at a time when Southern blacks were excluded from other schools (only four of the HBCUs are outside the South). They turned out doctors, lawyers, ministers and politicians. W.E.B. Du Bois graduated from Fisk in 1888, Thurgood Marshall from Lincoln (Chester County, Pa.) in 1930, and Martin Luther King Jr. from Morehouse (Atlanta) in 1948. As recently as 1960, these schools were the choice of almost two-thirds of black college students.

They are no longer exclusively for blacks. But they are racially identifiable -- much more so than most of the urban public schools that liberal critics routinely denounce as disastrously "segregated." Well over 80% of their students, and more than six out of 10 faculty members, are African-American. These institutions are defined by a commitment to a black identity that, for many students, remains meaningful. Morehouse, for instance, proudly advertises itself as "The Best College in the Nation for Educating African Americans."

But overwhelmingly white institutions are also eager for a significant black presence. If all educational doors are so wide open to black students and professors, should we really hope that schools such as Fisk survive? At the height of the civil-rights movement, some thoughtful observers expressed grave doubts. Research by Christopher Jencks and David Riesman concluded that these "by-products of the Southern caste system" were usually an "ill-financed, ill-staffed caricature of white higher education." The "great majority [stood] near the end of the academic procession in terms of student aptitudes, faculty competence, and intellectual ferment." And it seemed self-evident that the demise of Jim Crow would make these schools even weaker by exposing them to new competition. Their best students and teachers would have choices denied earlier generations of African-Americans, and few would choose even the better HBCUs like Howard over Harvard.

In fact, while the proportion of black students educated in HBCUs has fallen sharply with a significant rise in the total number of blacks attending college, in absolute numbers enrollment in these schools has grown substantially.

Perhaps they continue to thrive because they do an excellent job of making sure their students actually get a diploma. Getting into college is not the great problem for blacks in higher education today; staying and graduating is. The dropout rate at the HBCUs is high, but considerably lower than at the typical majority-white school. Although only a 10th of all African-Americans attend HBCUs, they award over a fifth of all bachelor's degrees earned by blacks. And yet they do not attract students from unusually affluent and educated homes.

Admittedly, their academic standards may still be relatively low. And it may still be the case, as Messrs. Jencks and

Riesman wrote, that they tend to "graduate anyone who perseveres." But academic expectations are also low elsewhere, and black students still drop out in alarmingly large numbers.

The HBCUs have an advantage over even the selective traditionally white colleges: There is no mismatch between black student qualifications and the academic demands of the schools. No students are preferentially admitted -- given a break in a system of racial double standards. And once they enroll at an HBCU, they can feel free to major in more difficult subjects, knowing that they will not be unprepared for the coursework.

In fact, a remarkable 40% of all African-Americans with a bachelor's degree in the physical sciences, and 38% of those who majored in math or the biological sciences, attended HBCUs. Conversely, almost no students at HBCUs gravitate to black studies, gender studies and the like. Moreover, among blacks who earned a Ph.D. in the late 1990s, 31% had done their undergraduate work at HBCUs. Messrs. Jencks and Riesman, writing in the '60s, complained that the schools were "traditional," rather than "progressive" and "harked back to an earlier period of white academic history." But their academic conservatism may be the secret to their success.

An impressive recent study by the economists Roland Fryer and Michael Greenstone suggests that HBCUs are not what they used to be. In the 1970s, compared with black students at other institutions, students at HBCUs went on to jobs that paid significantly higher wages. By the 1990s that labor-market advantage had disappeared. There was no "brain drain" into better white schools; the measurable academic credentials of black students at HBCUs relative to those at largely white schools had not changed. So what happened?

It is possible that the Fryer and Greenstone finding may reflect the special historical circumstances of the 1970s, when employers first came under pressure to hire a more racially diverse work force and found it most efficient to comply with affirmative-action mandates by recruiting at schools in which most job applicants would be African-American. By the 1990s these pressures may have eased, or employers may have developed other strategies for dealing with them.

Whatever the true story (and the inadequacies of the data make a definitive judgment difficult), the evidence does not indicate that HBCUs are "the best" schools for African-Americans across the board, as some enthusiasts claim. But they do seem to meet a real need, serving their students well in important respects.

In a free society, many private and public institutions will have a distinctive profile. Group clustering is not necessarily unhealthy; indeed, it's an inescapable feature of a multiethnic nation. No one worries that there are "too many" Jews at Yeshiva and Brandeis, "too many" Catholics at Notre Dame and Holy Cross, "too many" Mormons at Brigham Young. And so it should be with Howard, Fisk and Mississippi Valley State. That's what democratic pluralism means.

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