

An Oral History of Black Students at the University of Illinois, 1965-1975

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A significant body of research exists on the influence Black students attending historically Black colleges and universities had on their respective campuses, especially in the South; however, information regarding the influence Black students attending predominantly White campuses, especially in the Midwest, had on their respective campuses is lacking. As a case study of Black student influence on the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign campus (UIUC), this piece will help fill the information gap regarding the impact Black students had on helping to shape the nature of education at predominantly White institutions. Also, examining the Black Power era students and their influence on the UIUC campus provides a broader knowledge and appreciation for the full weight of the Black Power Movement on American higher education. The focus of this piece will be to examine the influence of the Special Educational Opportunities Program (SEOP) on the campus, the influence of a mass arrest on Black student life and thought, the evolving Black liberation ideology among Black students, and the perceived legacy of Black students of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The primary source for this project was oral interviews conducted by the author with persons involved in the Black student movement at UIUC from 1965 to 1975.

This research relies on the recollections of several interviewees who represent a range of opinions and positions on the UIUC campus. John Lee Johnson, a Champaign community resident, was involved heavily with Black UIUC students from 1965 to 1975 and still resides in Champaign. Clarence Shelley arrived at UIUC in 1968 as Director of SEOP, an affirmative action program initiated to increase Black student enrollment, and is now Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs. Edna Long-Green, Jeffrey Roberts, James Eggleston, Terry Cullers, Jacqueline Atkins, Terry Townsend, and Yolanda Williams were students at UIUC during the middle to late 1960s through the early 1970s. Each interviewee was able to offer a unique perspective on the sentiments and events occurring at UIUC in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

In the early to middle 1960s, integration remained the ascendant ideology regarding Black liberation. Blacks were encouraged to "fit in" and participate fully in the existing social structure. On the UIUC campus, African Americans and Whites practiced this philosophy in their student activities and organizations. For instance, they worked together in organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Black and White students in the organizations helped draft a resolution to condemn the bombing of a Black church that killed four young Black girls in Birmingham, Alabama ("Senate Maps Bill," *The Daily Illini* 17 September 1963); traveled to Mississippi to register Blacks voters in upcoming elections and to teach in freedom schools ("UI Rights Workers Return from Mississippi Campaign," *The Daily Illini* 7 November 1964); and participated in civil rights demonstrations in Champaign ("SNCC to Stage Sit-In," *The Daily Illini* 19 May 1964).

As a reflection of the national sentiment on Black liberation, many Black students felt as Ms. Long-Green did about "getting along" on campus, "My whole focus was blending in. I didn't want to stand out" (1997). She engaged in social activities with both Black and White friends and related well with her White residence hall floormates. She described the interaction between Black and White students as natural not hostile, "We were so different from our roommates, the curiosity was a natural curiosity as opposed to a racial curiosity. Most of them had not known a Black person in a social situation. Most of us had not known any Whites either so there was a natural curiosity" (Long-Green 1997). Both Mr. Eggleston and Ms. Atkins recounted potentially hostile incidents with their White roommates. Initially encountering prejudice, both confronted their roommates and later got along with them or adapted to the situation. As Mr. Eggleston stated, "There was no animosity between Black and White students. You could go around and not be bothered" (1997).

This is not to say that Black students on campus in the early to middle 1960s were attempting to forfeit their Blackness in order to fit in, were disinterested in civil rights concerns, or that racial tension on campus was nonexistent. In fact, many interviewees indicated they were involved with Black attempts at liberation prior to coming to UIUC including participation in Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s open housing drive in Chicago, Illinois, a flirting affiliation with the Chicago chapter of the Black Panther Party, watching the bus boycotts and Freedom Riders on television, joining

sit-ins and marches in Chicago, initiating Black student activism at other campuses before enrolling at UIUC, membership in SCLC, CORE, the NAACP, and Operation Breadbasket, and modeling their beliefs after parental attitudes and actions. Students brought their experience to campus, but often focused on more immediate concerns such as graduating from the university.

