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BLACK HIGHER EDUCATION: A BICENTENNIAL REFLECTION
by CHRISTOPHER EDLEY
Executive Director, United Negro College Fund

America's celebration of its Bicentennial highlights 200 years of progress, growth and influence that have affected the lives of every generation in this country and the world.

The accomplishments America has made throughout its history is a result of trained and educated minds ready and willing to accept the challenges and responsibilities that keep a democratic society strong and alive. Much of the credit for this accomplishment must be attributed to the role institutions of higher learning have played in delivering talent and skills for the good of the nation.

However, a fair and accurate account of America's growth and progress cannot be presented without including the contributions black colleges and universities have made to the building of America.

Ever since the first 20 black slaves were brought to this country in 1619, the struggle for equality has been an uphill battle. Education is not an exception. Blacks have always been forced to stay "close to the back door and not up front." America went about the business of developing the aspirations and dreams of the "chosen many" while the hopes and dreams of black people were being crushed by the so-called "Black Codes," a set of laws that prohibited the free thinking and movement of blacks.

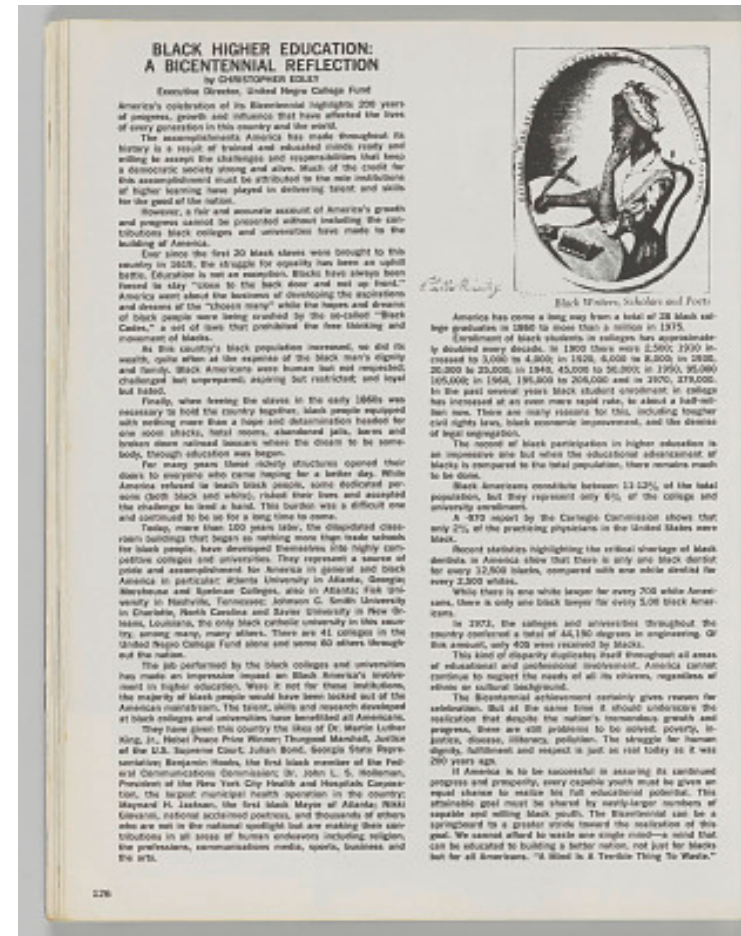
As this country's black population increased, so did its wealth, quite often at the expense of the black man's dignity and family. Black Americans were human but not respected; challenged but unprepared; aspiring but restricted; and loyal but hated.

Finally, when freeing the slaves in the early 1860s was necessary to hold the country together, black people equipped with nothing more than a hope and determination headed for one room shacks, hotel rooms, abandoned jails, barns and broken down railroad boxcars where the dream to be somebody, through education was begun.

For many years these rickety structures opened their doors to everyone who came hoping for a better day. While America refused to teach black people, some dedicated persons (both black and white), risked their lives and accepted the challenge to lend a hand. This burden was a difficult one and continued to be so for a long time to come.

