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Clarence Shelley

The Campaign to Diversify the University

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The history of black students at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign is a complicated one that involves discrimination, racism, protest, and resilience. Because the African American community maintained an unwavering belief in the importance of education, colleges and universities have long been important battlegrounds for black liberation efforts. Black students across the nation became the battering rams—and in many ways the vanguard—of the struggle for equal education. From the late 1960s through the early 1970s, in particular, black students helped redefine the goals and tactics of the struggle and demanded change, respect, and equity. Black students at the University of Illinois were at the forefront of that struggle and changed the face of the university and the nature of student experiences forever.

The battle to change the University of Illinois was not an easy one, particularly since the institution was located in Champaign County, which predominantly resembled southern states in its attitude toward and treatment of African American residents. For instance, large Ku Klux Klan meetings took place throughout the county, including a mass rally at a park in Urbana in 1924. Klan sentiment and hostility was not wholly embraced by white residents, but the cities of Champaign and Urbana established firm patterns of educational and residential segregation early in the twentieth century. By the 1930s a combination of federal housing programs, restrictive covenants, and bank lending policies led to the creation of all-black areas and a dual housing market in the twin cities. Residential segregation patterns also created ed-

Black Chorus, 1973. Photo courtesy of Student Life and Culture Archives at the University of Illinois Archives.

ucational segregation patterns, so that in Champaign, most black students attended all-black or predominantly black elementary schools through the twentieth century. By the late 1960s, blacks still had higher rates of living in deteriorated housing, unemployment, and infant mortality, and had median family incomes that remained about half that of whites.

The University of Illinois was established and evolved in this context. The first African American man would not graduate from the university until 1900, the first African American woman until 1906. African American undergraduate enrollment slowly climbed throughout the first part of the twentieth century. Their numbers rose from two in 1900 to sixty-eight in 1925, 138 in 1929, and 148 in 1944. Though their numbers multiplied, never did they amount to more than 1 percent of the student population until the late 1960s. In 1966, UIUC could count only ninety-three black freshmen. The next academic year it counted fifty-nine.

Consequently, African American students at Illinois experienced discrimination on and off campus. In the mid-1930s, a university report found that some professors refused to give black students higher than a grade of C. Black men were kept off the basketball team so as not to offend the university's southern competitors. Barred from living in residence halls, black students not living in black Greek fraternity or sorority houses had no option but to live with black families in the North End of Champaign, quite a distance from campus. The campus did not open residence hall housing to black students until 1945.

Despite these barriers, African American students made themselves a part of the campus and took advantage of university life. A few participated in established university organizations, including the glee club, literary societies, and the student newspaper, the *Daily Illini*. Others created parallel organizations to those established by the university or white student groups. In the early 1930s black students formed Cenacle, an honorary society for black students that sponsored plays with black student actors and a book exhibit in the university library featuring black authors. In 1938 black students published the *Scribbler*, "the official voice of the Negro students enrolled in the University of Illinois," and discussed the segregation in Champaign, the debate over voluntary segregation, as well as lighter subjects. In the early 1950s students celebrated Negro History Week with invited speakers, movies, and plays. In this way, black students created social and extracurricular outlets for their artistic inter-

ests, social welfare, and racial consciousness. Like blacks in general, black University of Illinois students demanded to be seen *and* heard.

In the mid-twentieth century, black students and their white campus allies demanded positive change on and off campus. Black student alienation, coupled with a growing racial consciousness associated with the Black Power movement, was transformed into activism. In October 1967, black undergraduate and graduate students formed the Black Students Association (BSA). The new organization adopted the motto "We hope for nothing; We demand everything" and linked itself to the Black Power movement. Leaders declared that the BSA would promote solidarity and unity among black students, celebrate and disseminate the positive aspects of black culture, and provide a training ground for political organization and leadership. It soon became the organization through which black students would force the university to recognize and act on black issues. BSA members and sympathetic administrators would play a leading role in diversifying the campus over the next several years.

Launching the Special Educational Opportunity Program

Responding to public pressure from BSA, white faculty and student allies, and a newly formed interracial Champaign organization called Citizens for Racial Justice, the campus leadership created the Special Educational Opportunities Program (SEOP) in the summer of 1968. Originally intended to include two hundred students, administrators increased the number to five hundred in response to the urgency created by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination in April. Even with that increase, black students still constituted only 3 percent of the undergraduate population. (In 1970, there were just over one million African Americans in Illinois.) Nevertheless, by admitting such a large number of students, SEOP became one of the largest programs in the nation initiated by a predominantly white university to enroll low-income black high school students.

