The Struggle for Integration at the College of Charleston, 1943-2015

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Since the founding of the College of Charleston in 1785, African Americans have remained a constant presence on campus. Enslaved African Americans constructed many of the College’s oldest buildings, and profits extracted from enslaved bodies provided the financial foundation for the college in the form of taxes, donations, and tuition fees. After emancipation, African Americans worked as janitors and maids on campus, but they remained excluded from the student body, faculty, and administration. As early as the 1940s, the College granted admission to a few Asian and Asian American students, but its doors remained closed to African American students until 1966 and to African American faculty until 1972.

After working as a watertender during the Spanish American War and as a coachman in Charleston, Robert Mathews spent forty-six years as a janitor at the College of Charleston, from 1901 until shortly before his death in 1947. (Credit: College of Charleston Libraries)
The NAACP Battles Segregation in Higher Education

The legal battle for integration in higher education in the United States had roots in the nineteenth century, but African American activists only began to see meaningful legal victories in the 1930s. Under the leadership of Special Counsel Charles Hamilton Houston, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) launched a legal strategy to dismantle Jim Crow by demanding the equalization of separate but unequal—or in some cases nonexistent—facilities. In cases involving public law schools in Maryland and Missouri—Pearson v. Murray (1936) and Missouri ex rel. Gaines v. Canada (1938) respectively—Houston’s strategy worked. Houston did not challenge school segregation directly, but when courts ordered states to maintain black schools and white schools on an equal basis, the states, confronted with the high cost of investing in (and sometimes building) black law schools, elected to accept black students into white institutions. A few years later in 1950, the NAACP’s Legal Defense Fund, now under the leadership of Thurgood Marshall, successfully challenged segregation in Texas and Oklahoma graduate schools with Sweatt v. Painter (1950) and McLaurin v. Oklahoma (1950), arguing that segregated schools violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. These victories inspired students and activists across the country to dismantle school segregation, including students at the Avery Institute in Charleston, South Carolina.

The NAACP filed a suit on behalf of Lloyd L. Gaines (above) after he was denied admission to the University of Missouri Law School. In 1938, the Supreme Court ruled that the University of Missouri violated Gaines’s right to the equal protection of the laws by not providing an in-state law school for blacks. (Credit: Wikipedia)
Avery Students Defy the Color

Founded in the wake of emancipation in 1865, the Avery Normal Institute educated African Americans in professional careers and leadership roles for nearly one hundred years, until its closure in 1954. In 1943, a graduate of the Avery Institute, John Wrighten, sent a letter to the College of Charleston to request information about applying for admission. The acting president of the College, George Grice, forwarded Wrighten’s letter to the Board of Trustees but never responded to Wrighten’s request to become the first African American student at the College. The following year, thirty-two Avery students from the Class of 1944 joined Wrighten in applying to the College. The Avery seniors were enrolled in Julia Brogdon's course on problems in democracy, and they decided to challenge the discriminatory policies of the College and the deeply entrenched racism in their hometown through a letter-writing campaign. All thirty-three applicants, including Wrighten, were denied admission, but this time The News and Courier (Charleston, SC) took note of their activism. With the threat of more challenges to the College’s policy of segregation both locally and nationally, the President and Board of Trustees felt compelled to act.

With his July 17, 1943 letter to the College of Charleston, John Wrighten became the first African American to inquire into applying to the College of Charleston. (Credit: College of Charleston Libraries)

The June 11, 1944 issue of The News and Courier covered the Avery students' attempts to apply to the College of Charleston. (Credit: College of Charleston Libraries)
The College of Charleston Became Private to Avoid Desegregation

Amid growing pressure from Avery students and the South Carolina NAACP to integrate, the College’s Trustees decided to avoid desegregation by becoming a private institution. H.L. Erckmann advised fellow trustee Paul M. Macmillan: “I have been giving very serious thought to the predicament in which we as Trustees would be placed should an attempt be made in the Federal Court to allow colored students to enter the College. We would certainly be in a very strong position if the title to this property were placed again in ‘The Trustees of the College of Charleston.’” In 1949, the College and the South Carolina State Legislature set in motion plans to transfer the College’s deed from the city of Charleston to the Trustees, despite having to forfeit significant financial support from the city. To preserve segregation, the administration preferred risking a more precarious financial position as a private institution rather than accepting African American students. In the end, privatization resulted in not just a financial loss, but also a loss in human capital. Among those African American students from the Avery Institute and Burke High School denied admission to the College were future lawyers, civil rights activists, community leaders, and a state legislator.

