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In Pursuit of Social Justice: The Unfinished Business of the Nation and the Unfinished Business of Howard

James E. Cheek

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Cheek, Dr. James E.
In pursuit of social justice

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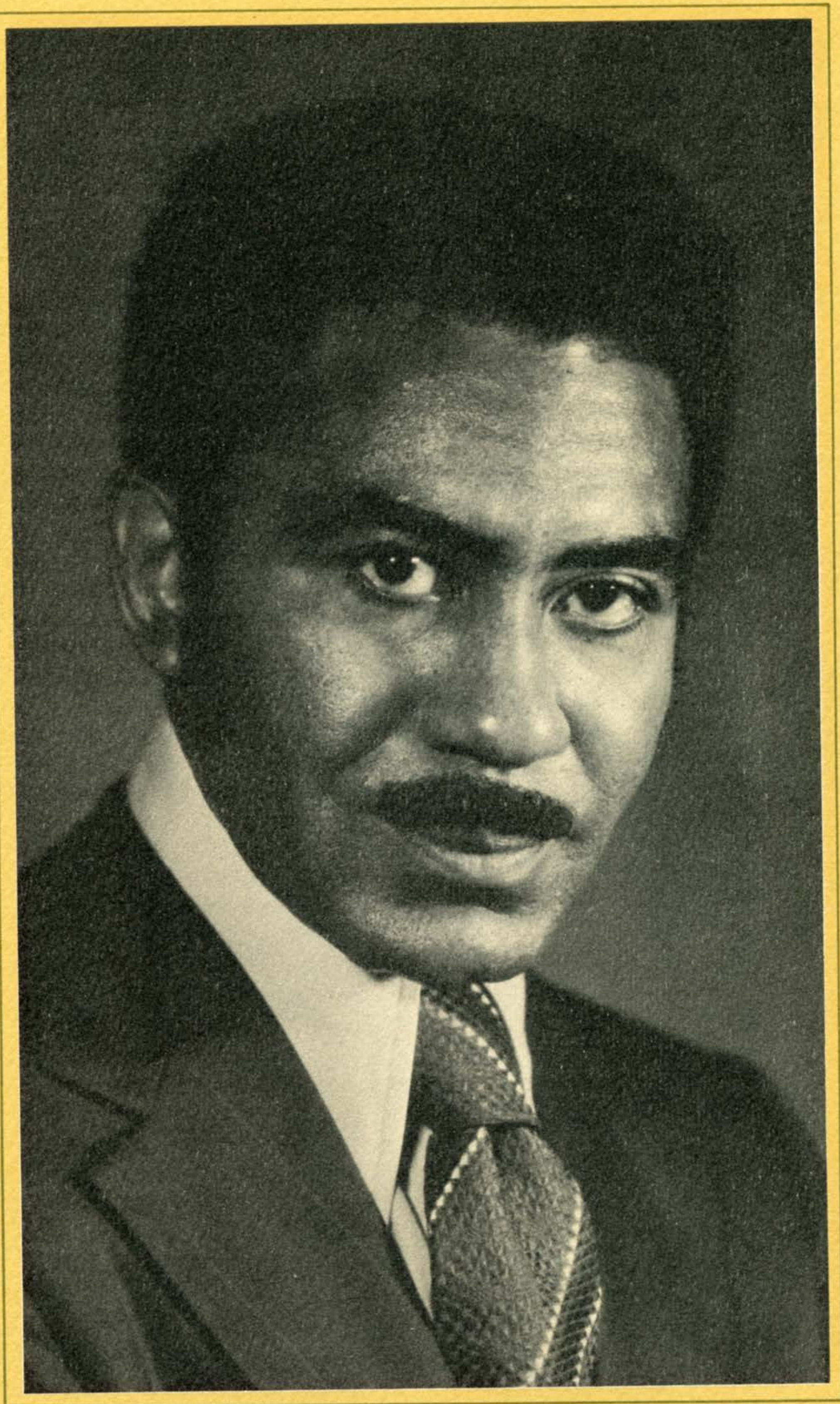
HOWARD UNIVERSITY

In Pursuit of Social Justice

*The Unfinished Business of the Nation and
the Unfinished Business of Howard*

The Howard University Convocation Address

*By Dr. James E. Cheek, President
September 6th, 1973*



This occasion has come to represent for me an opportunity to share with you my perceptions of the state and status of our university. I have found, however, that it is impossible for me properly to appraise our institutional affairs detached and apart from my perceptions of the state of the larger society of which we are a part and about the status and condition of the people we were originally established to serve.

We have embarked upon our 106th year in the atmosphere of a troubled nation with a confused and bewildered citizenry and with a society facing an uncertain future. But we must also note that, after more than a century of our existence as an institution of higher learning, we are confronted by the same issues, the same problems and the same challenges that were in existence at the time of our founding 106 years ago.