Clarence Shelley was recruited and appointed dean of the program in July 1968. Born and raised in Detroit, Michigan, Shelley received his bachelor of arts in English and taught English and speech at a Detroit high school for several years before returning to Wayne State University, his undergraduate alma mater, for a master's in educational psychology. Shelley then became a counselor in Wayne State's Higher Education Opportunity Program, where he began his professional focus on diversifying higher education and improving the quality of students' experiences. In his role, Shelley worked with several local high schools to disseminate information about admissions requirements, financial aid, and tutoring. He also worked with students at Wayne State to increase their retention and success rates. Shelley's success in Detroit—which came just as racial tensions were reaching a breaking point in that city—won him wide recognition. The Detroit Committee for Student Rights, for example, recognized him for his outstanding achievements in recruiting and retaining African American students at Wayne State. His wealth of experience and knowledge of what was then the very new field of minority recruitment made him the perfect candidate to become the director of the SEOP at the University of Illinois.

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According to a UIUC press release issued at the time, Shelley was expected to "supervise campus-wide services to help Negro students achieve academic success" at Illinois. To do so, he focused on all facets of the institution. He pushed staff and faculty to be accountable for student success in and out of the classroom. He pushed black students to treat their education seriously and helped them create ways to sustain themselves scholastically and socially. He pushed colleges and departments to devise policies and programs that would increase student opportunity and success. Without any other staff or resources, Shelley was the go-to person for all things diversity related on campus.

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The university scrambled to respond to Shelley's recommendations and to accommodate and enroll the SEOP students. The first order of business was orienting the new recruits to campus. To facilitate this process, the SEOP participants were invited to arrive in Urbana-Champaign one week before other incoming students in the fall of 1968. During that time they and members of BSA lived in Illinois State Residence Hall (ISR), a new and highly coveted dormitory on Green Street. As the SEOP students arrived, it became clear that many tasks remained undone. A number of the new arrivals had not taken the appropriate tests for course placement, others did not have room assignments for the coming semester, and others were still awaiting the details of their financial aid packages. Administrators assured students that the remaining housing and financial aid issues would be resolved either during New Student Week or in the first few weeks of school. On the last day of orientation, campus administrators instructed the SEOP students to move into their permanent room assignments. The general student body was arriving for the beginning of the new academic year, and—awkwardly—many returning students, the majority of them white, expected to move into their previously assigned rooms in the popular ISR building.

A number of female SEOP students were dissatisfied with the size and condition of their permanent rooms. Because of overcrowding, several women were placed temporarily in hall lounges until adequate space could be found for them. In addition, several SEOP recruits suddenly learned that the financial aid packages campus recruiters had promised them (perhaps prematurely) were nonexistent. Many of the new students reacted angrily to these revelations, but SEOP director Shelley and the campus housing staff urged them to remain calm. Shelley also warned the group that they would face disciplinary action if they did not vacate their rooms at ISR.

Word of the negotiations between campus administrators and the SEOP students spread across the black student community, and many, including BSA members among the returning students, began to assemble in the South Lounge of the Illini Union (the student union building) to consider taking action in protest. Though clearly agitated, the students remained calm. At midnight on September 9, while most students remained in the lounge, a group of administrators met with the BSA officers to discuss a course of action. The students refused to leave. Many chose to stay for the sake of unity and to support the women protesting their room assignments. Other women remained because they simply were afraid to walk home so late at night. When rumors of a growing police presence outside the Illini Union spread among the protestors, many students reported they were afraid they would be injured by billy clubs and dogs. Some later recalled being coerced into staying at the Union by BSA members, nonstudents, and older students. Some students simply fell asleep.

Administrators, according to Clarence Shelley, "were trying to decide what to do, arrest them, make them leave, or let them sit all night until they got tired." The decision to arrest the students was not an easy one, but Chancellor Jack Peltason felt compelled to take action. "As much as one hates to call the police the alternative was to let them stay there for a week," Peltason declared. "Then the State will be breathing down our neck, the program will be in trouble, and everybody will say, 'you shouldn't have done it.' So, let's clean it up."[1] The police moved in quickly, and the students, after being assured they would not be injured, left peacefully. By the early morning hours of September 10, the UIUC campus was labeled by the media as the scene of the first student "riot" of the 1968–69 academic year, with almost 250 black students, most of them freshmen, arrested.

