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Student Opinions On Current Issues

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SPECIAL REPORT: STUDENT OPINIONS ON CURRENT ISSUES

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Editor's note: *The following is the outcome of a recent survey on undergraduate student attitudes on issues of domestic and international concern. The students interviewed are enrolled at Howard's College of Liberal Arts, School of Business and Public Administration and School of Engineering. The data for the survey were collected last spring by three faculty members in the Department of Political Science who also wrote this special report. They are: ALVIN THORNTON, JOSEPH P. McCORMICK, II AND WALTER HILL JR.*

Abstract

Howard University undergraduates are post-civil rights movement students with life experiences and opportunities that markedly differ from those of their parents and grandparents. There is anecdotal evidence to suggest that this generation of Black college students is much more "practical" and concerned only with its own upward economic mobility.

Within the broader context of a political movement that has been characterized by scholars and journalists as "conservative," this survey examines the kinds of opinions held by Howard undergraduates on selected foreign and domestic issues. In the survey, we specifically sought to determine how much student opinions vary (if at all) by college or school of enrollment. Our random sample of 439 was entirely made up of students enrolled in the university's three largest academic units — the College of Liberal Arts, the School of Business and Public Administration and the School of Engineering.

The data show very few statistically significant differences among the students interviewed.

Introduction

Howard is a major American university with a rich history of preparing primarily Black students for leadership positions throughout the United States and the

world. The geographical distribution of its student body is broad, but the majority come from the United States and its possessions.¹

Past graduates of Howard have served or are now serving in positions of leadership at local, state, national and international levels, and have made unique contributions in the private and public sectors.

Howard and other traditionally Black institutions (TBIs) of higher education presently share less than 27 percent of the Black higher education population in the United States. This represents a significant decline from the 1970s when at least 50 percent of all Black students in higher education were enrolled at TBIs.² Notwithstanding this enrollment decline, traditionally Black colleges and universities continue to produce the critical mass of potential Black leaders. Approximately 50 percent of Black college graduates graduate from historically Black institutions.

The challenge in the 1960s and 1970s for Black college students was to "awaken to a new sense of group consciousness and pride in being Black and work as committed activists in the civil rights movement."³ Today, the concern of many Black students is with their ability to acquire specialized educational credentials in preparation for increasingly diversified public and private sector employment opportunities. This concern has been generated, in part, by the fact that the collective goals of Black Americans, as seen in the 1960s and 1970s, have largely been replaced by the lure of personal aspirations.

This survey seeks answers to two questions: (1) What kinds of social and political opinions have developed in the minds of this population?, (2) Do these opinions differ across academic concentrations?

In recent years, there has been increasing differentiation in areas of academic concentration selected by students at traditionally Black institutions of higher education. Over the past decade, increases have been seen in the number of students majoring in non-traditional fields, such as business and engineering.⁴ Associated with these increases has been the prediction that significant differences in social and political opinions would appear among students with different academic and career interests. This prediction is reasonable, given the exposure students have had to specialized curricula and the possibility that they will project opinions they deem appropriate to their contemplated occupations and life-

styles. A magazine article on Howard's School of Business and Public Administration suggests the potential impact of the school on the opinions of its students. "The why of its [the school's] growth and popularity has a lot to do with national trends. But it also has a lot to do with the particulars of the school's distinctive personality."⁵

Does, in fact, the Business School's "distinctive personality" produce students with different opinions about major social and political issues?

To address this and other questions, we examined the students' opinions on a number of controversial domestic and foreign policy issues.

Our research produced results that reveal a virtual absence of difference in student opinions based on college or school of enrollment. But we found opinion differences among the students when other variables were controlled, e.g., gender, self-identified political orientation. Although we will not report all of these relationships in this paper, significant gender-based differences were found among Howard students.

Our initial concern was not with opinion variations by gender. Rather it was with exploring the proposition that there may be opinion differences among Howard undergraduates based on their area of enrollment. The entry and graduation requirements of the three academic units (liberal arts, business, engineering) are different.

