

Segregated Students at the University of Illinois, 1945 to 1955

Deirdre L. Cobb

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

African American students at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) had to bear much of the burden their ancestors had endured. They were allowed to attend the University, however enrollment was on a limited basis, and they were not accepted as full and equal participants. The experiences of African American students at UIUC from the end of World War II to the Brown decision (1945 to 1955) were part of a history of overt and institutionalized discrimination dating back to the founding of the University.

African American students were constant victims of discrimination from the start of their enrollment at the University of Illinois. The determination of these students, with the assistance of Albert R. Lee, the unofficial dean of African American students, and the encouragement of African American elected officials, community individuals, the Interracial Committee, and individuals in nearby Chicago and St. Louis, enabled them to fight the discrimination emanating from varying levels.

The University of Illinois was incorporated on February 28, 1867, as the Illinois Industrial University and opened its doors to students on March 2, 1868. At the opening, it was clear the institution was intended for White men, despite its public land grant status. There was nothing in its charter which compelled discrimination against students because of race, sex, or class. Indeed, the U of I was chartered for all the children of the "industrial classes" of Illinois. Nonetheless, the University opened with fifty White males and maintained an all White male population until 1870 when it admitted its first female student, a White woman.

It was clear that women would no longer be excluded from admission to Illinois. The decision prompted by the fact that Illinois was a state school and taxpayers demanded their daughters as well as sons be educated. The Morrill Act established the land grant colleges especially for the sons and daughters of the common people. Although this was the case, it would be quite some time before White women matriculated at Illinois in any significant numbers. In 1887, the University admitted its first African American student, nearly two decades after the founding of the University. The population of African American students at the University remained at a minimum during the first half of the twentieth century, but there were relatively significant increases during the 1930's, 40's and 50's. From 1945-1955 approximately two thousand African American students matriculated at Illinois.

Housing problems that dated back to the founding of the University were exacerbated during the 1940's and 1950's for all students. Black students who faced the additional problem of racial discrimination found themselves in a difficult struggle to cope with living conditions on a Jim Crow campus. Typically, students lived in private housing around campus or if from the area with their parents in town. The first dormitory was erected in 1915. This dorm was for White women only, and was named Laura B. Evans Hall. This alleviated the problem of finding approved housing for many White women on campus, but the problem still existed for African American women. Over the next three decades the University continued to deny African American students the opportunity to live in campus dormitories. The year 1945 marked the first time African American women were allowed to live in the residence halls. The historical record is unclear as to when African American men were first allowed to reside in University dorms (Boarding 1930). It seems reasonable to assume that African American men were first admitted to the University residence halls soon after the admission of African American women in 1945.

African American students were only permitted to live in fraternity or sorority houses or in the African American community. The University housing authorities made virtually no effort to provide housing for Black students, who were expected to live off campus in restricted areas. Realtors used racial covenants to restrict various areas in and around town and thus African Americans were regulated to one corner of town based upon this particular situation. The covenants, although focused mainly on home ownership, also influenced renting to non-Caucasian individuals. The covenants clearly stated that "no part thereof will be sold or leased, either in whole or in part, or to be occupied as owner, or tenant by any person or persons not of the Caucasian race," and this in turn set the stage for the limited choices African American students had for their living arrangements (Tiebout Papers). These covenants characterized the community into which the students were received.

Along with African American students being expected to live in restricted residential areas, housing for African Americans generally in the Champaign-Urbana area in the 1940's was despicable. A study conducted by the League of Women Voters of Champaign County in 1946 indicated that housing for African Americans was a total disgrace (League of Women Voters). Many families lived in shacks with no indoor plumbing and had to use outdoor privies. In most cases these privies were very unsanitary and caused many people to contract communicable diseases, such as tuberculosis. Furthermore, these were previously used as coal bins (League of Women Voters 1946). In many instances the dwellings' people lived in were barely large enough for their families, not to mention students. It was in these conditions the Black residents of Champaign-Urbana had to live, as well as the African American university students that resided with them.

