Building the Institutional Competence of Black Colleges and Universities: The Role of Philanthropic Fellowship Programs, 1928–60

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Abstract

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, northern philanthropic foundations played a significant role in the development of higher education for African Americans in the South. The General Education Board (1902–60), a Rockefeller philanthropy, expended \$122 million on black education through a wide-ranging programmatic agenda. The Julius Rosenwald Fund (1917–48) is best known for the rural schoolbuilding program that constructed schoolhouses, teachers' homes, and shops throughout the South during the early 1930s. A lesser-known initiative on the part of both

foundations was the utilization of fellowship programs that enabled southern blacks to obtain graduate and professional education at northern institutions. This article discusses the barriers to graduate education for African Americans during the first half of the twentieth century, the characteristics of the General Education Board and Rosenwald Fund fellowship programs, and the role of the fellowship programs in building the institutional competence of black colleges and universities.

Keywords:

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Introduction

In the early decades of the twentieth century, black colleges and universities faced several challenges. First, the sheer number of institutions led to duplication of effort. In addition to public land-grant institutions, black institutions were

sponsored by both black and white church denominations and benevolent societies. The resulting competition for already scarce resources left most of them strapped for capital and operational funds. Second, the growing national accreditation movement began to rank institutions on the basis of the professionalism of their teaching forces. Third, access to graduate and professional study for blacks in the South was severely curtailed by *de jure* racial segregation.

As the calls for curricular standardization, teacher certification, and accreditation gained momentum, teachers and administrators were increasingly pressed to remedy their professional deficiencies. In 1928, a survey of 1,046 black teachers revealed that 86 percent had obtained an undergraduate degree. Only 305, or 29 percent, had earned graduate degrees such as a master of arts or science, doctor of philosophy, or doctor of theology. As institutions attempted to comply with accreditation standards, faculty who managed to obtain graduate degrees were able to improve their conditions of employment by moving to other institutions. Not surprisingly, turnover was high. Within a period of three years, over one-half of the institutions surveyed reported a faculty turnover rate ranging from one-third to more than one-half.¹ Despite the desire of blacks to work toward professional and graduate degrees, access to graduate programs—particularly in the South—was limited by the caste system.

Barriers to Graduate Education

In 1939, Fred McCuiston, field representative of the Southern Association of Colleges and Universities, conducted the first systematic study of the status of

black graduate education. Sponsored by the General Education Board (GEB), a Rockefeller philanthropy, *Graduate Instruction for Negroes in the United States* revealed a dearth of opportunities for blacks who sought graduate education. In 1932, not a single state-supported institution in any segregated state was open to blacks who desired graduate and professional training. In addition, no black college offered work beyond the bachelor's degree generally leading to the master of arts. At the time of the survey, blacks were enrolled as graduate students in seven black colleges in the South and 82 colleges outside the South.²

Blacks who were interested in a degree beyond the masters had little choice other than to attend northern institutions. This not only added to the expense, but also extended the length of time of study. According to Raymond B. Fosdick (GEB officer, 1932–6; president, Rockefeller Foundation, 1936–48):

For the Negro who remained in the South, a Ph.D. was impossible. Ph.D.s were not offered in any of the Negro universities. An M.A. of any value was almost as rare. This meant that the Negro student who wanted to do graduate work must put off whatever financial obligations he had already accumulated in the course of getting his B.A., find the means to travel North and study for several years or for a long string of summers, and somehow manage, despite an inferior academic background and the demands of part-time jobs, to keep his head above the deep waters of graduate study.³

