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**Beyond the Open Door:
The Origins of Race-Based Affirmative Action
in Undergraduate Admissions at Cornell and
the University of Michigan**

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Abstract

What are the origins of race-based affirmative action in college admissions? With only a few exceptions, there remain few evidence-based accounts of when and why such programs emerged among selective institutions of higher education; how heavily they weighed racial considerations; and how exactly race was taken into account. This paper draws on original archival research to closely examine the initial advent and early development of race-based affirmative action at Cornell and the University of Michigan, two of the largest and earliest adopters of such programs. It finds that both schools began to take race-based affirmative action in the early 1960s, responding to the moral impetus of the civil rights movement and concerns about racial patterns of educational inequality in the North as well as South. Compared to subsequent programs, these programs granted a modest degree of weight to race, and they took not only the race of the applicant into account but also the racial composition of the high school attended by the applicant.

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Though it remains firmly at the center of recent conflicts over civil rights and public policy, surprisingly little is known about the origins of affirmative action in college admissions. Where did such programs come from? Were they as controversial as they would later become? How did they initially work? Who started them, and what were their motivations? Historians have made enormous progress in teasing out the numerous and complicated storylines behind the advent of affirmative action in employment and contracting. Traditional, top-down narratives of bureaucratic, judicial, and partisan maneuvering during the Kennedy-Johnson-Nixon years are now complemented by powerful accounts of local, grassroots protest in northern cities during the late 1950s and early 1960s. But the history of affirmative action in college admissions remains largely unwritten, with only a handful of notable exceptions.¹

¹ Among the most significant exceptions are Jerome Karabel, *The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admission and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton* (New York, 2005); John Aubrey Douglass, *The Conditions for Admission: Access, Equity, and the Social Contract of Public Universities* (Stanford, 2007); Joy Ann Williamson, *Black Power on Campus: The University of Illinois, 1965-75* (Urbana-Champaign, 2003); Christopher Loss, *Between Citizens and the State: The Politics of American Higher Education in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, forthcoming). Brian Pusser, *Burning Down the House: Politics, Governance, and Affirmative Action at the University of California* (Albany, 2004). The historical literature on the origins and development of affirmative action in employment is now abundant. Among the most significant published contributions are Hugh Davis Graham, *The Civil Rights Era: Origins and Development of National Policy* (New York, 1990); Jill Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare: How Racism Undermined the War on Poverty* (New York, 1994); John D. Skrentny, *The Ironies of Affirmative Action: Politics, Culture, and Justice in America* (Chicago, 1996); Paul D. Moreno, *From Direct Action to Affirmative Action: Fair Employment Law and Policy in America, 1933-1970* (Baton Rouge, 1997); Dean J. Kotlowski, "Richard Nixon and the Origins of Affirmative Action," *Historian*, 60 (Spring 1998), 523-41; Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge, Mass., 2003); Thomas J. Sugrue, *Affirmative Action from Below: Civil Rights, the Building Trades, and the Politics of Racial Equality in the Urban North, 1945-1969*, *Journal of American History*,

The little that is known lends credence to the argument that affirmative action burst suddenly upon the scene as a pragmatic response by university administrators to the real and imaginary threats posed by campus demonstrations and urban riots in the late 1960s. Affirmative action, it would seem from the available evidence, was adopted primarily as a pressure valve to lessen the threat of further disorder. Some authors view the emergence of such programs as the outgrowth of a heroic struggle to open up racially exclusionary institutions of higher education, while others see it as the poisoned fruit of “racial blackmail” by student militants threatening campus violence. Regardless of how the historical narrative is constructed, however, affirmative action is seen as the result of a bottom-up process driven primarily by student protest and abetted significantly by the sense of chaos that pervaded the country in the aftermath of Watts, Detroit, and Newark.²

This view is historically incomplete; it misidentifies the timing and source of policy innovation and misses the subtle but definite linkages between the rise of racially attentive admissions policies and the black freedom struggle.