The arrests caused a backlash against SEOP on the campus and across the broader Urbana-Champaign community. Letters to the editor in both the student newspaper (the *Daily Illini*) and the Champaign community paper (the *News-Gazette*) chastised the SEOP students for their actions. The *Chicago Tribune*, under the headline "Negroes Riot at U of I: Negroes Go on Rampage after Row," painted a particularly vivid and grossly inaccurate image of the student sit-in. The article estimated the damage at $50,000, a figure far exceeding official estimates. It also offered a false representation of the financial assistance students received, which increased resentment toward SEOP participants: "The students, most of them Negroes from Chicago and East St. Louis—but some of them from as far away as Philadelphia—were to receive free tuition and free room and board." A *Tribune* editorial published the same day went further, using racist imagery to describe the sit-in. The editorial described how "black students and outside supporters went ape" and "swung from chandeliers in the lounges of the beautiful Illini Union." The author lamented that these "slum products" responded to the benevolence of the university and Illinois taxpayers "by kicking their benefactors in the groin." A similarly hostile letter sent to Clarence Shelley called the students " black apes," "black pigs," "dregs of society," and "hoodlums."[2]

On the other hand, defense of the arrested students came from many directions. Black alumni in Chicago organized the Concerned Alumni of Illinois to support the students' grievances. Led by Chicago Aldermen A. A. Rayner and William Cousins Jr., the group requested a meeting with Dean Clarence Shelley and Chancellor Jack Peltason and sponsored a rally in Chicago to support the students. They did not defend the damages that had occurred at the Union (though they pointed out that reports of destruction had been grossly exaggerated), but they did support the students' grievances and were interested in the kind of disciplinary action that would be taken against them. The National Students Organization sent a telegram to UIUC students decrying police conduct on the night of the arrest. The Illinois Graduate Student Association protested the arrests as well.

The arrests also fostered a strong sense of community among the SEOP students and became a unifying catalyst for activism. As Clarence Shelley stated, "A lot of kids who wouldn't have been active spent all their time trying to get even for [the arrests]." With this newly energized and politicized group, black students reaffirmed their connection to the Black Power movement sweeping the nation in the late 1960s and found themselves a place in it. Their mobilization helped transform the UIUC campus.

Changing the Campus

Black students barreled forward despite the calls from administrators and despite state and federal officials urging them to remain quiet and simply pursue their education on campus. The BSA organized a number of strategy meetings during the fall of 1968, and by February 1969 the organization was ready to engage the university in a process of reform. The BSA launched its campaign by issuing thirty-five demands. These ranged from requests that charges be dropped against participants in the sit-in, to hiring more black staff and faculty, to increasing the number of black graduate students, to increasing the wages of janitorial and food service staff (black and white), to working with the black Champaign community residents in ameliorating racist policies and practices in housing, hiring, and education in the local area. Certain demands—for instance, that the university hire five hundred black professors by 1972—were improbable. However, even outlandish demands highlighted areas for university improvement, and concerned administrators, especially Jack Peltason and Clarence Shelley, worked to improve the situation. In particular, the newly created Faculty-Student Commission on Afro-American Life and Culture, a committee appointed by Peltason that

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The staff of the Irepodun, the yearbook sponsored by the Black Student Association and African American Cultural Center, 1972. Photo courtesy of Student Life and Culture Archives at the University of Illinois Archives.

included Shelley as a member, worked toward operationalizing some of the more feasible demands.

For example, the campus Afro-American Cultural Program opened in the fall semester of 1969. The center became the cultural and artistic hub for black-oriented activities on campus. While all students were welcome at the new center, the black students' sense of ownership there, together with separatist sentiment of the times, meant that, practically, only black students and black Urbana-Champaign residents used the cultural center facility to its fullest. The center sponsored several culturally focused workshops, including a writer's workshop where students read, learned about, and wrote poetry and essays; a dance workshop where students learned and performed African dances; and manhood/womanhood workshops where issues of gender roles and male/female relationships were discussed. Often, workshop participants would showcase their talents in shows or publications.

The center became the campus locus of the creation and exultation of black culture and the black aesthetic and was extremely popular with black students. Many considered it a haven from the hostile academic and social atmosphere of the campus. According to former student Jeffrey Roberts, "It was a place you could go and you didn't feel like you were being beat-up on by the university. Every place else you went had such a negative situation. At least for that hour you were at the cultural center you felt like you were in a positive situation where people were reinforcing whatever needs you had."