However, Black Power politics and sentiment grew and were magnified on campus after the 4 April 1968 assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. His murder stunned the campus, Champaign-Urbana, and the entire nation and seemed the last straw in a long line of disappointments and frustrations. Mr. Cullers described it as overwhelming, "There was a feeling in 1968 of, 'What in the world is happening? Is this country really going to hell in a handbasket?'" (1997). Students like Mr. Cullers examined such roadblocks to Black liberation as the assassinations of Medgar Evers, John Kennedy, Malcolm X, Robert Kennedy, the riots in Watts and Newark, the Vietnam War, and civil rights defeats in the South. King's assassination was the last insult they could endure. It bolstered their resolve and confirmed their belief that nonviolence was inappropriate, ineffectual, and useless. As Mr. Eggleston stated, "If somebody hits us, we hit them back. If you were really revolutionary, you would take up the gun to go for liberation" (1997).

At UIUC, King's murder directly influenced the number of students admitted through SEOP in Fall 1968. Initially conceptualized to include approximately 150 students, King's assassination, demands from the newly formed Black Students Association (BSA), and community pressure increased the numbers to over 500, more than doubling the Black undergraduate population. This sudden infusion of Black students invigorated the Black campus community and magnified Black Power on campus. It was in this context and climate that the SEOP students arrived on campus. Not only would they have to contend with the pressures of attending college and being away from home for the first time, they would enter an environment in which continuing Black students encouraged them to place themselves in opposition to the university and question the university's commitment to its Black students.

The interviewees agreed that a state of total confusion existed when the SEOP students arrived on campus. According to Mr. Shelley, "It was obvious early on that this community had never seen anything like this before. There was lots of tension because their presence was an anomaly" (1997). The Black students, primarily coming from predominantly Black environments, experienced culture shock; the administration poorly handled the shortage of housing and financial aid for the incoming students; the White students "began to look at you differently because they were slightly afraid of you because they didn't know how radical you were" (Long-Green 1997). Adding to the tension on campus was the arrest of more than 250 Black students before the start of the 1968 Fall semester.

The first day of New Student Week, 9 September 1968, became a defining point for the Black UIUC student population, and by consequence, the entire University. While attending student orientation, held the week before New Student Week, the SEOP students were housed in the Illinois Street Residence Hall (ISR), a popular and relatively new residence hall. However, they found that they would be moved to older residence halls for the school year. Adding to their dismay, some had been placed in hall lounges until permanent rooms could be found and had been informed that the financial aid promised them by BSA recruiters was nonexistent. On that first day of New Student Week, the Black students, both continuing students and newly arrived SEOP students, decided that they would not tolerate the housing or financial aid situation and met in the Illini Union to discuss a plan of action. By the early morning hours of 10 September 1968, approximately 250 Black UIUC students, 221 of whom were in SEOP, were arrested on counts of mob action and inaugurated the UIUC campus as the scene of the first student "riot" of the 1968-1969 academic year.

News of the 9 September 1968 incident spread across the country as is evidenced in the Clipped Article File obtained from Mr. Shelley. In *The New York Times*, the headline read, "Classes to Begin at U. of Illinois: Tension Pervades Campus After Monday's Protest" (14 September 1968); in *The Wall Street Journal*, it read "Black Student Revolt: Colleges' Bid to Enroll 'Disadvantaged' Brings Problems and Protests; Feeling Strange at Illinois" (24 January 1969); in *The Los Angeles Times*, it read, "College Plan for Negroes Passes Test; But 'Project 500' at Illinois U. Meets Obstacle" (19 December 1968); in the *St. Louis Globe Democrat*, it read, "300 Negro Students Charged in U of I Row" (11 September 1968); in the *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, it read, "Illinois University Officials Meet Negro Group's Housing Demands" (11 September 1968); and in *The Chicago Tribune*, it read, "Negroes Riot at U of I" (10 September 1968). The articles chronicled the goals of SEOP, the students arrival on campus, the fact that Whites were ejected from

the 9 September 1968 meeting, the vandalism of the Illini Union, and the number of Black students arrested.