Affirmative action in college admissions began in the early 1960s as the “classical phase” of the civil rights movement reached the fullest scope of its national influence. In

91 (June 2004), 145-73; “Matthew Countryman, *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 2005); Nancy MacLean, *Freedom Is Not Enough: The Opening of the American Workplace* (New York Cambridge, Mass., 2006); Robert C. Lieberman, *Shaping Race Policy: The United States in Comparative Perspective* (Princeton, 2007); Paul Frymer, *Black and Blue: African Americans, the Labor Movement, and the Decline of the Democratic Party* (Princeton, 2007).

² The precipitating role of campus demonstrations or urban riots is highlighted in J. Harvie Wilkinson, III, *From Brown to Bakke: The Supreme Court and School Integration* (New York, 1979); William G. Bowen and Derek Bok, *The Shape of the River: The Long-Term Consequences of Considering Race in College and University Admissions* (Princeton, 1998); Karabel, *The Chosen*; John D. Skrentny, *The Minority Rights Revolution* (Cambridge, MA, 2002); Terry Anderson, *The Pursuit of Fairness: A History of Affirmative Action* (New York, 2004).

the wake of Eugene “Bull” Connor’s heavy-handed repression of protest in Birmingham and King’s stirring perorations from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, public support for civil rights soared, if only for a fleeting moment. Less than a year later, Congress passed historic legislation requiring the equal treatment Americans in education, employment, public accommodations, and federally assisted programs.³ In precisely the same span of time, however, there was a growing sense that laws simply mandating non-discrimination and desegregation could not redeem the promise of racial equality on their own. In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson would declare in a commencement address to graduates of Howard University that “freedom is not enough,” and subsequent generations of liberals would cite his claim as rationale for affirmative action. But the president was only giving national voice to a sentiment that had been percolating for years in local settings across the country. In the field of higher education, certain selective colleges and universities in the North had already begun to experiment with official programs that relied on racial considerations to increase the enrollment of African American undergraduates. Leading the effort to transform admissions policy and practice were a set of university administrators—presidents, provosts, and deans—who found the racial composition of their schools wanting. Most selective northern institutions remained overwhelmingly white, and a number of the men presiding over them believed that their long-held “open door” policies were inadequate to the times. None went so far as to endorse racial quotas,

³ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” *Journal of American History*, 91 (March 2005), 1233-1263. On the relationship between public opinion and the civil rights movement, Taeku Lee, *Mobilizing Public Opinion: Black Insurgency and Racial Attitudes in the Civil Rights Era* (Chicago, 2002) and Paul Burstein, *Discrimination, Jobs, and Politics: The Struggle for Equal Employment Opportunity Since the New Deal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

but they argued that achieving racial integration required more than racial neutrality in the admissions process, and they rejected the argument that racial inclusion was intrinsically incompatible with academic excellence. What resulted from their initiatives were the first affirmative action programs in American higher education—and perhaps in the country as a whole.⁴

This paper traces the little-known advent of affirmative action in undergraduate admissions at two selective universities—one public and other private. In particular, it examines the early history of the Opportunity Award Program (OAP) at the University of Michigan and the Cornell Opportunity Program (COP) at Cornell University. To be certain, similar programs and initiatives were launched at other institutions of higher education, including Dartmouth College, Swarthmore College, the University of California, Los Angeles, the University of Pennsylvania, and Wesleyan College. But the University of Michigan’s OAP and Cornell University’s COP were among the earliest to take racial considerations into account in undergraduate admissions, and their origins warrant a closer look.⁵

The initial establishment of affirmative action in college admissions came at a time of tremendous change among institutions of higher learning. Undergraduate enrollments were continuing to swell, admissions offices were growing more selective about the applicants they accepted, doctoral and professional programs were being developed at a fantastic clip, and a widening flow of federal dollars was financing ever-

⁴ Johnson quoted in MacLean, *Freedom Is Not Enough*, 74.