The philanthropic foundations with the longest tradition of financial assistance to

southern education were the GEB and the Julius Rosenwald Fund. The GEB began in 1902 with an endowment of one million dollars from John D. Rockefeller. Dedicated to the improvement of southern higher education, the GEB provided endowments to black institutions, allocated funds to supplement the salaries of black college faculty, and generally supported those institutions considered to be the most financially stable. From 1902 to 1960, the GEB directed over \$122 million towards black education.⁴ Chartered in 1917, the Julius Rosenwald Fund concentrated its activities on education, health, race relations, and fellowships. The hallmark of the Rosenwald Fund, however, was the rural schoolbuilding program. From 1928 to 1932, the Fund provided matching funds to build public schoolhouses, manual training facilities, and dwellings for teachers throughout the South. By the time the program ended, a total of 4,977 Rosenwald schoolhouses, 163 shops, and 217 teachers' homes dotted the rural landscapes of 15 southern states.⁵

Philanthropic Fellowship Programs

The practice of utilizing a fellowship program to meet the aims of an educational philanthropic fund in the southern region can be traced to the George Peabody Education Fund (1867–1914). George Peabody, a New England merchant and banker, established the Peabody Fund to promote education in the American South.⁶ In 1875, the Fund began an effort to convert the Literary Department of the University of Nashville into a state normal college. As a means of recruiting students, the Peabody Fund established a fellowship program whereby “pupils from adjoining

States, whose characters, abilities and general culture give special promise of usefulness as teachers” received \$200 each for two successive years of enrollment.⁷ The students had to be recommended by the State Superintendent of Public Instruction and pass a high school examination. The scholarships were used as an incentive to enroll in the college rather than a means of financial aid. In return, students were to complete their studies, return to their home state, and become “apostles” for education, thereby diffusing teacher training and administrative competence throughout the South and encouraging support for education among the general public.⁸

During the 1920s, the General Education Board and the Julius Rosenwald Fund established fellowship programs whose objectives displayed a faith in the vital connection among advanced training, black leadership, and institutional competence. As early as 1902 the GEB addressed the lack of trained leadership in the field of education by awarding scholarships to southern white normal school teachers to attend Teachers College, Columbia, to complete their professional training.⁹ In 1924, the GEB began to award fellowships to promising black instructors in southern institutions.¹⁰ Fellowship Programs had previously been a component of various Rockefeller boards such as the Rockefeller Foundation, Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial, and International Education Board. The GEB Fellowship Program began informally, patterned after that of the Rockefeller Foundation and influenced by the result of surveys of educational conditions in the South. Unlike the Rockefeller Foundation, however, the GEB program focused on advanced training for teachers and the production of an

educational leadership rather than the support of research. It was also intended to play an integral role in building the competence of southern colleges and educational agencies. According to Frank P. Bachman, Director of School Surveys and Public Education, the fellowships were not intended to merely support the desire for graduate and advanced training, but "to get the needed training to qualify them for leadership in their respective fields."¹¹

Over time, the GEB fellowship program included the development of black leadership for black institutions and agencies. In 1924, fellowships were awarded to black instructors in southern institutions. Nominations for fellowships originated with the presidents of black colleges and universities, who forwarded their nominations to GEB officers. Candidates also had to provide letters of recommendation, medical reports, transcripts, and a plan of study. They were interviewed and evaluated by GEB officers on the basis of whether or not they could staff new departments, provide the curriculum development for offering doctoral degrees, or even take the reins as institutional president. The philosophy of the GEB fellowship program was:

... based on the very sound notion that any organization, from a total society to the smallest and most casual group, will be productive to the extent that it contains enlightened, educated individuals of sound judgment and intellectual curiosity, of emotional stability and unprejudiced minds, of mental discipline and broad social responsibility.¹²

Beginning with informal handouts to individuals by Julius Rosenwald himself,

the Fellowship Program was formalized in 1928 with the incorporation of the Fund. Begun with modest awards to support advanced training for medical and nursing personnel, vocational and industrial teachers, and librarians, the program expanded to candidates in the social sciences, and the liberal and fine arts. By the time the Rosenwald Fund closed in 1948, the list of Rosenwald Fellows resembled the Talented Tenth envisioned by W. E. B. Dubois. Included among them were Harlem Renaissance figures such as anthropologist and folklorist Zora Neale Hurston, artist Jacob Lawrence, and author James Baldwin. Between them, the Rosenwald and GEB fellowship programs produced an educational leadership cadre whose members directly strengthened the competence of black colleges and universities by serving as faculty members, department chairpersons, and institutional presidents.