On April 28, 1949, South Carolina Governor Strom Thurmond signed into law an act transferring the deed for the College of Charleston from the city to the Board of Trustees in an effort to insulate the College from integration. (Credit: College of Charleston Libraries)
Briggs v Elliott (1952) Challenges Public School Segregation in South Carolina

Shortly after the College of Charleston became a private institution, Harry Briggs and other African American parents in nearby Clarendon County, South Carolina filed a suit against the local school board, challenging the practice of offering bussing to white students but not to African American students, who had to walk to school. On the state level, the District Court upheld the practice of maintaining separate and unequal public schools and school transportation. On appeal, however, the NAACP legal team changed their strategy to focus on school integration instead of equalization. NAACP lawyers combined the Briggs v. Elliott (1952) case with four others from around the country, resulting in Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (1954), in which the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the doctrine of “separate but equal.” In the decade that followed, civil rights victories in Montgomery, Alabama; Little Rock, Arkansas; Greensboro, North Carolina; and Oxford, Mississippi captivated the nation. Local activists in Charleston also successfully chipped away at segregation in public facilities, including the public schools, which began desegregation in 1963. Despite the edifice of Jim Crow crumbling all around the College, President Grice and the Board of Trustees remained staunchly opposed to integration, denying admission to two more African American students, Gretta A. Middleton and James Milton, in 1962 and 1963 respectively.

With the help of the NAACP, African American parents in Clarendon County, South Carolina sued the local school district for denying African American students school buses in Briggs v. Elliott (1952). (Credit: United States Reports: Cases Adjudged in the Supreme Court Vol. 344)
The College Resists Integration Amid the Civil Rights Movement

In the 1960s the College faced a debilitating fiscal crisis precipitated by dwindling private donations, shrinking financial support from the city, and irresponsible real estate acquisitions, including the purchase of houses bordering the campus for the express purpose of preventing African American families from living nearby. The College’s financial predicament was further exacerbated by President Grice’s refusal to comply with Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which demanded that institutions of higher education not discriminate on the basis of race, color, or national origin. As a result, students at the College were ineligible for federal student loans, and faculty could no longer receive research grants from federal agencies. Some alumni and students at the College publically supported integration, but President Grice dug in his heels. In a statement to the Trustees sent after five more African Americans applied to the College in September 1964, Grice openly endorsed racial discrimination: “I do not agree that we should send application blanks to those persons whom we know to be Negroes, because we know that we will refuse such persons admission even though academically qualified.” He continued, “I am impelled to say that I simply cannot, in good conscience, have any part in admitting other than white students into an institution for which I am responsible until that other race is accepted in this community as social persons. The College would be accepting a Negro student as a student and not as a person. Such a policy is unjust to the Negro, and I cannot have any part in it.”

After reading of President Grice’s refusal to comply with Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, alumnus J. Roy Pennell sent a $1,000 check to support a student loan fund and, by extension, non-compliance with the law. (Credit: College of Charleston Libraries)
President Grice retired in 1965, leaving the College in near financial ruin and with a reputation as a backward-looking bastion of white supremacy. Under his successor, President Walter Coppedge, the College agreed to comply with Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act in July 1966. Desegregation itself unfolded in a stunningly haphazard manner. According to the Board of Trustees Minutes from October 1966, two black women, Louise Smalls Moore and Sonja Ann Perry, had registered for classes in September. Moore had enrolled as a part-time student. Perry, however, was a full-time student. When Perry had picked up an application from the College, the staff did not realize she was African American—they had incorrectly assumed she was Filipino. A handful of Asian and Asian American students had attended the College since at least the 1940s, but only when the administration realized that Perry was the first full-time African American student did they consider the College integrated. This particular notion of integration reflected not only the erasure of Asian and Asian American students from the College’s history, but reinforced the especially degraded status of African Americans in the eyes of the College of Charleston. Soon after ushering in desegregation, the Board of Trustees fired President Coppedge. He was convinced that his termination directly resulted from his position on non-discrimination.

In 1966, the College finally agreed to comply with Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, though some Trustees remained vocal in their opposition to the non-discrimination clause.