⁵ Lisa M. Stulberg and Anthony S. Chen, “Beyond Disruption: The Forgotten Origins of Affirmative Action in College and University Admissions, 1961-1969,” Working Paper 07-001, Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, University of Michigan.

expanding volumes of research in science, engineering, and medicine. Amidst such major changes, one aspect of higher education stayed more or less the same: Going to college remained largely the privilege of white students. Black students were a rarity on American college campuses—not just in the South but in the North as well. Using data from the Current Population Reports, Milton A. Gordon has estimated that African Americans represented only 4.3% all of college students in 1960. That same year, only 7 percent of 18-24 year-old African Americans were attending college, one-third the college-going rate of whites in the same age bracket. The vast majority of black students were undoubtedly enrolled at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), and only a handful of them attended college elsewhere.⁶

The acute paucity of black enrollment did not go unnoticed. Much of the attention, of course, was focused on the pitched conflict over the desegregation of southern institutions. In 1962, Governor Ross Barnett famously tried to prevent air force veteran James Meredith from enrolling at the University of Mississippi. The violent aftermath of their confrontation made national headlines. But some observers of higher education saw that colleges and universities outside the South were nearly as racially exclusionary as their southern counterparts, though the basic reasons for the situation were obviously different. Charles E. Odegaard, long-time president of the University of Washington noticed the pronounced absence of black students at a commencement

⁶ John R. Thelin, *A History of American Higher Education* (Baltimore, 2004), 260-316; David Karen, “The Politics of Class, Race, and Gender: Access to Higher Education in the United States, 1960-1986,” *American Journal of Education*, 99 (February 1991), 208-237; Dongbin Kim and John L. Rury, “The Changing Profile of College Access: The Truman Commission and Enrollment Patterns in the Postwar Era,” *History of Education Quarterly*, 47 (August 2007), 302-327; Milton A Gordon, “An Analysis of Enrollment Data for Black Students in Institutions of Higher Education, from 1940-1972,” *Journal of Negro Education*, 45 (Spring 1976), 117-121.

exercise in 1963. Washington had observed an “open door” policy since 1959, when it announced that “educational opportunities” there were “open to all qualified applicants without distinction or preference on account of race, creed or color,” but it nevertheless enrolled only a handful of black students. In a meeting with high school counselors and administrators from Los Angeles in 1964, Byron H. Atkinson, Dean of Students at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), conceded that few black students actually attended UCLA, in spite of the “open door” policy that it had historically followed. Similar observations could have easily been made about most schools outside of the South—public or private, big or small, elite or mediocre. Although they had never practiced or imposed segregation as determinedly as Ole Miss, black students seemed in equally short supply there as well.⁷

If the problem did not go unnoticed, neither did it go unaddressed. Indeed, concern was sufficiently serious and widespread to sustain interest in a one-day conference at the University of Michigan in 1963. Attending the gathering—which the organizers called the Inter-University Conference on the Negro in Higher Education—were Roger W. Heyns, Vice-President of Academic Affairs, University of Michigan; Hobart Taylor, Jr., Executive Vice-President of the President’s Committee on Equal

⁷ Joseph Crespino, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution* (Princeton, 2007), 15-7, 41-8; University Memorandum No. 22: Equality of Opportunity, February 3, 1959, File: University Memoranda, 20-29, Box 38, University of Washington President Records, Special Collections Division, University of Washington; Meeting, May 27, 1965, Bulletin 161, File: Class C Bulletin, 1953-68, Box 112, University Publications, Special Collections Division, University of Washington; *University of Washington Daily*, October 30, 1968; Schedule: Meeting with School Administrators, December 8, 1964, File: Educational Opportunities Programs, 1963-1964-1965, Box 36, UCLA Office of the Chancellor—Administrative Subject Files of Franklin D. Murphy, University Archives, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

Employment Opportunity; along with representatives from Michigan State University, Northwestern University, Purdue University the University of Chicago, the University of Iowa, and Wayne State University as well as Alcoa and General Electric. Discussion centered on how to black youth who were capable of succeeding at the university; how to retain black students once they were admitted; how to channel them into graduate and professional schools; and how to facilitate cooperative programs between white schools and HBCUs. Among the more significant moments of the day occurred when Russell W. Brown, Vice-President of the Tuskegee Institute, rose to speak about the problem of using standardized test scores to gauge the academic potential of black applicants. In a session on graduate and professional education, Brown suggested that it might perhaps be necessary to “take a risk” on black students in the admissions process, arguing that “measuring and testing devices” in their current state did not reliably identify the “real potential for success of these students.” Interest in the racial integration of northern campuses may not have yet become widespread, but the Michigan conference signified that the issue had landed prominently on the agenda of key leaders in higher education.⁸