Accounts of why the Illini Union incident occurred and what actually happened varied. In the campus student newspaper, *The Daily Illini*, the headline on 10 September 1968 read, in bold letters, "Blacks Occupy Illini Union." The article stated that over 150 Black students occupied the South Lounge of the Illini Union to protest room assignments and financial aid arrangements. During the "occupation," furniture and glass were destroyed, and according to Carolann Rodriguez's article, "Blacks Urge Guns," Whites were barred from the South Lounge where the Black students met to discuss their grievances with the administration (*The Daily Illini* 11 January 1969). When the meeting continued past the Illini Union's official closing time and students became unruly, Champaign and University police were called in and "removed" the students.

BSA released a policy statement regarding the incident and placed blame squarely on the University. They also further explained BSA's role in the development and implementation of SEOP. They stated that in Spring of the 1967-1968 academic year they presented the administration with a list of demands. In an effort that would "legitimize" the university, they advocated an increase in the number of Black students. Recognizing that the recruited freshmen would need financial assistance and that finances were a major determinant in attending any university, the BSA Executive Council and the University administration agreed that no SEOP student would have to incur a loan exceeding \$470.00. Also, no SEOP student would be required to work during his or her first year. However, when SEOP students arrived on campus, they were informed that some would have loans exceeding the agreed upon amount. Also, some were informed that they would have to work. Unlike *The Daily Illini*, BSA stated in an article entitled, "Misinformation," that housing *was not* the real issue in the events of 9 September 1968: "*The Daily Illini* reacted in true form with its publication on the morning after the incident by attempting to treat the housing problem as the issue. Of course they have attempted to exonerate themselves by praising the efforts of BSA in the last two weeks" (*Drums* September 1968.)

Some parents were furious their children involved themselves in such a protest. Mr. Shelley, then Director of SEOP, recounted an incident when a mother confronted her son, who had been arrested, in his office. According to Mr. Shelley, she yelled at her son, "I sent you down here to school, and you go to jail?" (1997). However, many parents supported their children, and defense of the arrested students came from many directions. A telegram obtained from Mr. Shelley's Clipped Article File stated that Black UIUC alumni in Chicago, Illinois, formed "Concerned Alumni of Illinois" in an effort to support those Black students arrested at the Illini Union. Led by Chicago Alderman A. A. Rayner, the group requested a meeting with Mr. Shelley and Jack Peltason, Chancellor. The UIUC Graduate Student Association received a telegram from the National Students Organization decrying police conduct on the night of the arrest: "The National Students Association pledges legal assistance and advice to the students involved. . . . We are ready to continue the struggle against the use of such police tactics in the educational environment" (Shelley Clipped Article File). White UIUC students also rallied around the arrested Black students. According to the article, "Rally to Support Demonstrators," Peace and Freedom Party members circulated a petition during a rally to support the arrested Black students and collected approximately 700 signatures. Speakers at the rally included Black and White UIUC students, UIUC faculty, and church pastor, Reverend James Offutt. The culmination of the rally was the presentation of the petitions to the assistant Vice Chancellor, John Briscoe (*The Daily Illini* 25 September 1968).

All those arrested pleaded not guilty and were on bond. Administrators were split on how to handle the students' academic status. Some recommended expulsion; others recommended suspension; still others recommended more lenient procedures. The Black students, as well as various White student groups, demanded that the charges be dropped and the students retain full academic status. After a long period of deliberations, most SEOP freshmen were issued letters of reprimand for "conduct undesirable" to the University community. They were allowed to continue their UIUC academic careers without the reprimand appearing on their University transcripts.