Engineering and business are considered pre-professional, with less flexibility in their curricula and higher cumulative grade point average requirements. In addition, there is the generally held assumption that a degree in business or engineering is more marketable. We felt that these factors might result in student populations with significantly different opinions on foreign and domestic policy issues.

This exploratory analysis of Howard students is a response, in part, to Walter Allen's view that "comparative studies of Blacks in educational settings" should be conducted. His research has illuminated significant differences among Black college students (who attend predominantly white schools), and has led him to indicate that "we have extensively studied black-white differences, but the record on black-black and black-other minority differences is more limited and should be expanded."⁶

In addition, our analysis is based upon the idea that we should better understand the

intra-university factors that might be shaping the opinions of students, especially at a time of increasing academic specialization.

Sample Design

To draw our sample, we used a multi-stage random sampling design. After securing the enrollment data from the Office of the Registrar for the spring and fall 1986 and spring 1987 semesters, we determined that Howard's undergraduate enrollment for the 1986-87 academic year was approximately 7,600. We determined that a sample size of 400 would permit us to make reasonable inferences about the undergraduate population. Our sampling error was plus or minus five percent.

Of the 7,600 undergraduates enrolled in the 1986-87 academic year, 5,274 were in the College of Liberal Arts, the School of Business and Public Administration and the School of Engineering. These three units comprised approximately 70 percent of Howard University's undergraduate population. Liberal arts had 48.3 percent, business 37.6 percent and engineering 14.1 percent of the 5,274 total. These proportions were used to determine the size of the sub-samples for each of the three units. For each of them, we also estimated the proportion of freshman, sophomore, junior and senior students. Finally, we stratified each sub-sample by the proportion of majors to get a cross-section of students in each of the three academic units.

After consulting with academic advisors and faculty members, we randomly selected, by academic major, from official registration lists, those courses known to be taken by lower and upper division students. This sample design enabled us to generalize about inter-college or inter-school differences.

Descriptive Profile

In Table I, six socioeconomic and political characteristics of our sample are presented: gender, family income, high school and neighborhood racial composition, ideological orientation and party identification. These characteristics provide some context for assessing the opinions described below.

Overall, 52 percent of the sample was composed of female students and 48 percent of male students. Black colleges and universities have traditionally enrolled more females than males. The College of Liberal Arts' sample was composed of 59.4 percent female and 40.6 percent male

students. The School of Business' sample was 60.2 percent female and 39.8 male, and the School of Engineering's sample was 37.7 percent female and 62.3 percent male.

More than 40 percent of students in liberal arts, business and engineering reported that their annual family income exceeded \$40,000. More than half of those in engineering were in this category. Among liberal arts students, 35.5 percent said they came from a family with an annual income greater than \$20,000 but less than \$40,000, while 36.6 percent of business and 28.4 percent of engineering students were in this category. Less than 19 percent of students from each area indicated their family annual income was less than \$20,000.

Most students in each sub-sample came from neighborhoods that were more than 50 percent Black. Engineering students (70.8 percent) were most likely to have lived in predominately Black neighborhoods, while liberal arts students (56.5 percent) were least likely to have lived in such neighborhoods. Business students (63.2 percent) fell between these extremes. The reverse was true for the high schools from which these students graduated. More than 50 percent of students in our sample said their high schools were not majority Black.

More than 40 percent of students in the College of Liberal Arts, the School of Business and the School of Engineering indicated that their ideological orientations were more liberal than conservative or moderate. We found that 48.7 percent of engineering students associated with the liberal view, whereas 46.1 percent of the liberal arts students and only 40.5 percent of business majors said they were liberal. We did not anticipate that engineering students, given their more narrowly focused academic orientation, would be most likely to identify themselves as liberals.

The School of Business had the highest percentage (29.7) of students who indicated that they were conservative, followed by the College of Liberal Arts and the School of Engineering — 17.6 and 14.2 percent respectively.