Our troubled nation with its bewildered people and the uncertainty about the future of our society are caused in large measure by the awareness that the historic principles on which this nation was founded are so fragile in texture and so weak in nature that they can easily be destroyed in the pursuit of absolute power that corrupts absolutely.

And we face the same issues and the same problems and the same challenges today in 1973 as we did in 1867 because of our nation's unwillingness to resolve the historic conflict between black and white and to purge itself of the doctrine and dogma of white supremacy.

Everything that is now being laid bare about the disregard for human rights and civil liberties, the suspension of constitutional protections, and the contempt for the rule of law is deeply rooted in our nation's or people's easy accommodation of themselves to a social, economic and political system that sanctioned and perpetuated the doctrine that some men have a right to oppress, repress and hold dominion over other men.

When our nation was still relatively young and groping its way toward fulfilling its promise, Abraham Lincoln, in 1858, warned his countrymen that the ultimate destiny of this society would depend in large measure upon the nation's resolution of its treatment of and attitudes toward Black people in a manner consistent with the principles of freedom, justice and fraternity. And in a letter dated April 6, 1859, he wrote:

"This is a world of compensation; and he who would be no slave must consent to have no slave. Those who deny freedom to others deserve it not for themselves, and under a just God, cannot long retain it."

I believe that there can be redeeming features in our current national tragedy if this experience arouses in the nation at large the

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awareness that social justice must be pursued with relentless vigor and preserved and guarded with eternal vigilance. And, also, if it compels our nation to recall the words of Madison and Jay written in the FEDERALIST in 1787:

“Justice is the end of government. It is the end of civil society. It ever has been and ever will be pursued, until it be obtained, or until liberty be lost in the pursuit. In a society under the forms of which the stronger faction can readily unite and oppress the weaker, anarchy may as truly be said to reign, as in a state of nature where the weaker individual is not secured against the violence of the stronger.”

Institutions such as Howard were founded to help this nation fulfill its promise as one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all. The task this university was founded to accomplish remains an unfinished task primarily because the promise this nation was created to keep remains an unfulfilled promise.

The problem of the “color line” that DuBois predicted would be the problem of the twentieth century has passed through successive stages of definition from an “American Problem” at the beginning of this century, to an “American Dilemma” in the 1940’s, to an “American Crisis” in the 1970’s. But it is not recognized as a crisis.

Our nation and our people have been lulled into apathy and indifference about racism and its consequences by the widely circulated reports that during the 1960’s we have made such tremendous progress toward changing the nature and condition of life for Black Americans that we can be at peace, extend congratulations to ourselves and stand up and cheer. From the “benign neglect” of Moynihan, we are likely now to have a “malignant neglect” from the work of *Wattenberg* and *Scammon*. I do not deny that some things have improved, but I do contend that as long as there is any inequity and disparity between Black and white in family income, educational opportunity and achievement, employment, housing, election to public office at every level and in all other areas of American life, I am not prepared to be at peace, extend congratulations or stand up and cheer.

On the contrary, rather than finding very much about which to be satisfied, I find much about which I am deeply concerned. I am troubled about the resurrection of the concept of genetic intellectual inferiority and the ease with which so-called liberal scholars in supposedly liberal universities advance and support this notion.

I am also concerned – as I stated in my Convocation address last year – about the impact that the thesis of Coleman and Jencks concerning the relative importance of education to a people’s upward



mobility is having not only in moulding public opinion but also in shaping national and public policy.

And I am deeply troubled by the assault now being made upon the institutions of higher learning serving primarily Black young men and women.

Those of us in institutions like Howard will face this year and in the years immediately ahead in this issue one of the most serious issues we have faced since institutions serving Black people were created; and that is the issue of the survival of our institutions. There are forces now adrift in the currents of this society that have as their ultimate objective the destruction of institutions of higher learning which have as their special and primary mission the education of Black Americans and of other Black peoples.