The conference also signaled a growing belief that the de facto segregation of northern campuses was simply unacceptable. At a time when the civil rights movement had begun to stage nationally visible demonstrations that would become indelibly etched

⁸ Program, Inter-University Conference on the Negro in Higher Education, October 21, 1963, Folder: Negro, re 1963-4, Box 1, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs—Central Files, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan (hereafter UM Provost Records); Michael Sattinger, “Seek to Elevate Negro Role,” *Michigan Daily*, October 13, 1963. The idea for the Michigan conference had originated the previous spring at a conference organized by the President’s Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity and held at Wayne State University. A few of the participants agreed that it would be worthwhile to launch a larger discussion about African Americans in higher education. See Sattinger, “Seek to Elevate Negro Role.”

in American political history, key numbers of university administrators were beginning to argue that institutions of higher learning could and should experiment with new programs and approaches to break down the racial exclusivity of their campuses. This exclusivity did not stem from segregationist impulses or supremacist sentiments, as it may have elsewhere; it was instead the direct legacy of racial inequality. Yet it warranted redress just the same. These ideas surfaced with particular clarity in 1963, when President David D. Henry at the University of Illinois announced the establishment of a university-wide Committee on Human Relations and Equal Opportunity. Like many other institutions that formed similar committees at roughly the same time (e.g., Washington), Illinois had long been “open equally to all persons,” and it had been particularly open in terms of “student admissions and student opportunity.” But the events of recent years had convinced Henry that formal equality was not enough: “We have a new consciousness...that it is not sufficient that the University be passively available to all.” Something else was required if the pattern was to be broken. “I believe that we must take more positive steps to overcome the disabilities that stem from decades of inequality in our society, some of it hidden and unconscious until now.” Henry was well aware that his remarks might be interpreted as a hasty and ill-advised abandonment of merit, and he sought to counter the impression by addressing it directly. “I am in no way suggesting that we should alter our standards for any student or for any employee.” It would be just as “wrong” to confer an artificial advantage on a “Negro” as it would be to discriminate against her. Instead, he offered a metaphor for what he had in mind. “[A]s we build ramps for our physically disabled students, without violating our standards, I believe that we must off-set some of the disabilities arising from racial and social inequality by building psychological and

special assistance ‘ramps’ for young who need them.” Though the comparison might have led some listeners to bristle, Henry’s underlying point was straightforward. Decades of racial inequality left black students at a competitive disadvantage in comparison to their white peers, and the time had come to explore new ways of leveling the playing field, so that black students could compete on the same terms as other applicants.⁹

Henry’s sentiments were echoed in a widely noted speech by Basil O’Connor at the Tuskegee Conference on Disadvantage, held less than a week after the Michigan conference. O’Connor chaired Tuskegee’s Board of Trustees, and he made remarks to a large, distinguished audience—which included Michigan’s Heyns, who had made the trip from Ann Arbor. O’Connor’s remarks were motivated by a single question: “After Desegregation What?” This was not just a question for southerners, he implied. It was a question for all Americans. The civil rights movement had “overflowed” the southern states and pricked the conscience of the entire nation. “None of us lives far enough from segregated housing, inferior Negro schools, or poverty-stricken Negro neighborhoods, that we can consider this none of our affair.” But the days of “formal segregation and discrimination” were numbered. “Who is now making plans for *after* the victory?” The time would soon come when “[n]egroes can enter any university, pursue any profession or vocation—but will they have the previous schooling to make that possible?” The answer, alas, was no: Most blacks would not be in a position to take advantage of their newfound rights. “For decades,” O’Connor argued, “many Negroes have been denied education entirely, or short-changed in their schools and colleges.” This “collective

⁹ Statement of President David Henry, “Illinois Appoints Committee for Human Relations and Equal Opportunity,” n.d., circa 1964, Box 1, Slatoff Papers, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Kroch Library, Cornell University (hereafter Slatoff Papers).