Although the majority of students in the survey said they identified with the Democratic Party (liberal arts, 55.7 percent; business, 58.3 percent; and engineering 56.1 percent), a surprisingly high percentage of them indicated they were independents. In fact, more than 34 percent of students in each unit gave this response. This seems to be consistent with the

general increase in the number of self-identified politically independent persons in all age cohorts found in the population at large.⁷

A higher percentage of business students (7.2 percent) identified with the Republican Party than was the case with liberal arts (3.8 percent) and engineering (2.0 percent). As one expert pointed out, "the association of Blacks with the Democratic Party points to their historical movement toward liberalism, suggesting why they have traditionally associated with the political party whose platforms were more liberal than conservative."⁸

The party identification of students at Howard, notwithstanding area of study, appears to be generally consistent with that of the general Black population. It is more Democratic than Republican or independent.

Nicaragua, South Africa, Angola

In an essay on the influence of Black Americans on U.S. foreign policy, a Black former foreign service officer wrote: "Blacks had to overcome their own relative apathy about foreign affairs compared to other ethnic groups in the face of preoccupation with urgent domestic concerns like voting, education, and economic advancement."⁹

We asked our students their opinions about the positions the U.S. government should take in selected national issues and conflicts in three foreign countries — Nicaragua, South Africa, and Angola.

In Nicaragua, there are essentially two competing political forces, the Sandinista government and the "Contras," an umbrella organization of rebel groups opposed to the government. The position of the United States has been to support the Contras by providing military and other support. American public opinion has been divided on whether the United States should support the Contras. The majority of Americans have consistently indicated that they support negotiations with the current government. A New York Times/CBS News Poll showed that 45 percent of men and 57 percent of women *disapproved* of the United States giving military aid to the Contras. The poll also indicated that 59 percent of people 18 to 29 years old *disapproved* of such aid.¹⁰

Table II shows the students' responses to this question: "What position should the United States take in the Nicaraguan conflict?"

What should the U.S. do in South Africa?

What should the U.S. do in Angola?

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Table I
Selected Characteristics of Students in the Spring, 1986

Characteristics	Liberal Arts n = 106	Business n = 118	Engineering n = 122
Gender			
Female	59.4	60.2	37.7
Male	40.6	39.8	62.3
Family Income			
% < \$20,000	18.3	17.9	17.4
% > \$20,000 but < \$40,000	35.5	36.6	28.4
% > \$40,000	46.2	45.5	54.1
Racial Comp. of H.S.			
< 50% Black	50.5	53.4	50.4
> 50% Black	49.5	46.6	49.6
Racial Comp. of Neighborhood			
< 50% Black	43.8	36.8	29.2
> 50% Black	56.2	63.2	70.8
Ideological Orientation			
Conservative	17.6	29.7	14.2
Moderate	36.3	29.7	37.2
Liberal	46.1	40.5	48.7
Political Party Identification			
Democrat	55.7	58.3	56.1
Independent	40.5	34.5	41.9
Republican	3.8	7.2	2.0

Table II
U.S. Position in Nicaragua

U.S. Position in Nicaragua	Liberal Arts n = 92	Business n = 92	Engineering n = 88
Support the existing government	7.6	16.3	23.9
Support the Contras	33.7	20.7	20.5
Support neither	58.7	63.0	55.7

Chi. Sq. = 12.16; p = .01

Table III
U.S. Position in South Africa

What should the U.S. do in South Africa?	Liberal Arts n = 102	Business n = 111	Engineering n = 112
Support the existing government	0.0	4.5	2.7
Support the anti-government forces	91.2	82.9	87.5
Support neither	8.8	12.6	9.8

Chi. Sq. = 5.63; p = .22

There were significant differences among the students in the College of Liberal Arts, the School of Business and the School of Engineering regarding U.S. involvement in Nicaragua. However, the majority of students from each unit indicated that neither the present government nor the Contras should be supported. A higher percentage of business students held this position (63.0 percent). Among liberal arts students, 58.7 percent said neither should be supported, while 55.7 percent of engineering students held this position. The rebel groups had a higher level of support among liberal arts students (33.7), and the Sandinista government was supported by a higher percentage of engineering students.

When asked what position the U.S. government should adopt in the national liberation struggle in South Africa, the overwhelming majority of students said the anti-apartheid forces should be supported. These data are found in Table III.

Slightly more than 90 percent of liberal arts students felt that the anti-government forces should be supported. None of the liberal arts students felt the present government in South Africa deserved support. Interestingly, almost five percent of students in the School of Business thought the existing government should be supported. This was almost double the percentage of engineering students.