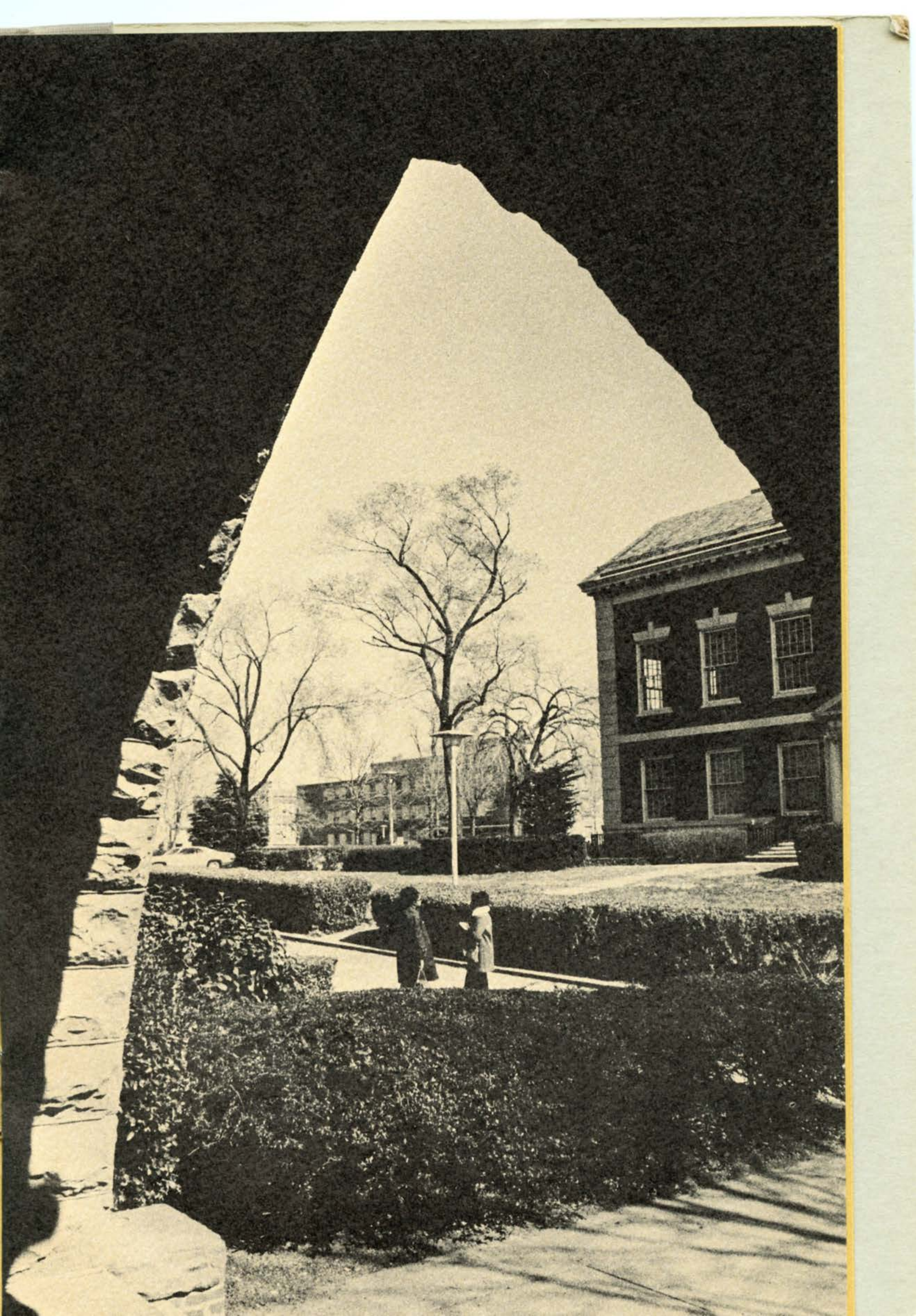
In the name of eliminating the "racial identity" of institutions of higher learning, and under the guise of "integrating" American higher education, such forces advocate that those institutions with a predominantly Black student population be merged or consolidated with institutions with a majority white student population.

There are a number of things that are basically wrong with such advocacy.

First, America has not yet reached that level of maturity and racial unconsciousness that allows anything to lose "racial identity." Where colleges and universities are involved, such institutions would simply change their racial identity, not lose it. To state the issue another way, institutions now serving primarily Black students would become institutions serving primarily white students with a small minority of Black students. Black students, already grossly under-represented in the college and university population would be even more under-represented. In short, Black students of college age would be "shut out" and "pushed out" of the higher educational system just as they have been pushed or shoved out of the lower educational system during the past eighteen years.

I am a firm believer in America becoming an "open society" and in the desegregation of every aspect of American life, including education, but I conscientiously cannot support a concept of "integration" that by definition and in its pragmatic execution is an insidious perpetuation of the doctrine of white supremacy and that results in a diminution of our people's access to be accorded equity and parity.

The President of the United States has stated several times in his public utterances that he believes that every American should have, and is entitled to an "equal chance at the starting gate." If that is truly his belief and conviction, then I call upon him to take the initiative — not only by public pronouncement but by public action without delay



—and those steps that would insure that Black Americans are in fact afforded such an equal chance — and the place to begin is with education. I agree with Horace Mann that “*education is the great equalizer of the conditions of men; the balance wheel of the social machinery.*” We could have equalized the conditions of Black people and white people in this society generations ago had there existed in this society a genuine and unequivocal commitment to equalizing educational opportunity. And by educational opportunity, I do not mean simply access to entry, but appropriate programs and remedies to assure equal success in successful performance.

Those of us in higher education should take heed from what has happened in lower education with respect to Blacks since the 1954 Supreme Court decision.