educational deficit” was the single most significant problem that faced the country after desegregation. The solution, O’Connor suggested, was to “devote our energies and our money, to improving, enriching, and accelerating the education of American Negroes, making it clear that others in the underprivileged segments of society are also welcome to take advantage of the chance to catch up.” This did not have to mean a program of “preferential treatment” in the form of racial quotas. O’Connor strenuously disagreed with critics who labeled the idea “discrimination in reverse.” But he also argued that supporting such policies would taint the great moral and practical strengths of the civil rights movement. Instead, what was necessary was an all-out effort to “upgrade all of education” and especially historically black colleges like Tuskegee. Moreover, it would also be necessary to develop “much-improved tools for identifying able and talented Negroes” whose disadvantaged backgrounds obscured their potential to achieve. Many more new programs would be needed to realize “true equality of opportunity.” What could not be countenanced was the belief that desegregation was enough.¹⁰

Words were followed by action at numerous schools in the North, and new initiatives sprung up at every stage of the educational pipeline from high school to college. Yale, Princeton, Brown, and Rutgers launched programs to prepare “disadvantaged” high school students for college application. Special university-wide committees were formed at Washington, Illinois, Michigan, and Cornell to consider ways of increasing black representation of campus. Several universities partnered with historically black colleges and started exchange programs, including Cornell-Hampton,

¹⁰ Basil O’Connor, *After Desegregation What?* (Tuskegee, AL: Tuskegee Institute, 1963), Box 1, Slatoff Papers; *Tuskegee Conference on Disadvantage* (Tuskegee, AL, Tuskegee Institute, 1963).

Brown-Tougaloo, Michigan-Tuskegee, and Yale-Hampton. In 1964, Cornell University alone was actively involved in a wide range of formal activities designed to increase the number of black enrollees. It participated in the National Scholarship and Service Fund for Negro Students. As a member of the Ivy League, Cornell was also involved with in the Cooperative Program for Educational Opportunity (CPEO), which was essentially a “talent searching operation” that focused primarily on “attracting more qualified” black applicants from the deep South and other “disadvantaged” areas. Lastly, forty students belonging to the Undergraduate Secondary School Committee were planning to talk to ninth and tenth graders in disadvantaged areas of their home neighborhoods in order to motivate them to apply for college. It was indeed a time of great experimentation across higher education. Cornell and many schools were trying what they could—within limits—to increase the enrollment of black students.¹¹

Two schools went slightly further than most others in their efforts. In 1964, both Michigan and Cornell launched what would eventually become known as their affirmative action programs—that is, programs that permitted the racial background of the applicant to be given some weight in the decision to admit. The program at Michigan would initially enroll 70 students, most of them from Detroit and most of them African

¹¹ Lincoln Lewis, Memorandum, Appendix 2, July 13, 1964, Slatoff Papers. The appendix lists Princeton and California as schools who provided scholarships for “talented students whose grades might otherwise bar admission,” but we have been unable to confirm the existence of such a program at either school in 1964; W.A. Snickenberger to John Summerskill, January 11, 1964, Box 1, Slatoff Papers. On the Michigan-Tuskegee program, see Laurel Park, “Planting the Seeds of Academic Excellence and Cultural Awareness: The Michigan-Tuskegee Exchange Program,” *Michigan Historical Review*, 30 (Spring 2004): 117-131.

American. The program at Cornell would enroll 10 students in 1964 after a recruiting effort that focused on New York high schools with large black populations.¹²