It is very important to note that many African Americans living in these conditions were able to afford better housing. Despite having the means to afford better, racial discrimination by the city Realtors and landlords prevented them from finding better housing (League of Women Voters 1946). It was clearly a situation where they were forced to live in a racially segregated and impoverished residential area, despite their economic capability to maintain a household in a more inhabitable environment. The condition of housing for African Americans in the community affected the majority of Black students, since most of them were compelled to live in the community. About the only exception were Black students who lived in fraternity and sorority housing.

Early on, the role of Black fraternities and sororities became quite evident in combating the housing needs for African American students. Most of these organizations were founded on the principle of community service, and functioned as a vehicle for African American students to come together under a common bond of struggle. Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Inc., (AKA) was one of the first organizations at UIUC to fight for housing near campus. This sorority was successful in securing housing in 1928, with the help of outside members, the Dean of Women, and various other African Americans and Whites.

After World War II the influx of African American students rose, due in significant part to the GI Bill. The impact of housing discrimination increased significantly as more African Americans entered the University. African American students were being admitted to the University at increasing rates. However no provisions were made for their room and board, and they were not allowed to eat, live, or interact socially on campus. If they were to attend the University it was an unspoken agreement on the University's part that they were to reside in the African American community. They were not to live on campus except in the rare instance of Black Greek houses located near campus.

The University prohibited students from living on campus through an unwritten policy that contradicted its written rules regarding equality of opportunity (League of Women Voters 1968). The unwritten policy was introduced in the form of a question on the housing application. All students were asked to designate "Race, and National Descent? (Willard Papers)." Individuals were curious as to why this question existed. University officials tried as best they could to explain, but the explanations were unsatisfactory. Lawyer and State Representative Charles J. Jenkins, from Chicago, was very concerned about the structure of the housing questionnaire and contacted the President of the University to inquire as to why these questions appeared on the form and what purpose they served. Consequently, President Willard had S. Earl Thompson, Director of Housing, conduct an investigation. In a letter to A.J. Janata, Assistant to the President, dated 6 August 1945 (Willard Papers), Thompson explained that these questions were of much importance in order to avoid any major errors in room assignments. However the most interesting part about his response is the meaning behind "major errors." In this context major error meant unwittingly assigning students of different races and religions to the same double rooms. Willard forwarded the results of the investigation to Jenkins, omitting the statement issued by Thompson to Janata in the letter dated 6 August 1945 (Willard Papers). It read,

Almost 90% of our residence hall spaces are in double rooms. It seems essential to us that we have information which we requested if we are to avoid major errors in the assignment of roommates. I know of no University or College which does not request similar information for applications for assignment to residence halls.

In the history of the University, no African American had lived in the dorms, so in 1945 when the letter was written, no presumable "errors" had occurred. It was clear the President did not want any errors being made.

Jenkins began a campaign to ensure that African American females would have the opportunity to live on campus in the dormitories. He submitted several names to the President for consideration and awaited a response. In a letter to A.C. Willard dated 30 July 1945 (Willard Papers), Charles J. Jenkins was almost pleading with the president for consideration of his suggestions. In a letter to Thompson dated 11 August 1945 (Willard Papers), Jenkins provided letters of reference for various women, as well as giving his word that they would be qualified and respectable candidates. It was evident that African American women had to be hand picked for living in the dorms. There was no where on the housing application that indicated categories for respectable and qualified. Furthermore, it was inferred that a candidate might have the grades and still not be considered respectable by the University. In a letter to Charles J. Jenkins dated 2 August 1945 (Willard Papers), President Willard listed several reasons for the refusal of African American women being admitted to University housing. He commented that one woman was on academic probation and her grades were not satisfactory enough to live in the dorms. Of the housing documents surveyed never was it indicated that a particular grade point average had to be maintained for residents of the dorm.