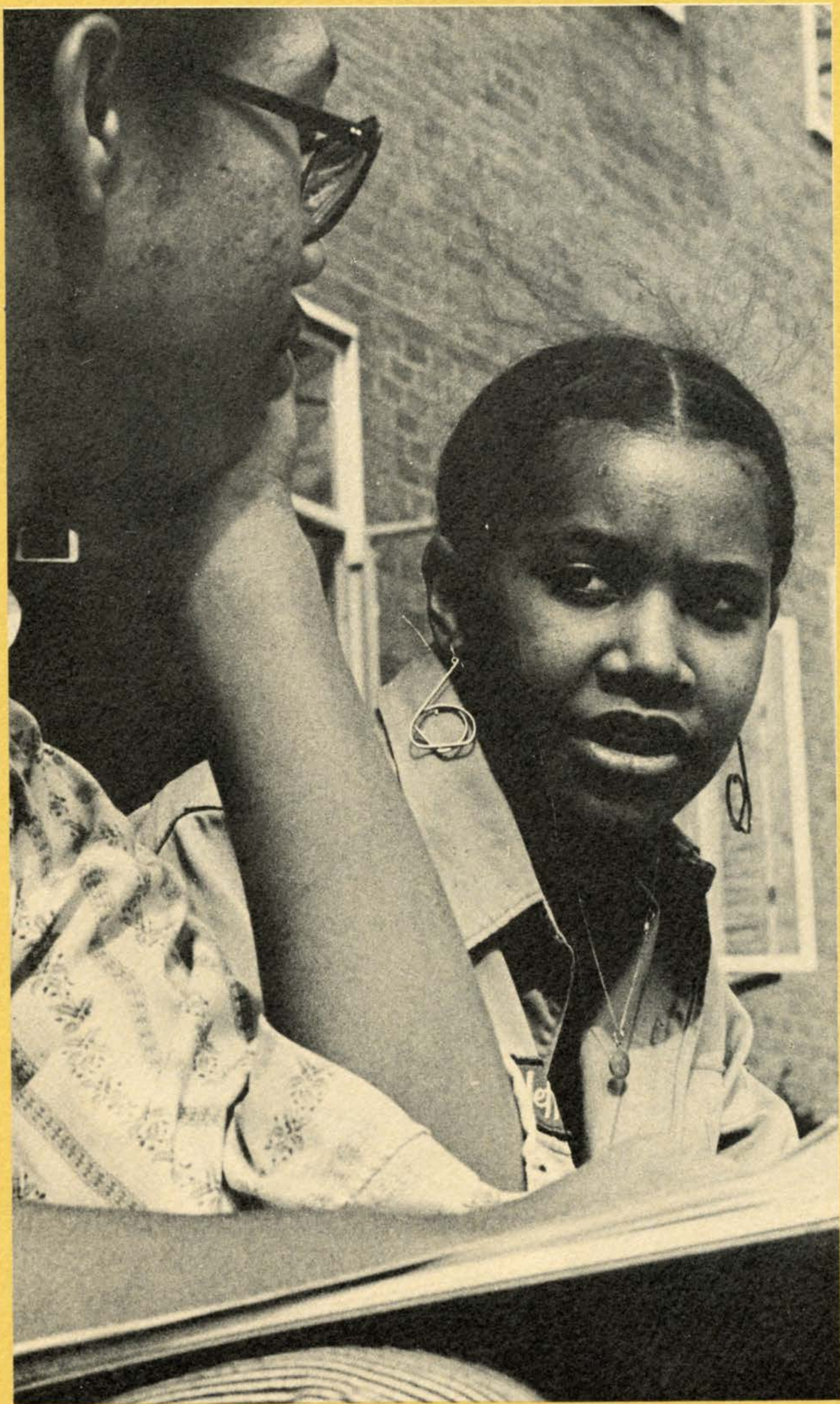
A study released in July of this year, under the auspices of the Southern Regional Council, the National Education Association and the National Urban League, reported that *southern Black communities were 30,000 jobs and \$250 million poorer as a result of desegregation in the public schools.* This study also revealed the dismissal of veteran Black teachers and the failure to hire Black college graduates.

In March of this year the National Education Association reported that 22,750 Black students in Mississippi alone have been pushed out of school. The Mississippi Teachers Association indicates that the number of pushouts may be as high as 50,000 Black students.

Even in New York state we find an alarming picture. The Fleischman Report notes that there were 33,969 Black students in the 9th grade in 1967, but in grade 12 in 1970, there were only 19,000; that is, almost half of the Black students were out of school and did not graduate from high school.