A Rosenwald Fellowship enabled H. Council Trenholm, the president of Alabama State Teachers College, to write a dissertation on the development of teacher education for African Americans in Alabama and receive a Ph.D. D. O. W. Holmes was serving as the dean of the college of education at Howard University when he received a Rosenwald Fellowship in 1930. After earning a Ph.D. at Teachers College, Columbia, he became president of Morgan State University. Elijah Fitchett, a professor of sociology at Claflin College, wrote his Ph.D. dissertation on free blacks in Charleston, North Carolina, and subsequently became vice-president of Claflin. Fellowship programs strengthened black institutions in other ways, however. During his tenure as institutional president, fellowship recipient John Hope drew leading intellectuals to the faculties

of Morehouse College and Atlanta University. Included among them were sociologists W. E. B. Dubois and Ira DeA. Reid and historians Rayford Logan and Clarence A. Bacote—all of who had received GEB or Rosenwald Fellowships.¹³

Assessing the GEB fellowship program, Fosdick stated:

About 85 per cent of the Board fellows went back to the South to teach or work as educational administrators. The roster of college presidents alone is impressive: Rufus Clement of Atlanta University, James P. Brawley of Clark, Albert E. Manley of Spelman, Stephen J. Wright of Fisk, Alfonso Elder of North Carolina College at Durham, Samuel M. Nabrit of Texas Southern University, and others. Fred D. Patterson went from the presidency of Tuskegee to the directorship of the Phelps-Stokes Fund, Ralph J. Bunch became head of the political science department at Howard before he moved on to the broader stage of international affairs, and Ira DeA. Reid became a distinguished sociologist with a professorship at Haverford College in Pennsylvania.¹⁴

It should be noted that women had to contend not only with racial barriers to higher education but also with gender constraints. Although few rose to the ranks of institutional presidents, they were well represented on the rolls of the fellowship awards and returned to black institutions as highly qualified faculty members and department chairpersons. They also contributed in less obvious ways. Although Mamie Clark was not awarded a fellowship, she collaborated with her husband, Rosenwald Fellow

Kenneth B. Clark's investigation into the effects of racial awareness of children. That study would later become part of the testimony in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), in which the legal arm of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People used social scientific techniques to argue that segregated schools damaged the self-esteem of black children.

Conclusion

All in all, the GEB awarded nearly 2,000 fellowships (to black and white southerners) and the Rosenwald Fund awarded nearly 800 fellowships to blacks alone. Although the scope of the Fellowship programs changed over time, racial segregation forced most of the Fellows to return to the South to seek employment in historically black colleges and universities. It was not until the 1950s that, as Fosdick suggests in the above quotation, African Americans would begin to join the faculties of majority white institutions such as Haverford.

In the opinion of the officers of the General Education Board and the Julius Rosenwald Fund, the institutional competence of black colleges and universities was predicated upon at least three conditions: (1) the production of instructional leadership, (2) the expansion of the curriculum, and (3) the development of departments offering graduate work. The fellowship programs were but one programmatic initiative among the wide-ranging philanthropic agendas embraced by both funds. But it is clear that the talented African Americans who received fellowships to study at prestigious northern institutions and subsequently returned to southern institutions as department chairs, deans, and presidents constituted a leadership

cadre that contributed to the competence of historically black colleges and universities. That competence was expanded exponentially when presidents such as John Hope were able to attract scholars to institutions that were becoming increasingly financially solvent, intellectually stimulating, and politically supportive. As the professional departments (e.g., teacher preparation) strengthened, black education at all levels—elementary, secondary, and postsecondary—was effectively improved.