(Credit: United States Statutes at Large Vol. 78)
Two more African American women, Carrie Nesbitt and Angela Brown, enrolled at the College in the fall 1967 semester, and Eddie Ganaway joined them in the spring 1968 semester, after the College announced its new “Open Door Policy” for admissions. Ganaway became the first African American to graduate from the College in 1971, and within a few years, these and other pioneering African American students organized the Afro-American Society and the College’s first black sorority and fraternity. They also joined student government, sports teams, the literary magazine, and other campus organizations. The tenor of campus life began to change as the College hired African American professors to teach classes and the administration invited speakers like the civil rights activist Julian Bond to deliver lectures on campus. However, the racial dynamics of the campus continued to reflect deep-seated problems. As one student pointed out in 1973, “The employment of the college is 50/50. The black 50 percent, however, serve purposes such as cleaning, cooking, and low-maintenance positions.” Desegregation had done little to change the lot of African American workers in low-paying service jobs around campus.

In 1970, African American students formed the African American Cultural Committee, which was renamed the Afro-American Society in 1971. The organization provided support for students of color and planned programs on campus. (Credit: College of Charleston Libraries)

Members of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority meet in the Cistern yard during the 1974-1975 academic year. (Credit: College of Charleston Libraries)

T.J. Washington and Audrey Dingle discuss the publication of The Phoenix, a campus literary magazine. (Credit: College of Charleston Libraries)
White Students and Faculty React to the “Open Door Policy”

Once the Trustees announced the “Open Door Policy” in 1966, white students and faculty had a wide range of responses to the changes coming to campus. Some welcomed African American students. Others expressed disgust, like one white student who told the College’s newspaper, “I think [the Open Door Policy] will lower the morale of the students. It will destroy what remaining pride we have in The College, by lowering the standards and taking in lower-quality people.” A member of the faculty, Professor George Heltai, remarked, “Probably more Negro students will be able to enter The College. Taking these students out of their environment will help social democratization.” Implicit in both quotations was the patronizing assumption of African American inferiority. Whereas that student assumed African American students would lower the educational quality of the institution, Professor Heltai assumed that, by virtue of being in a predominantly white institution, African American students would receive a better education.

White students debated the impact of the College’s new “Open Door Policy” in the student newspaper, The Meteor. (Credit: College of Charleston Libraries)
Lucille Whipper and Affirmative Action at the College

Although the “Open Door Policy” removed racial restrictions in the admissions process, the College still required a comprehensive plan to recruit and retain a more diverse student body, faculty, and administration. President Theodore Stern, who replaced President Coppedge in 1968, hired Lucille Whipper in 1972 to be the administrative officer of the College’s affirmative action plan. A member of the Avery Institute’s Class of 1944—the same class that had submitted applications to integrate the College of Charleston—Whipper had long been an advocate for racial justice and educational reform in Charleston. In her position at the College, she developed plans for not only diversifying the racial makeup of the campus, but also for supporting racial minorities and women of all races. In 1984, Whipper left the College of Charleston to pursue a political career as a state representative. Among her many legacies that remain on campus is the Avery Research Center. In 1985, Whipper led a group of Avery alumni and supporters to establish a partnership with the College of Charleston to develop a research center for African American history and culture in the former Avery Normal Institute building. The Avery Research Center opened to the public in 1990.

Lucille Whipper developed the College’s first affirmative action plan in the early 1970s. She was instrumental in establishing the Avery Research Center as a part of the College’s library system. (Credit: Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture)
Is the College of Charleston Integrated Yet?

Since the College first accepted a full-time African American student in 1966, the number of full-time African American students has grown to over eight-hundred in 2015. However, even today, African Americans make up only 7.7% of the student body, far below the percentage of African Americans in the state of South Carolina, which the 2010 Census estimates at 27.9%. The percentage of African American students at the College has stagnated, remaining between 5% and 8% for the past four decades. The College’s African American student population must more than triple before numerical parity is achieved. More importantly, the institutional culture itself must change. True integration requires institutions to adapt, and the burden of adapting should not rest solely upon students and faculty of color. An assimilationist model of integration only reinforces the dominance of the majority, which is precisely what novelist and essayist, James Baldwin, cautioned against in *The Fire Next Time* (1963):

“White Americans find it as difficult as white people elsewhere do to divest themselves of the notion that they are in possession of some intrinsic value that black people need, or want. And this assumption—which, for example, makes the solution to the Negro problem depend on the speed with which Negroes accept and adopt white standards—is revealed in all kinds of striking ways... It is the Negro, of course, who is presumed to have become equal—an achievement that not only proves the comforting fact that perseverance has no color but also overwhelmingly corroborates the white man’s sense of his own value. Alas, this value can scarcely be corroborated in any other way; there is certainly little enough in the white man’s public or private life that one should desire to imitate.”