Let us look at the past 108 years from 1865 onward when most of the institutions serving Black students were founded. Socially, culturally, economically and politically, where would Black people in the United States be today if schools like Howard, Fisk, Tuskegee, Atlanta, Hampton, Shaw, etc. had not been founded? At the time of their creation, none of these colleges or universities had broad public support for their creation and many faced firm and stern opposition. But they — with more than a hundred others — have endured and today still graduate more Blacks than all of the predominantly white institutions combined.

If social justice means equity and parity in access to all of the opportunities, rewards, benefits and powers of the American society — and that is the test I apply — then this year the number of Black students enrolled in higher education would be approximately one million; but last year it was not even a half million. And of that number



only about a third, were enrolled in programs leading to a degree. Much of the celebrated progress in increasing the level of Black college enrollment has taken place in community colleges with a large number of Black students being placed in terminal programs not leading to a college degree. On the basis of the fact that Black students constituted 12 or more percent of the college age population last year, equity and parity—in my opinion—would demand that Black students be enrolled in higher education in proportion to their numbers in the college age population.

According to the most recent information I have been able to obtain—the 1971-72 academic year—there were 73,676 students enrolled in medical schools, of which only 3,292 were Black students. Equity would require 5,549 additional Black students in medicine. In dentistry the total enrollment was 16,789, of which only 601 were Black, requiring an additional 1,413 Black students. Law schools nationwide had a total enrollment of 93,500 students, but only 3,732 Black, leaving a deficiency of 7,488. That year there were 229,047 students studying engineering but only 4,831 Black students, a deficiency of Black students numbering 22,654.

The best estimate on Black Ph.D. students is they constitute about .8 of one percent of all Ph.D. candidates currently enrolled in American universities. But we know for a fact that during the period 1958-1970, American universities produced 207,513 Ph.D.'s. Of that number only approximately 2,200 were Black. In terms of equity, during that period, there should have been at least 22,701 more Black Ph.D.'s.

When one considers the magnitude of the job that needs to be done by all of American higher education in equalizing the educational opportunity for Black young men and women, no rational person and certainly no concerned educator would advocate or support any action that is almost certain to result in a decrease in higher educational opportunity for Black Americans.

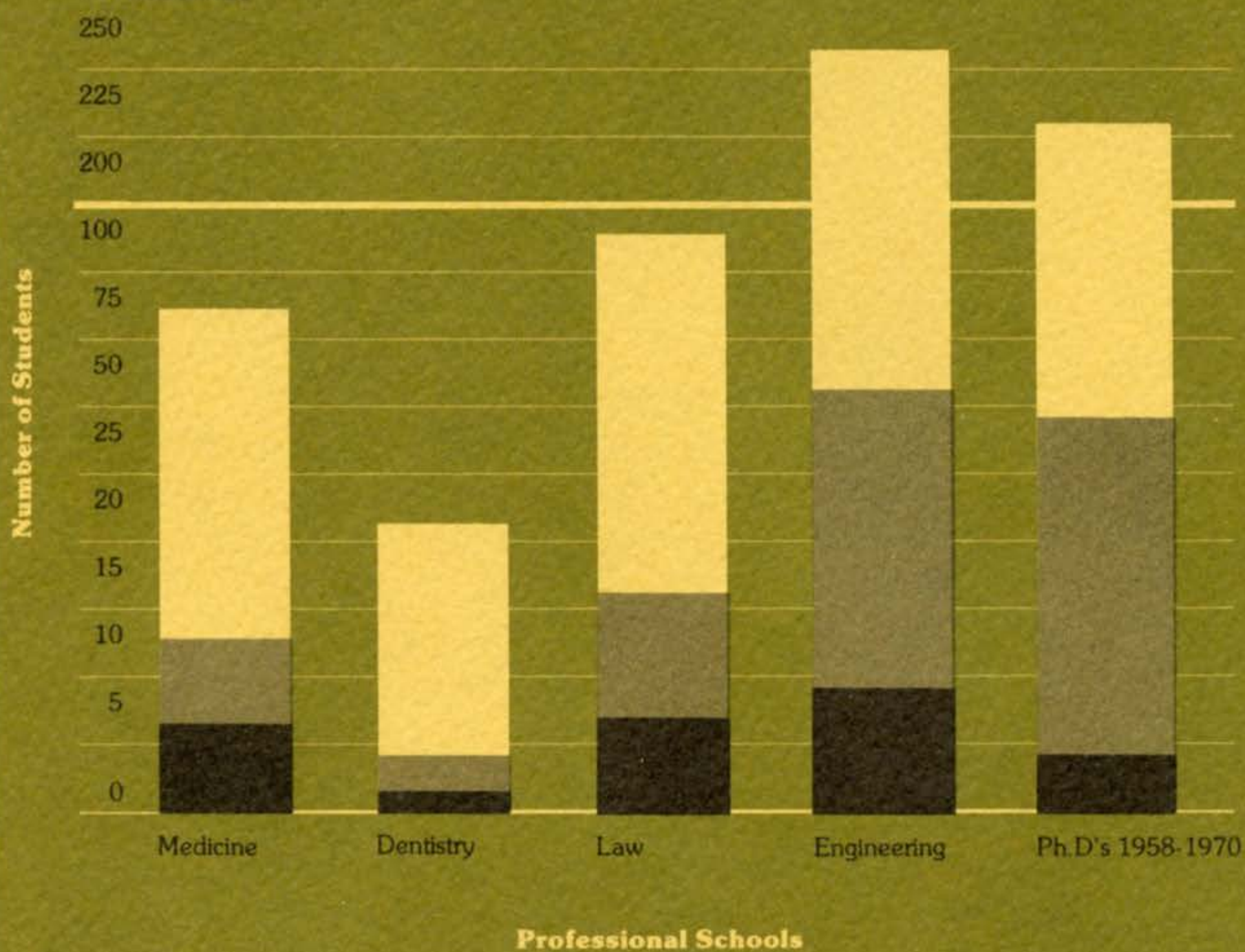
Our university, in this academic year within the larger society faces a time of troubles, but within our own institutional community, we face a time of challenges, new opportunities and unfinished tasks.