Members of the UIUC community had made individual attempts to initiate black-centered courses before the SEOP program began, but there was no coordinated effort to organize an African American Studies program until the 1969–70 academic year. According to Clarence Shelley, institutionalizing the black experience in an academic course helped allay black student concerns and frustration on campus. Shelley applauded the efforts and commented, "I think more than any other single activity on campus this program has been responsible for the intellectual and cultural growth of the SEOP students for

experiences in light of the social and political pressures to which they have been subjected."

In 1972 a new academic entity, the Afro-American Studies and Research Program, became an institutional reality, with Walter Strong, a graduate student in political science, serving as director. By the late 1970s the Afro-American Studies and Research Program had emerged as a viable new interdisciplinary academic effort. The struggle to put the program on solid footing continued until early in the twenty-first century, when, under the leadership of Chancellor Nancy Cantor, African American Studies began to appoint its own faculty. The program became the Department of African American Studies in 2008.

The black student movement also left a more student-centered legacy on campus. Though nearly fifty years have passed, various events and organizations initiated by students in the Black Power era still exist. Since many black students continue to feel alienated from the larger campus community, these events and organizations provide meaning and acceptance. Black Mom's Day celebrations—begun in the wake of the SEOP program—are still held the same weekend as the university's Mom's Day celebrations. Other activities from that era continue to thrive. These include Black Homecoming, which involves social events and the recognition of returning alumni. In addition, the Black Chorus has grown from its founding with four students to more than one hundred members and continues to perform in churches and educational institutions across the state of Illinois. The first dinner to recognize black SEOP graduating seniors, held in 1972, was later transformed into the Black Congratulatory Ceremony, a more personal event for black graduating seniors, graduate students, and professional students and their families held as part of the university graduation ceremonies each spring. (Similar ceremonies are now organized as well for Latino/a, Asian American, and Native American students.) The Central Black Student Union still offers an alternative to the university-sponsored student government and a vehicle for students to communicate concerns regarding residence hall living and student life. In recent years, a campus "Black Lives Matter" group has also been formed. It maintains a presence on social media as well as in student affairs. In all of these ways, black students continue to remind the academic and student community of the historical and ongoing need for such organizations and events on campus and the institution's special responsibility to educate black students by supporting their academic work as well as acclimating them to campus and providing a voice for them in the campus community. These concerns are a powerful echo of the goals set forth by BSA almost fifty years ago.

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Clarence Shelley retired from the University of Illinois in 2001. During his time at Illinois he served as associate dean of students, dean of students (for eleven years), and associate vice chancellor for student affairs—the first black person to hold any of those positions. Even in retirement he continued to serve the institution as a special assistant to the chancellor. As a tribute to his long and productive career and his tireless efforts to diversify the campus and foster success for all students, Shelley received the Chancellor's Medallion, only the third ever awarded, in 2002. Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs Pat Askew outlined the long list of Shelley's contributions to the University of Illinois but called special attention to his steadfastness in helping the institution weather the tumult of late 1960s and early 1970s. As she stated during the ceremony, "This

University owes a great debt to Clarence Shelley for having the wisdom and fortitude to face the situation and persist in bringing change."

Shelley himself remembered the late 1960s and early 1970s as a unique time in university history that has had far-reaching consequences. Students have never regained the kind of decision-making power they held in the middle to late twentieth century, but administrators are now much less likely to ignore their concerns. He also believes that the black student movement made the campus more adaptive. Administrators learned how to react to different pressures without the luxury of time and think in new and innovative ways about the nature of higher education. He credits black students with precipitating institutional change that had not previously been entertained: "I have no doubt it was the students and their presentation that made the difference." Indeed, black students pushed the envelope.

Black students during the Black Power era provided a benchmark for change at UIUC. Their time there was short and often intense, but they were able to influence educational policy and programs in ways that no students had done previously or have since. With students and administrators forced into a closer relationship than had existed, black students created space for dialogue on black student issues and concerns. Their dedication ensured that long-lasting changes came out of their collaboration with administrators on different reform initiatives. Their accomplishments demonstrate the power of a social movement within an institution. For Clarence Shelley and many others, "the legacy is about the possibilities,"—the possibilities for change, the possibilities for compromise, and the possibilities for growth.

Notes

1. Quoted in Williamson, *Black Power on Campus,* 86.
2. See Williamson, *Black Power on Campus*, 90.

Sources

The one major published work on the subject is Joy Ann Williamson, *Black Power on Campus: The University of Illinois, 1965–1975* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003). Major archival collections, including oral interviews with former students, administrators, and community members conducted by this author, are in the Student Life and Culture Collection at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.