Today, more than 100 years later, the dilapidated classroom buildings that began as nothing more than trade schools for black people, have developed themselves into highly competitive colleges and universities. They represent a source of pride and accomplishment for America in general and black America in particular; Atlanta University in Atlanta, Georgia; Morehouse and Spelman Colleges, also in Atlanta; Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee; Johnson C. Smith University in Charlotte, North Carolina and Xavier University in New Orleans, Louisiana, the only black catholic university in this country, among many, many others. There are 41 colleges in the United Negro College Fund alone and some 60 others throughout the nation.

The job performed by the black colleges and universities has made an impressive impact on Black America's involvement in higher education. Were it not for these institutions, the majority of black people would have been locked out of the American mainstream. The talent, skills and



research developed at black colleges and universities have benefitted all Americans.

They have given this country the likes of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Nobel Peace Prize Winner; Thurgood Marshall, Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court; Julian Bond, Georgia State Representative; Benjamin Hooks, the first black member of the Federal Communications Commission; Dr. John L.S. Holloman, President of the New York City Health and Hospitals Corporation, the largest municipal health operation in the country; Maynard H. Jackson, the first black Mayor of Atlanta; Nikki Giovanni, national acclaimed poetress, and thousands of others who are not in the national spotlight but are making their contributions in all areas of human endeavors including religion, the professions, communications media, sports, business and the arts.

[[image - illustration and signature of Phillis Wheatley, with the words PHYLLIS WHEATLEY, NEGRO SERVANT to Mr. JOHN WHEATLEY of BOSTON.]]
[[caption]] Black Writers, Scholars and Poets [[/caption]]

America has come a long way from a total of 28 black college graduates in 1860 to more than a million in 1975.

Enrollment of black students in colleges has approximately doubled every decade. In 1900 there were 2,500; 1910 increased to 3,000 to 4,000; in 1920, 6,000 to 8,000; in 1930, 20,000 to 25,000; in 1940, 45,000 to 50,000; in 1950, 95,000 to 105,000; in 1960, 195,000 to 205,000 and in 1970, 379,000. In the past several years black student enrollment in college has increased at an even more rapid rate, to about a half-million now. There are many reasons for this, including tougher civil rights laws, black economic improvement, and the demise of legal segregation.

The record of black participation in higher education is an impressive one but when the educational advancement of blacks is compared to the total population, there remains much to be done.

Black Americans constitute between 11-12% of the total population, but they represent only 6% of the college and university enrollment.

A -970 report by the Carnegie Commission shows that only 2% of the practicing physicians in the United States were black.

Recent statistics highlighting the critical shortage of black dentists in America show that there is only one black dentist for every 12,500 blacks, compared with one white dentist for every 2,500 whites.

While there is one white lawyer for every 700 white Americans, there is only one black lawyer for every 5,00 black Americans.

In 1973, the colleges and universities throughout the country conferred a total of 44,190 degrees in engineering. Of this amount, only 405 were received by blacks.

This kind of disparity duplicates itself throughout all areas of educational and professional involvement. America cannot continue to neglect the needs of all its citizens, regardless of ethnic or cultural background.

The Bicentennial achievement certainly gives reason for celebration. But at the same time it should underscore the realization that despite the nation's tremendous growth and progress, there are still problems to be

solved: poverty, injustice, disease, illiteracy, pollution. The struggle for human dignity, fulfillment and respect is just as real today as it was 200 years ago.

If America is to be successful in assuring its continued progress and prosperity, every capable youth must be given an equal chance to realize his full educational potential. This attainable goal must be shared by vastly-larger numbers of capable and willing black youth. The Bicentennial can be a springboard to a greater stride toward the realization of this goal. We cannot afford to waste one single mind — a mind that can be educated to building a better nation, not just for blacks but for all Americans. "A Mind Is A Terrible Thing To Waste."

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