The interviewees agreed that the situation began peacefully but continued to escalate until the students were arrested, that the situation escalated due to communication breakdown, and that the Black students did not anticipate the arrest or intend to be arrested. Mr. Shelley and Mr. Roberts recounted how the meeting began as a forum to discuss the housing and financial aid situation. Black students demanded the President and Chancellor come to the Union and address their concerns. When the administrators refused to come and the Union's closing time neared, tension increased

and the situation intensified. Mr. Roberts remembered that "ninety percent of the students arrested had no idea of what was going on that night." He believes the students were used as pawns by BSA and the administration: "The leadership of BSA felt they had been hung out to dry and they didn't want to look bad in front of their constituents. The university wasn't about to give on anything. You had these two forces come together and the students got caught in the middle" (Roberts 1997). Mr. Shelley agreed stating that, "Many of them were there because everyone else was there. Many of them were afraid to leave. Some of them were there because they didn't want to be asked why they weren't there" (1997).

With the 9 September crisis, the continuing students and new SEOP students became one cohesive group. According to Mr. Roberts, the Illini Union incident forced unity, perseverance, confidence, and persistence. Also, the arrests spurred many students to action. As Mr. Shelley stated, "A lot of kids who wouldn't have been active spent all their time trying to get even for [the arrests]" (1997). Likewise, Mr. Roberts stated, "I think it turned a lot of people into activists. People who were sitting on the fence and didn't know what to do got pushed into, 'I need to participate'" (1997).

Though BSA existed before the SEOP students arrived, the interviewees agreed the arrests energized BSA. Before 9 September 1968, BSA was still "trying to define itself as a force" (Shelley 1997). At the 9 September rally BSA leadership attempted, as Mr. Shelley described, "to use this mass of students as a mobilizing entity. They were trying to politicize these kids" (1997). The arrests served as a confirmation of the need to become involved in BSA and Black issues on campus. With this newly energized and politicized group, Black UIUC students connected themselves to the Black Power Movement sweeping the nation in the late 1960s and carved a niche for themselves in it. In an article entitled, "Goals Are Black Unity and Black Consciousness," appearing in BSA's newspaper, *Drums* (1967), the organization declared, "It is our responsibility to interpret to each student the changing attitude of the Black Movement [from the Civil Rights Movement to the Black Power Movement] nationally and locally and to reflect Black Consciousness."

Heavily influenced by national Black Power figures such the Black Panther Party, Stokely Carmichael, H. Rap Brown, Malcolm X, Julius Lester, and Don L. Lee, and others, Black UIUC students began to formulate an ideology. They gleaned parts from their own experience in civil rights struggle and appropriated others from national discussions on Black Power and new tactics for Black liberation. Increasingly, they involved themselves in Black freedom struggles, and as Mr. Eggleston stated, "went with the Movement" (1997). They funneled their increased numbers and energy into creating change at the university. According to Ms. Long-Green, the SEOP students "wanted the university to catch up with the times and remove itself from the very protective collegiate ivy league world" (1997).

The shift in national sentiments, attitudes, tactics, and goals regarding Black liberation began to be manifest on the UIUC campus toward the middle to late 1960s. Students questioned the goals of the Civil Rights Movement, "The mood had really become not anti-integration or not integration at any price, but is integration really the goal?" (Cullers 1997). Black students pondered other objectives and followed the shift from racially integrated civil rights organizations to predominantly or all Black civil rights organizations, from non-confrontational or moderate methods to aggression. By the later 1960s, the NAACP and other integration-minded organizations still existed on campus but faced fierce competition for Black members from newly formed Black Power-minded organizations. It would be futile to argue that all Black students swayed toward Black Power. It is doubtless that many continued to fight for the equal opportunity to assimilate into the dominant White society and culture while others fought for an equal opportunity to participate in a pluralistic society. However, Black Power-minded organizations gained momentum with a significant part of the Black student population. By 1967, Black Power became the ascendant ideology on the UIUC campus.