A.C. Willard, realizing this campaign would not end until African American females were permitted to live in the dorms, offered a token measure. In a letter to Charles J. Jenkins dated 2 August 1945 (Willard Papers), Willard wrote ensuring him of his willingness to see African American women housed in the dorms, going so far as to reserve one room for African American females. This gesture was an assurance of the commitment to African American females. It was August 11, 1945, that two African American women were finally agreed upon, Quintella King and Ruthe Cash. These women were the first known African Americans to live in the dorms at UIUC.

In 1950, five years after the first African American females were admitted to the dorms, Vivian Adams experienced what may have been true for many African American female residents, racism. Apparently there had been several thefts in Busey hall, where Vivian resided, which were of great concern for the hall faculty as well as the women that lived there. In January of 1951 the dorm director called for an investigation indicating she had some information pertaining to the recent thefts. In a letter to University investigator R.S. Laymon dated 30 January 1951 (Women's Card Files), security officer J.E. Ewers wrote that it had been brought to his attention by the dorm monitor and some of the women living in the dorms that they had observed Vivian Adams going from room to room suspiciously.

When Vivian was questioned she adamantly denied having anything to do with the thefts in Busey Hall. Furthermore she could not understand why she was being questioned on the matter. During questioning, her room was searched by dorm officials. In a report dated 2 February 1951 (Women's Card Files), Florence B. Ingraham, Assistant Dean of Women, wrote to J.E. Ewers that the end of the search resulted in the finding of several reportedly missing items. Vivian still denied having anything to do with the thefts and refused to talk.

The matter was going to go before the student disciplinary committee, and until a decision was made Vivian was placed on probation. In the interim Vivian was questioned again, and eventually she felt comfortable enough to tell what had happened in regard to the thefts at Busey Hall. In a letter to J.E. Ewers dated 7 March 1951 (Women Card Files), Miriam Shelden, Dean of Women, wrote that Vivian admitted stealing the items from various students in the hall in an effort to hurt them as she had been hurt. She further stated she had not intended on keeping the articles or disposing of them. She merely wanted to cause pain to the women in the hall by taking things they valued highly, as this was her only recourse.

Prior to the thefts in Busey Hall, Vivian had engaged in conversation with some of the other female residents in the hall. These women were Jewish and they indicated how they had never cared for "Colored" people. Very much offended by this statement Vivian questioned them as to why.

In a letter to J.E. Ewers dated 7 March 1951 (Women Card Files), Miriam Shelden described the conversation that occurred between Vivian and the Jewish women, based on Vivian's account. The Jewish women in the dorm described ways in which "negroes are so gullible." Real estate operators seek African Americans to purchase property in an all white area. By purchasing property in these areas, African Americans are being set up to make White residents feel uncomfortable. As Whites began to move, real estate operators began to buy the homes at a reduced rate, and eventually resell the property in smaller units at a much higher price. The Jewish female students characterized the African American buyers as ignorant, implying that they were unwilling dupes of real estate

operators, and therefore very easy and willing prey.

In the same letter dated 7 March 1951 (Women's Card Files), Shelden reports Vivian as having said that African Americans were no different from other people who could also be victims of economic exploitation. The conversation ended in a violent argument, with the Jewish girls finally stating that Vivian and her sister were somehow different from the average "colored" person. This statement alone enraged Vivian, and she vowed to herself that she would repay them for their unkind words and thoughts about her race (Women Card Files). Vivian was very clear in her admission of guilt that she had not intended to keep or use the items. She intended on returning the items.

Vivian made an error in judgment when deciding to take items that did not belong to her. It was clear that she felt insulted, rejected and humiliated. Her actions, however inappropriate, constituted a vendetta against racism. Vivian's stealing was her response to one issue of racial discrimination that was present in the lives of African American students. There were many other instances that would require a response as well.