Many people would argue that the historical role of the United States in South Africa, where the African National Con-

gress (ANC) and other opposition forces are fighting against the government, has been to the detriment of the majority Black African population. South Africa's domestic policies and most of its social interaction reflect a policy of strict separation of the races, and institutionalized economic and cultural oppression.

The United States, through its policy of constructive engagement, continues to cooperate with the South African government.¹¹

The point has been made that if the United States is serious about working to end apartheid, it must consider new steps—specifically, active economic and military support for South Africa's neighbors and the imposition of comprehensive economic and military sanctions against the current regime.¹² Implicit in this proposition is an argument for United States support for the anti-government forces in South Africa. Howard students, notwithstanding area of enrollment, supported this position.

Unlike in Nicaragua and other nations where America is involved militarily, the students from each unit drew parallels between the South African situation and the African-American struggle for political and economic rights.¹³

The students were less committal when asked about the proper U.S. government position in Angola. Their responses are in Table IV.

In each college or school, the majority of the students indicated that neither the

existing government in Angola nor the rebel forces should be supported. In the College of Liberal Arts, 61.8 percent felt this way, while 62.2 percent in the School of Business and 54.2 percent in the School of Engineering took this position. There was greater support among business and engineering students than among liberal arts majors for the current government. Approximately one-fifth of the students thought the government should be supported, while less than 13 percent of liberal arts students indicated so.

The students in each unit were unsure which side to support in the Angolan versus the South African conflict. This might be due to the fact that, unlike in South Africa, the Angola conflict involves primary combatants that are Black Africans. The ruling party, Popular Front for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), is being contested by the Union for the Total Liberation of Angola (UNITA). UNITA is supported by the government of South Africa and the United States, while the MPLA has the backing of most African nations.

We asked the students one additional question related to foreign affairs—whether the level of spending for U.S. national defense should be increased or reduced.

There were no significant differences in student opinions about the appropriate level of spending for defense. Their responses are in Table V.

More than two-thirds of the students in our survey indicated that spending for

Table IV
U.S. Position in Angola

What should the U.S. do in Angola?	Liberal Arts n = 55	Business n = 45	Engineering n = 48
Support the existing government	12.7	20.0	20.8
Support the rebels	25.5	17.8	25.0
Support neither	61.8	62.2	54.2

Chi. Sq. = 2.27; $p = .66$

Table V
Level of Spending for Defense

Spending for defense should be	Liberal Arts n = 104	Business n = 115	Engineering n = 121
Increased	1.9	2.6	3.3
Kept at present level	18.3	20.0	24.0
Reduced	74.0	73.0	65.3
Ended all together	5.8	4.3	7.4

Chi. Sq. = 3.05; $p = .80$

defense should be reduced. There was virtually no support for increasing defense spending, although between 18 and 24 percent of the students said that it should be kept at about the present level.

Opinions on Social Issues

Today, we face several controversial social concerns that have significantly divided the general population in America. Among these are whether abortion should be prohibited; whether homosexuality is always wrong; whether the death penalty should be abolished.

There was almost no difference between our student subsamples where the prohibition of abortion is concerned. Most Howard students disagreed with the notion that federal law should prohibit abortion. More than 80 percent of the students surveyed held this opinion. These data are in Table VI.

The majority of the students in our survey felt that homosexuality is always wrong. Approximately 59 percent of liberal arts students felt this way, while 64 percent and 63.7 percent of the business and engineering students, respectively, indicated this opinion.

More of the liberal arts students (41.4 percent) than business (36.0 percent) and engineering (36.3 percent) disagreed with the proposition that homosexuality is always wrong. These relationships are in Table VII.