The definition of "Black consciousness," according to the interviewees, varied between different individuals and groups. They were careful not to paint a monolithic picture of Black student ideology. As Mr. Roberts stated, "You had people who were Black nationalists, culturally oriented, academicians. We were spread all over" (1997). Mr. Shelley described parts of the group as Marxist, Pan-Africanists, or most concerned with Black Studies. "It was a very disparate group in terms of ideology" (1997). Regardless of their differences in ideology, all interviewees understood that the Black students were connected and bonded together. Though they subscribed to different beliefs, "we understood

we were banded together because of race" (Roberts 1997). Whatever the route the end was the same: Black liberation.

Reflecting on BSA's tangible goals, Mr. Eggleston remembered the increasing sophistication of objectives. At first, one of the primary goals of BSA was to integrate the campus. Not only did BSA view increasing the number of Black students a way in which to train future Black leaders but as psychologically satisfying as well. The low number of Black students deeply affected emotional well being and friendships. "Being there, it was so lonely. When people flunked out, it was devastating. Every year you had to make new friends. If you made three friends, two of them would leave." As their ideology became more developed and their goals more defined, "We got more sophisticated and wanted more Black professors. We got more sophisticated and wanted a Black student center. We got more sophisticated and wanted equal rights and good wages for Black auxiliary staff" (Eggleston 1997). BSA acted as an organized forum for students to discuss issues relevant to the Black community and as a reminder to individual Black students that they were not alone in their frustration and isolation on campus. BSA then took that energy, and as Ms. Atkins stated, "pushed the envelope for the university."

In their pursuit of liberation, African American UIUC students, consistent with national trends, formed all Black academic organizations, sponsored all Black events, and initiated all Black activities. According to Mr. Roberts, "There were attempts by the university to figure out how to bring Black students into the mix of things. But, many Black students didn't want to be a part of what was going on at the university. We weren't accepted into their social events, but nobody really wanted to be anyway" (1997). Instead of participating in established groups or activities Black students created a parallel existence in which Blackness was the center. All Black organizations such as the Black Law Students Association and the Black Engineers Association and activities such as Black Chorus and Black Homecoming served the academic and social needs of Black students attending a predominantly White institution, "you could go [there] 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 felt like you were in a positive situation where people were reinforcing whatever needs you had" (Roberts 1997).

Why then, many Whites asked, would Black students attend UIUC instead of an historically Black college? If they felt more comfortable with separate activities and felt the university was not supportive, why not transfer? Answers among the interviewees varied, but none interpreted the perceived dissonance as debilitating. Some interviewees, especially those in SEOP, indicated that their financial packages kept them at UIUC. Others explained that there was an attitude among some Black UIUC students that their peers at historically Black institutions were not as academically capable. Though noting it was elitist, Ms. Atkins stated, "There was an attitude that we may have been a tad bit better" (1997). Many interviewees noted the prestige of UIUC. The academic reputation of the university and its high status among premier institutions was attractive and beneficial for future career pursuits. Mr. Cullers explained UIUC attendance as a right as taxpaying citizens in the state of Illinois. He stated, "Since we're paying taxes for this institution, we felt we should be able to take advantage of it" (1997). Discussions of the possible incongruence between Black Power ideology and attendance at a predominantly White institution existed but was not the primary concern of Black UIUC students. As Townsend stated, "We were more concerned with trying to pressure this university into being all it could be" (1997).

To be considered "truly Black" could be difficult and demanding. "Your academic success wasn't what you were measured by, it was your participation in relevant things" (Roberts 1997). Expectations for Black students included attending every BSA meeting. Mr. Shelley remembered that students took attendance, socialized with Blacks only, dated Blacks only, participated in all Black student sponsored events, and avoided White friendships. As Mr. Roberts described it, "if you ventured outside of that you were considered an outcast" (1997). Commenting on the pressures to conform Mr. Shelley stated, "Many of them were here trying to decide how Black they had to be while they were here. There was lots of pressure on students for them to behave a certain way. You could see the dissonance in how they were expected to act and how they really wanted to act" (1997).