Although the GEB and Rosenwald Fund periodically inquired about the whereabouts of former Fellows, neither foundation conducted systematic assessments of the fellowship programs. Institutional histories of the funds include anecdotal accounts of individual success stories and ledger accounts of fellowship expenditures. Admittedly, objective evaluation of fellowship programs—past and present—remains problematical. Although outwardly grateful, African Americans sometimes chafed under the unrealistic expectations placed upon them by the foundations. Biologist E. E. Just, for example, both relied upon and resented the aid he received from the Rosenwald Fund in its desire to increase the institutional competence of Howard University. Despite the Fund's assistance, Just would later bitterly admit that he never ceased to be judged against the "colored" rather than white standard for scientists.¹⁵ In general, the fellowship programs focused on key individuals who were, in most cases, exceptional. At best, the fellowship programs were likely contributors to their success rather than sole determiners.

The GEB and Rosenwald Fellowship Programs provide a historical context for studying the efficacy of philanthropic

fellowship programs and their role in the advancement of higher education. Indeed, the legacies of the GEB and Rosenwald Fellowship Programs can be found in contemporary programs such as the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, Spencer Foundation, MacArthur Foundation, and numerous other foundations that continue to make "investments in people." The recent United States Supreme Court decision in the matter of *Grutter v. Bollinger*, which upheld the right of the University of Michigan Law to use affirmative action in student selection to its law school, renewed the conversation over access to higher education. Closely related is the question whether student aid should be awarded on the basis of scholastic merit, financial need, or the perception that education is an instrument of social change. Then as now, fellowship programs will continue to hold a place in the continuing debate over the role of education in a democracy.

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Practitioner's Perspective

Dr. Beilke documents here a little publicized aspect of American higher educational development, the building of competence in black institutions throughout the South and its significant contributing factors. From the advancement perspective, the article, “Building the Institutional Competence of Black Colleges and Universities: The Role of Philanthropic Fellowship Programs, 1928–60” is a marked departure from articles intended primarily for today’s advancement professional. Typically, articles of this sort present a range of topics related to the day-to-day concerns of the advancement professional. Topics such as the best practices of alumni relations professionals, development officers, and public relations administrators; or trends in advancement research; or discussions on the effectiveness of advancement programs, and the like, are presented in ways that enable advancement professionals to gauge the merits of their work and the effectiveness of the programs they conduct. Dr. Beilke’s article does not discuss matters related directly to the advancement professional or the ways in which individual institutions benefit from the work of the advancement profession. Yet there is value here. The article gives a glimpse of the early philanthropic activities and related outcomes that are the precursors of today’s advancement operations.

In illustrating how the General Education Board and the Julius Rosenwald Fund expended millions to conduct their respective fellowship programs, resulting in extensive cultural change in the South, Dr. Beilke reveals how the largess of these programs wrought change in the lives of individual educated southern blacks and precipitated unprecedented intellectual growth in southern black colleges. While the benefit was received with mixed emotions by some individuals, as evidenced by biologist E. E. Just’s complaint that as a fellow “he never ceased to be judged against the ‘colored’ rather than white standard for scientists,” Dr. Beilke posits that the fellowships, combined with other factors, in essence shaped the direction of the development of historically black colleges and universities and indeed the black intellectual movement in the South. The southern church, northern educational philanthropy, and more importantly, the will of African American intellectuals who, thanks to the fellowships, advanced themselves and the institutions to which they returned as key administrators, are all critical factors that nudged the development of the black intellectual movement in the South.

Without a doubt, the article has appeal to a range of readers including the student of American educational history, those interested in the development of HBCUs and the emergence of the black intellectual movement, and undoubtedly those interested in the heroic accomplishments of the southern black intellectual in overcoming unique challenges and hardships.

The article's appeal to today's advancement professional may appear less obvious. But in reading this article one has to appreciate, the role philanthropy has played historically. The period covered by the article was during the infancy of advancement, when the profession was not as clearly defined and developed as it is today. In this article, we see the valued role philanthropy had during the early decades of the twentieth century in being the primary catalyst in the aggregate improvement of the intellectual competence of a significant segment of American higher education. Also, we can appreciate the role played by those who actually negotiated and secured the distribution of the funds that financed this growth.

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