It has now been four years and sixty-seven days since I arrived on this campus to assume officially the duties and responsibilities as your President. I brought with me the conviction, which I shall never lose, that Howard could and would become one of the major intellectual centers in the world.

Some of you I am sure have the impression that I have an obsession about financial resources. I must confess that I do have such, and for a very good reason:

A Comparative Study of Professional School Enrollment 1971-1972

IN THOUSANDS



Legend

- Total Enrollment
- Black Enrollment
- Black Deficiency

It has frequently been noted that Black colleges have mastered the art of making "brick without straw." That may be true, but I simply do not know how to do that, and I have no interest in learning the formula. That may have been acceptable in the old order, but it simply will not do for the new order.

In the area of resource development, I have two overall objectives: (1) to increase substantially our resources from the Federal Government, and (2) to establish and maintain an organized and on-going development fund-raising program in the private sector to augment in a substantial way the support from the Federal Government.

When we review the increases in the Federal appropriation to Howard during the four years of my administration, the amount and level of such increases are indeed, on the surface, impressive. During the four budget years for which I have been responsible, we have received \$5,884,000 to increase faculty salaries; \$14,244,000 in increases for the operation of the academic program; \$2,831,000 in increases for the operation of Freedmen's Hospital. During a four year period, from the federal appropriation we have received 267 new faculty positions, 201 additional supporting staff positions and 187 non-teaching staff positions for Freedmen's Hospital.

With respect to faculty salaries, we have made that area our number one priority during the past four years and we shall continue to do so in the future.

Measured against the Federal appropriation of prior years, such increases in financial support should be a source of great satisfaction to all of us. But in all candor, I must state that I am not at all completely satisfied.

When I ponder what we have received in relation to what we need, I am reminded of the story related to me by Dr. Benjamin Mays. Dr. Mays tells the story of his roommate at Bates College who had considerable difficulty in mastering Greek. After he had taken the final examination in the first year course, this young man was in considerable agony about how well he had done. After several days of nervous anguish, Dr. Mays suggested to his roommate that he should go see the professor of Greek and find out what his performance was. He took his advice and procured a conference with the professor. The student asked his teacher how well he had done in the course. The professor replied: "Mr. Jones, you did very well; as a matter of fact, you did exceedingly well, and one could say you did extraordinarily well, but unfortunately, *not well enough to pass.*"

During the past four years, the Federal Government has done very well by Howard, but in my judgment, not well enough to pass.



Between now and 1983, we will need and we will seek not less than \$80,000,000 in new funds for the operation of our academic program, including in that amount the increases required to compensate our faculty adequately. This amount will bring us to a stable base of Federal support for the academic program of \$125,000,000 by the 1983-84 academic year. During the same period we will need and we will seek for the physical development of the University, not less than 260 million dollars. These funds are required to build additional academic and support facilities to accommodate not only our present enrollment, but an enrollment expected to double over the next ten years and to acquire additional land area.

But what we will seek from the Federal Government—large as it may appear—is not adequate for the job we are called upon to do. As I stated in my first convocation address four years ago, we also must go to the private sector—our alumni, our friends, philanthropic foundations and corporate business community. We will camp on their doorsteps and seek from them the balance that we need. The opportunity for investment in Howard that we shall present will be one that cannot be refused without making it clear that the support of Howard is not as important to them as the support of Harvard or Yale or Chicago. And if that be the result of our effort—every second of time and every ounce of energy that we devote to this endeavor will still not be lost, for we will then know for a fact and with a high degree of certitude that this wealthy and prosperous nation does in fact intend to keep Black people and the institutions that serve them in a continual—and perhaps—perpetual state of inferiority.