When we controlled for gender, statis-

Table VI
Prohibition of Abortions

Abortions should be prohibited	Liberal Arts n = 100	Business n = 107	Engineering n = 110
Agree	18.0	19.6	20.0
Disagree	82.0	80.4	80.0

Chi. Sq. = .15; $p = .97$

Table VII
Opinions About Homosexuality

Homosexuality is always wrong	Liberal Arts n = 99	Business n = 100	Engineering n = 113
Agree	58.6	64.0	63.7
Disagree	41.4	36.0	36.3

Chi. Sq. = .79; $p = .67$

tically significant differences between men and women on the homosexuality issue emerged. Overall, approximately 64 percent of the students surveyed agreed with the statement that "homosexuality is always wrong." About 57 percent of the women and approximately 74 percent of the men agreed with this statement. Among business students, there was no statistically significant difference by gender on this question.

There was no statistically significant difference among the three groups of students regarding the question of whether the death penalty should be abolished. Table VIII shows that the overwhelming majority of students interviewed, more than 67 percent, disagreed with the idea that the death penalty should be abolished.

The fact that more than two-thirds of the students in each of the three academic units indicated that the death penalty should not be abolished is interesting considering the fact that the death penalty is disproportionately imposed on Blacks, the poor, the illiterate and other ethnic minorities.

Our data indicate that the Howard undergraduate student, notwithstanding area of enrollment, is generally pro-abortion; is in favor of the death penalty; thinks homosexuality is always wrong (though opinion on this is somewhat divided by gender).

Opinions on Black Issues

The Rev. Jesse Jackson and other Black leaders are fond of saying "if the door of

Should the death penalty be abolished?

Should race be used as a criterion?

opportunity is open, you have to be prepared and willing to walk through it." This view has been occasioned by the impression that many individuals do not take advantage of opportunities afforded them. Opinions about whether this is true is a function of a complex set of individual, social, and economic considerations, the assessment of which may vary with an individual's sense of motivation and chances in life.

We asked our sample students whether they think "some people do not use breaks that come their way."

There was a significant difference among the students regarding the idea that "some people just don't use the breaks that come their way, and that if they don't do well, it's their own fault." Among liberal arts students, 66.7 percent disagreed with this proposition, while only 46.7 percent and 49.1 percent of business and engineering students, respectively, disagreed.

The students' positions are outlined in Table IX. These data suggest that business and engineering students are far more likely to hold the individual accountable for his or her own failure to take advantage of opportunities than are liberal arts students.

We asked the students whether in an effort to compensate for past racial discrimination, some graduate and professional schools should consider an applicant's race in making admission decisions, i.e., affirmative action. The question also asked whether such a practice should continue into the foreseeable future. We found no

More than 65 percent of the students interviewed said there was a need for a Black political party.

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significant differences in the responses the students gave. Half of the students in liberal arts, and a majority of business and engineering students said they agreed that *race should be used* as a criterion into the foreseeable future. Table X contains data showing their responses.

While there was no overwhelming opposition to affirmative action in graduate and/or professional school admission among the students surveyed, we did not anticipate that *so many* students would be opposed to the use of race as a criterion for admission to graduate and professional schools.

We speculate that many students in each of the three units hold the opinion that the use of race in such a way stigmatizes and compromises the student involved and awards unwarranted educational benefits. There was also no significant disagreement among the students regarding the use of affirmative action in hiring and promotion. (See Table XI).

In each of our three sample units, there was an almost equal division between those who agreed with using race as one of a number of factors for hiring and promotion and those who disagreed with such a practice.

Business and engineering students were slightly more likely than liberal arts students to endorse the use of affirmative action in hiring and promotion decisions. We should also point out that when one compares the responses in Tables X and XI, two possibilities, both of which are equally plausible, stand out: (1) In the case of graduate or professional school, Howard students appear ready to take advantage of an opportunity which might facilitate their entry, notwithstanding the fact that the opportunity may convey a racial stigma; and (2) In the case of gaining entry to the job market, or upward mobility within it, Howard students appear less willing to endorse an opportunity that may be seen as conveying a racial stigma.

Table VIII
Opinions About the Death Penalty

Should the death penalty be abolished?	Liberal Arts n = 92	Business n = 104	Engineering n = 115
Agree	29.3	32.7	29.6
Disagree	70.7	67.3	70.4

Chi. Sq. = .34; p = .84

Table IX
Opinions About Use of Breaks

Some people don't use breaks	Liberal Arts n = 90	Business n = 105	Engineering n = 114
Agree	33.3	53.3	50.9
Disagree	66.4	46.7	49.1

Chi. Sq. = 9.11; p = .01

In the job market, Howard students appear to be more concerned with gaining entry or upward mobility on the basis of individual merit rather than through affirmative action.