Some interviewees noted a pressure to conform to certain ideas of Blackness. The degree of pressure felt by interviewees or exerted by interviewees varied. Mr. Eggleston acknowledged there was pressure but did not consider it a factor in relationships between Black students. Though it may not have influenced Black friendships, Mr. Cullers

explained how this pressure to be "truly Black" influenced friendships between Black and White students, "As the 1960s wore on, those relationships were not tended to. It was that period of being to ourselves and trying to work with ourselves solely" (1997). Also, Ms. Williams described the influence of the new ideology on the Black Greek fraternities and sororities, "We were pressured to get involved in BSA and not other things, especially Greek life. BSA would say to be Greek is to be White" (1997). Other interviewees who were also members of Greek letter organizations expressed similar sentiments. Whereas in decades earlier membership in a Greek letter organization brought prestige, in the later 1960s it became antithetical to the cause of Black liberation. Many interviewees indicated that the number of members in Black fraternities and sororities suffered during this period of "Black consciousness."

Regardless of the differences in ideology and the often stringent nature in which Black students could be considered "truly Black," all interviewees believed the Black students of the late 1960s left a positive legacy on the campus and that they benefitted from their involvement in the Black student movement as well. Remembering the personal for Black students, Ms. Long-Green stated, "I think a strength is that it produced tremendous leaders. They understood and appreciated the opportunity the university gave them and what the university meant for those who stayed. I think it was a character building and strength building process" (1997). Mr. Roberts attributes his current success to his years at UIUC and his involvement with the Black student movement, "Reflecting back, if I didn't do anything else at the U of I, I learned how to think for myself" (1997).

Also, interviewees believed the Black student movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s left an indelible mark on the UIUC campus, "I think Black students, especially the 1968 group, changed the direction of the university. They definitely turned the ship around" (Roberts 1997). Interviewees believed the legacy included forcing the administration to recognize the heterogeneous quality of its student population and its need to sponsor organizations and activities that reflect diversity, to understand the need for more Black faculty and staff, and to be adaptable and think and act strategically. They prodded the university to action and placed it and themselves at the forefront of Black student struggle across the nation.

Lasting tangible evidence of Black Power era student influence on campus includes the Afro-American Studies and Research Program, the Afro-American Cultural Program, courses in various disciplines on the Black experience, Black Chorus, Black Homecoming, Black academic associations, and the Black Congratulatory Ceremony. Today the university continues to provide funding and space for the above activities and associations in an effort to promote and maintain diversity on campus, a diversity fostered by the arrival of the SEOP students.

Most interviewees valued their experience as UIUC students despite the tension that existed on campus during the late 1960s and early 1970s, and would repeat the experience. As Ms. Long-Green stated, "For me, U of I was a good fit in spite of coming in the back door" (1997). They recognized deficits in the university structure, but agreed that their UIUC education was invaluable and helped them attain success in later life. Attempting to explain the fondness with which students of the late 1960s and early 1970s remember their experience at UIUC Mr. Shelley stated, "They look back on their days here with much more affection than students who left after them because they accomplished so much in such difficult times. They honor the experience more. It cost them more to get through it therefore they value it more"(1997).

The 1968 SEOP students left a tangible legacy on campus in the form of institutionalized programs and policies. Their insistence on separate activities based on race continues in the form of Black residence hall councils and academic associations. Their attempt to force the university to grapple with their demands as Black people subscribing to the philosophy of Black Power acted as the catalyst in the university's increasing commitment to its multicultural student population. As the interviewees mentioned, they prodded the university out of its protective shell and into the forefront of Black student struggle on predominantly White college campuses.

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