But our quality as an institution of higher learning will not really be determined by the size of our budget, number of our buildings, or the beauty of our campus.

It will be determined by the quality and character of our performance.

We ask our teachers to make demonstrably clear to all that the Howard faculty is a faculty of scholars. Fondly do I hope and fervently do I pray that the Howard faculty will seize the initiative and make it impossible for anyone to equate our work with inferiority. Two years ago I was returning to Washington from the White House Conference on Youth in Denver, I had as my seat mate on the airplane a high officer of the Atomic Energy Commission. After we had introduced ourselves, with his discovery that I was the President of Howard, he said to me: "I understand the great debate taking place among the Howard faculty is whether Howard is going to be a 'Black university' or a 'first class university'." When that person saw the expression on my face and in my eyes, he quickly realized the implications of his remarks and

tried to apologize. I told him there were no words in the English language or in any language that he could utter to me as an apology. Despite my anger and indignation, I realized that he was a victim of American racism. And there are many people who still firmly believe that it is impossible to achieve academic excellence and to produce outstanding scholarship in an institution of higher learning that is under predominantly Black leadership, and that has a predominantly Black faculty and a predominantly Black student population. We are determined here at Howard to prove such people wrong.

We ask of our students a very simple thing: that you study so hard and learn so well that when you leave this institution you carry with you the knowledge and skills that will make it impossible for anyone to regard you or call you inferior and/or incompetent. The 3500 new students admitted this year were drawn from an application pool in excess of 17,000. You chose Howard as the place to participate in an educational experience, but Howard also chose you. We chose you, our students, in conformity with this University's mission: to produce leaders for our oppressed peoples and leaders for a nation that needs moral direction.

I have no hard and fast views about the criteria we should use in admitting students to Howard. But I have deep and firm convictions about students who are allowed to stay here and even greater convictions about students we graduate. This university will not place its imprimatur on any person who is not thoroughly competent to compete effectively with his peers in his or her chosen profession, occupation or calling.

That is an obligation we owe to you and an obligation we owe to the people we serve.

But continuing our efforts to increase our resources to support our teaching, learning and research endeavors is not the only area that must engage our attention this year.

Because of our concern about the status and condition of Black people and other minorities, we are giving active consideration to hosting a national conference to examine in depth, and in an analytical fashion, the state of Black America. Such a conference, should it be convened, will have as its purpose to draw together the Black leadership as well as the grassroots in all areas—education, business, government, the health professions, the legal profession, news media, religion, social work, entertainment, the sports world, etc.—to see if we can fashion an effective way to remind our nation that our problems are not yet solved. Such a conference will not be a “rap” session.

Out of it, hopefully, will emerge a masterplan to mobilize all resources to help our nation achieve social justice.

To improve our effectiveness as an international university and to better serve our large non-American student population, we shall create an Advisory Council on International Education and Cultural Exchange. We need to establish formal relations with universities in other nations, and to assist those nations in ways that they wish and in ways that we can.

Because of our need to forge and establish stronger and more structured relations with the community in which we reside we shall initiate formal discussions with community leaders in the District Government, in the school board, among political and religious leaders. We are not only a resource to the nation at large and to other nations, but we must become a more effective resource for our community and our neighbors. We have much that we can offer and they have much that they can teach us.

During the period of the 1960's we grew immensely as an institution of higher learning. In 1960-61 our Operating Budget was \$10,019,000. Last year our total Operating Budget was \$83,737,000, and if we include the operating budget of Freedmen's Hospital, our budget for operations was \$109,762,000. And I should note also that in the short period of four years since 1969-70, when I took office to 1972-73, our budget rose from a level of \$39.1 to the level of \$83.7 million, an increase of some \$44 million.

In 1960-61, we had a FTE student population of 5,246. Last year, it was 9,722, an increase of more than 85%. And in 1960-61, our FTE Faculty was 362. Last year, it was 874, an increase of more than 140%.

With the reorganization of the composition and functioning of our governing board, with the reorganization of the central administration; because of the establishment of four new professional schools, several new research institutes, commercial activities such as the Howard University Press, a commercial radio station, the prospect for operating our own television station, our new relationship with a community bank and a branch on our campus—all of these—and many other developments having occurred in just four short years—coupled with the growth of the preceding decade—have transformed Howard into a truly major corporate enterprise. Despite our clear need for greatly increased resources, the trustees and I are deeply concerned that we are using well and managing prudently the resources we already have. The trustees have, therefore, authorized the engagement of an outside management consulting firm with broad experience in educational management of complex institutions to examine every aspect

of our operation and make appropriate recommendations for our consideration.

As we embark upon our ten year development fund raising program, which is now in its second year of active planning and preparation, it is imperative that we be able to present to both the Federal Government and private philanthropy a Howard University whose affairs are being properly and prudently managed. In addition to the evaluations by the various accrediting agencies and the annual inspections by the Bureau of Higher Education of HEW, we now need the judgment and evaluation of management experts whose non relation to the University may provide a measure of objectivity not otherwise available.