The problem of housing still existed but it was further compounded by a lack of eating places available to African American students. African Americans were discriminated against in dining facilities on campus well until the 1960's. African American students were not allowed to eat on campus or at any of the campus restaurants. Students were forced to carry meals or return to the North End for meals during school days. The trip back to where they resided could consist of an hour or so, allowing thirty minutes to walk home and another thirty minutes to walk back to campus. This did not include the time it would take for them to actually eat lunch. This created a hardship on the students and further demonstrated the University and White community's commitment to making this group of students feel unwanted.

African American students suffered shame and humiliation from being denied the right to eat in public restaurants. Only African American students were refused service, making it known to all that they were uniquely despised and unwelcome in campus town. It was clear that restaurant owners did not want African Americans in their establishment, however they attempted to mask the racially motivated reasons in terms of potential business loss.

Restaurant owners claimed that they did not serve African Americans because of the harm it would do to business. Most restaurant owners claimed if they served "Negroes" their White customers would boycott them, and no longer patronize the establishment (Dean of Women Subject File, Box 4). However, no evidence exists that supports the claim of restaurant owners. While maintaining that they harbored no personal prejudices against African Americans, restaurant owners decided on their own initiative to disregard laws surrounding racial discrimination.

African American students at Illinois decided to take a legal approach to the discrimination they were receiving. The Student-Community Interracial Committee formed in 1946, including African American and White students, embarked on a letter campaign to the State's Attorney and a method of testing campus area restaurants. In a letter to John J. Bresee, State's Attorney, dated 14 May 1946 (Tiebout Papers), a student, Paul Burt, provided a list of restaurants that had openly discriminated against African American students. He also included the date of the discriminatory act, address of restaurant, people that were victims of discrimination, along with any witnesses that were present. It was his hope that Bresee would write these restaurants and call their attention to the violations of Illinois laws that protected citizens against discrimination based on race.

Besides writing to the State's Attorney for assistance, students, as mentioned earlier, both African American and White, embarked upon a testing campaign, in which they documented discrimination found in the various campus restaurants. It appeared as if they went to campus town restaurants and documented what they either experienced or witnessed. In 1946 Eloise Ellison and Helen F. Wesley, both African American, had gone to Steak-N-Shake Drive Inn for a meal and were victims of discrimination. In their affidavits they wrote:

I seated myself in the Steak-N-Shake Drive Inn with a friend, also a Negro of dark skin. A waitress took our order and brought our food to us in a bag for us to take the food out. She replied that "Negroes can't eat here on the inside of the restaurant. They can take it out or be served in a car." We asked to see the manger. The waitress stated, "Well the manager is my husband." The manager repeated to us, "We serve Negroes when they are in cars but not in the restaurant." We explained to him that we did not come in a car. Then he said, "Well, since you aren't in a car you can eat here now, but don't ask me to do it again (Tiebout Papers)."

Also dining in the restaurant were White students Verna Volz and Charles Shattuck. They witnessed the incident and reported:

While seated in Steak-N-Shake Drive Inn, I saw two Negro girls enter and sit down. I saw the waitress take their order and later bring it to them in a paper bag. I heard the Negro girls tell the waitress they did not want to take the food out but wanted to eat it there. The waitress said they would not serve colored people inside the restaurant. The Negroes asked to speak to the manager. I heard him say he would serve colored people in cars but not inside the restaurant. After some discussion, I heard the manager say that he would serve them that time but the Negroes should not ask him to do it again (Tiebout Papers).

Steak-N-Shake was not the only restaurant in Champaign-Urbana to discriminate against African Americans. Melvin Humphrey had a similar experience when he attempted to buy a beer at Bidwell's. The bartender indicated that Humphrey did not look old enough to purchase alcohol. Humphrey commented that he had served fifteen months overseas in the war, but would go home to retrieve his identification. Upon returning to the establishment he stated:

I gave it to the bartender, manager, or owner, whatever his position was and asked him if he could read. After looking at the card, he then told me that he would sell me a bottle of beer but I would have to drink it in the kitchen. I immediately asked him why. He replied, "That's my policy." I then asked him if he had anything against me. He replied no. Then I asked him again why he was refusing me equal accommodation. He point[ed] to a sign that read "We reserve the right to seat our customers.[]" I asked him didn't he [know] that it was against the law to discriminate. He said he knew that or so what (Tiebout Papers).