The willingness of Howard undergraduates to be independent of the two major political parties (Democratic and Republican) was indicated by their support for the establishment of a Black independent political party. Table XII contains their opinions on this.

More than 65 percent of the students interviewed said there was a need for a Black political party. Many attempts have been made to form independent Black political parties, with the most recent one being the National Independent Black Political Party (NIBPP). Before NIBPP, there were national parties like the Black Panther Party, National Liberation Party, Afro-American Party, Freedom Now Party, and the Peace and Freedom Party. In addition, between 1897 and 1970, there were several Black state parties, such as the Negro Progressive Party and the United Citizens Party.¹⁴

One final issue that we felt had an impact on the progress of Blacks in the United States is the integration of public schools. We asked the students whether they felt "racial integration of public schools had improved education for Black people, made it worse, or has not made any difference?"

Table X
Race as a Criterion for Admission to Graduate and Professional Schools

Should race be used as a criterion?	Liberal Arts n = 90	Business n = 98	Engineering n = 110
Agree	50.0	56.1	55.5
Disagree	50.0	43.9	44.5

Chi. Sq. = 85; p = .65

Table XI
Race as a Criterion in Hiring Decisions

Race as a Criterion	Liberal Arts	Business	Engineering
Agree	48.9	51.0	54.5
Disagree	51.1	49.0	45.5

Chi. Sq. = 54; p = .72

There was no significant difference among the students in their responses to this question. The majority of them indicated that racial integration of public schools had improved education for Black people. Fifty-nine percent of liberal arts students, 58.8 percent of business students and 63.1 percent of engineering students held this opinion. Less than 20 percent of the students indicated that public school integration had worsened the education of Black people. Table XIII contains these data.

Conclusion

The data indicated that there were significant differences among Howard students (by area of enrollment) where self-identified ideological orientation is concerned, i.e., whether one sees him/herself as a liberal, conservative or moderate. Interestingly though, such differences were not readily seen in the responses to specific questions on foreign and domestic policy issues. Notwithstanding college or school of enrollment, the students held similar positions on many of the controversial issues facing the United States in the late 1980s.

A possible explanation for this finding is that Howard undergraduate students in the three areas we surveyed may: (a) not have a clear understanding of the operational meaning of such terms as "liberal" and "conservative," or (b) apply these terms

At the undergraduate level, one's field of study appears to have little bearing on the opinions one holds on major domestic and foreign issues.

Table XII
Need for a Black Political Party

Need for a Black Political Party	Liberal Arts	Business	Engineering
Agree	71.1	69.6	70.9
Disagree	28.9	30.4	29.1

Chi. Sq. = .05; $p = .97$

Table XIII
Impact of Racial Integration

Effects of Public School Integration On Education of Blacks	Liberal Arts n = 101	Business n = 114	Engineering n = 111
Improved it	59.4	58.8	63.1
Worsened it	7.9	13.2	15.3
Had no effect	27.7	24.6	17.1
No opinion	5.0	3.5	4.5

Chi. Sq. = 5.71; $p = .45$



differently depending on the issue involved. Thus it is plausible that an individual may view some issues through a liberal lens, while viewing others through a conservative lens.

At the undergraduate level, one's field of study appears to have little bearing on the opinions one holds on major domestic and foreign issues. This finding also tends to hold when selected racial issues are included in the analysis.

Our conclusion about Howard University students in the College of Liberal Arts, the School of Business and the School of Engineering can be clarified somewhat if we place the opinions they hold in the larger context of the experience of Black people in the United States. About the Black population in general, it has been noted that "because of the systematic discrimination against blacks in American culture, blacks form a much more homogeneous group socioeconomically, as well as a more politically self-conscious one, than most other groups in American society."¹⁵ One inference that can be drawn from this is that the social and political opinions of Afro-Americans would also be more homogeneous than other less discriminated against ethnic groups. □

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