We have asked the Deans and the Faculties, along with the students of our fifteen schools and colleges to examine in depth their present academic offerings and to recommend changes that in their judgment will improve the quality and effectiveness of teaching and learning.

Major attention will be given this year to improving our programs at the graduate level beyond the first degree. We are most concerned about the present structure and organization of our Graduate School, and will soon have available for your consideration, a working paper as a point of departure for having at Howard a truly outstanding Graduate School of Arts and Sciences. In undertaking this task we are mindful of the fact that among the 110 predominantly Black institutions of higher learning in the nation, Howard is the only truly comprehensive university, making us — among this group of institutions — unique. We, therefore, have the unique opportunity — and I daresay also a unique obligation — to play an even larger role in this area in the future than we have in the past.

When I arrived at Howard four years ago, I discovered that the university had been accumulating a deficit for several years. I decided two years ago to share this fact with the university community, not in an effort to alarm, but rather in an effort to inform and hopefully to seek your understanding of why certain policies were necessary and to seek your cooperation in helping us to come to grips with our financial reality. Today, I am able to report that our accumulated deficit, based upon preliminary figures, has been totally eliminated.

Unlike many other universities faced with the same problem, this has been accomplished without abolishing any faculty or staff positions and without having to eliminate any vital and necessary programs. We have suffered, however, in not being able to accommodate many unmet needs — especially in the area of supporting non-teaching staff. We hope we have now turned the corner, and

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while attempting to maintain expenditures in balance with our revenues, we will be able to provide some modest relief in those areas that are most critical.

This year we face some very major problems having to do with physical space, and our space problem is exceedingly complicated by two things very basic: the absence of available land area and the absence of sufficient money to purchase the land and build new buildings.

We are now ready to place on the market for bids, the new University Center for which we have been waiting since 1964. But in order to build that much needed facility, we shall have to relocate student activities in the present Student Union, as well as the School of Education.

We have been put on notice by the accrediting body for the School of Architecture that this year the University must be able to show evidence of moving decisively in adequately providing physical facilities for our School of Architecture. We face the same prospect when the School of Business and Public Administration is visited by its accrediting body.

Several buildings need drastic renovation. We have already allocated \$1.2 million to renovate Founders Library and another \$1.2 million to renovate the chemistry building — two buildings constructed in the 1930's. The facility housing the College of Fine Arts must be drastically renovated and enlarged. We need to relocate the Computer Center and totally utilize Locke Hall classrooms and faculty office space.

I have requested the appropriate officers of the University to prepare for my consideration and for consideration by the Trustees, a workable plan to meet all of these critical needs — a plan that we can begin to act on this year and not reflect over for another ten years. I have already devoted four years giving prayerful consideration to the problem, now I want an immediate workable solution to the problem.

With the establishment of the new Moorland-Springarn Research Center, we must provide what will be needed for it to function as one of our institution's most important and priceless resources.

And now that the Howard University Press is ready to sign contracts for the publishing of a large number of works by outstanding scholars we must find a way to meet its financial requirements in order that we keep faith with our intentions.

None of these tasks is an easy task, but none is unaccomplishable if we bring to each hard work, a firm commitment and a united and cooperative effort.

Our work this year, however, is not solely for Howard alone. As

we labor and toil together as a community of scholars I should hope that all of us will endeavor to insure that what we do will have some lasting benefit for our people and for our country.

I know there are some who firmly believe that there is no hope in this society for people of African descent, but speaking for myself alone, I cannot give up in the struggle to make our nation do what is morally right. Our people have given so much for so long for this generation of Black Americans to abdicate our duty. For let us not forget that our fathers and our brothers have answered every call to bear arms in defense of liberties we never had. The bodies of Black men are buried in the soil around the globe as witness and testimony to preserving a democracy we have never enjoyed. Our parents have begged on bended knee to be accorded the most elementary rights of human beings. In the past, many of our leaders have laughed when they were not humored and have scratched where they did not itch. They have shuffled their feet when they were not nervous and have bowed their heads when they were not engaged in prayer.

We have peacefully assembled and petitioned for the redress of grievances. We have sat in, slept in, stood in, studied in, prayed in. We have waged our struggle non-violently in the spirit of love, appealed to the fundamental morality of the nation, and the nation's conscience. The response has been bloodied heads and broken limbs; bombed churches and burned homes; assassinated leaders and murdered followers; broken spirits and crippled hopes.

But despite all of this, I firmly believe that if we are true believers in the cause, if we are faithful to the mission we were created to pursue, and if we are diligent in the pursuit of the mission, we at Howard can surely help to make our people truly free and to make our nation truly just.

James E. Cheek
September 6, 1973