Todd's cafe was another establishment that refused equal service to African Americans. On May 5, 1946 a young African American woman stated she was refused service,

Because I am a Negro while at the same time and place that I was denied equal service other persons of the Caucasian or white race were being served without discrimination. Mr. Todd stated that it was not his policy to serve Negroes and if I wanted to be served I would have to eat in the back (Tiebout Papers).

Onlooker Smith Wisegarver was curious as to what was happening to the African American patron and inquired of the manager. The manager replied:

That he did not serve colored people because it would ruin his business. He said he would lose \$50 a day if he served colored people and that no one would repay him the amount lost. Then I said to Mr. Todd that the Negroes there were obviously nice persons and as nice as anyone else in the restaurant. Mr. Todd expressed agreement with my statement but said that if he served them he would have to serve all kinds of undesirable people (Tiebout Papers).

In the cases investigated whites were not treated the same as African Americans. Students would then follow the guidelines set forth by CORE (Committee on Racial Equality). Based on the CORE guidelines, students addressed the issue of discrimination in an organized and non-violent manner. Students were instructed to do such things as plan campaign of testing; contact by letter, explain who we are, what we do, call attention to the incidents of discrimination in which we know about, recalling dates . . . Suggest we help them change policy without injury to their business—Ask for a personal conference with them; and have the Student-Community Human Relations Council committee go down without invitation if they do not offer one. These students were committed to addressing the issue of discrimination in an organized and non-violent manner. So, after each subsequent act of discrimination, African American students would file formal affidavits documenting their experiences. In these affidavits the students would provide a detailed explanation of their experience and have the document notarized to become a part of public record. White students and some faculty showed their support by filing affidavits as witnesses to the incidents.

The result from these tests of discrimination proved what most African Americans already knew, their second class citizenship. Although students were encouraged to exhaust all alternatives prior to legal action, often times the law was their only recourse. De Luxe restaurant continued to discriminate against African Americans in spite of approximately ten years of work by the Illinois Attorney General, States Attorney of Champaign County, the Student

Community Interracial Committee, and particular African American students. Several civil suits were filed during this time. However, evidence only documents two cases appearing in court, and both times the court ruled in favor of the restaurant owner (Tiebout Papers).

African Americans in general and students in particular were discriminated against in all aspects of their lives. Attending college is often considered the best time of an individual's life, and this should include African Americans as well. However, given the racial notions of the country, these students experienced a living hell, one that no one person or group should have experienced. These students attended school under extremely hostile and difficult living conditions.

The cohorts of University of Illinois African American students changed every four to five years. Throughout their difficulties, stability and continuity were provided by the ongoing presence of Albert R. Lee, African American elected officials, the Interracial committee, some University officials, and by the Champaign African American community. These individuals were the backbone to the growth and development of the students during the days of segregation and beyond.

Illinois represented an institution of higher learning situated in the "liberal" North, a place perceived as somehow different from the Jim Crow South. However what students encountered here was very much the same forms of segregation their Southern counterparts experienced. Despite time spent serving their country, and devoting time to studies so they could compete academically at the University, those things meant nothing. They lived by the Jim Crow laws of the North, a set of laws that boasted the inferiority of African Americans.

In essence African American students at the University of Illinois experienced varying forms of discrimination. As their enrollment trends increased so did the discriminatory acts they faced. These students attended school under very antagonistic conditions. Having to find a place to eat and live miles from campus, not being allowed to sit in adequate seats in theaters, or receive hair cuts, to name only a few instances of discrimination, were conditions that no student should have to live under. These various acts of discrimination had an impact on the educational and social environment of these students. Despite the less than pleasant or inviting instances, African American students were able to matriculate, persevere, and achieve.

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