The impetus for Michigan's program stretched back to 1962, when top administrators first began consider their options for raising black enrollment. Among them was Roger W. Heyns, who had recently become provost after having served a short term as Dean of the College of Literature, Science, and Arts. The momentum for action accelerated rapidly. Heyns arranged to meet with Stephen Spurr, Dean of the Graduate School, and Francis, head of the Detroit Urban League, and the men discussed various "ways and means" of increasing black representation on campus. Shortly thereafter, Heyns formed the Ad Hoc Advisory Committee on the Negro in Higher Education. The committee was asked to "discuss research and action programs concerned with the place of the Negro student and faculty member in higher education in general, and at the University of Michigan in particular." It was chaired by N. Edd Miller and included faculty from psychology, social work, and the Institute for Social Research. It met several times over the course of 1963, and from its deliberations emerged the idea of the OAP. On March 5, 1964, Heyns announced the establishment of the OAP at a meeting of school superintendents, principals, and guidance counselors from around Michigan. A program like OAP, he implied, was essential to the demands of the times. "As social, legal, moral, and political forces continually succeed in reducing discriminatory practices," he said, "a major educational task is the preparation of the Negro and other

¹² Press Release, University of Michigan News Service, March 5, 1964, Folder: Negro re 1963-4, Box 1, UM Provost Records; "Survey Shows Wide Range of Positive Action On Racial Matters Within the University Community," *University Record*, June 6, 1968; A Report on the Disadvantaged Student Program, 1965-66, Folder 39, Box 18, James A. Perkins Papers, Kroch Library, Cornell University (hereafter Perkins Papers).

deprived students for a greater role in all aspects of American life.” In a subsequent letter to a Michigan faculty member, Heyns elaborated on his rationale for the program. One reason was simply to expand “educational opportunities” for qualified black students whose inability to attend college was largely financial in nature. But a second reason was to “participate appropriately in the national movement to improve the status of the Negro in our society.” Universities could and should do more than just keep their doors open; they should take proactive steps to ensure that African Americans could compete on fair terms with everyone else after segregation had been overcome.¹³

Of course, Heyns had little to do with the day-to-day operation of the OAP, which was in the capable hands of Leonard Sain, former principal of Eastern High School in Detroit. Sain joined the staff of the admissions office as a special assistant, and he participated intensively in the recruiting and admissions process. Principals and guidance counselors from selected schools in Detroit were urged to identify strong candidates for admission and then arrange a visit. Sain or one of his colleagues made trips out to the schools and met with potential applicants, answering their questions and passing out application materials. Once the applications were completed, Sain interviewed the most promising applicants and make recommendations to the admissions office. Sain returned

¹³ Memo from Roger W. Heyns to the Ad-Hoc Advisory Committee on the Negro in Higher Education, May 31, 1963, Box 1, UM Provost Records; “U-M vice president describes long-time efforts to boost black enrollment,” *Michigan Alumnus Magazine* (May 1970), 20-1; Memo from N. Edd Miller to Roger W. Heyns, May 31, 1963, Folder: Negro, 1962-3, Box 1, UM Provost Records, Bentley Historical Library; Letter from Leonard F. Sain to Milton R. Konvitz, January 21, 1964, Press Release, March 5, 1964, Folder: Negro re 1963-4; Heyns to Maynard, April 7, 1964, all Folder: Negro, Re 1963-4, Box 1, UM Provost Records. The planning start date of 1962 is verified by two further sources: (1) Opportunity Scholarship Luncheon participant program notes. March 5, 1964. Bentley Historical Library, U.M. Provost and Executive V-P for Ac Affairs, Central Files, Box 1. (2) Robben Fleming’s letter to readers about the BAM negotiations. *Michigan Alumnus* magazine, May 1970.

to the Detroit Public School system the next year, and OAP recruiting was taken over by Robert Marion, who brought 64 students into OAP for the 1965-6 academic year.¹⁴

Recruiting students capable of college work could not have been easy for Sain and Marion. Racial inequality was pervasive in Detroit Public Schools. There were nearly 300 schools in the system, enrolling 285,000 students and employing 10,000 teachers. In 1961, nearly half the students were black, while roughly eighty percent of the teachers were white. Fifty-four schools were entirely white, while eight were all black. Most black students lived in the central and eastern parts of the city, and their schools were in far poorer condition than the schools attended by their white counterparts elsewhere. A report of the Citizens' Advisory Council on Equal Educational Opportunities found that the average school building in a majority black neighborhood lacked in safety, accessibility, efficiency, appearance and teaching adequacy. Twelve elementary school buildings in low-income, majority black areas were deemed "not fit for use." At the high school level, black students were far more likely to be placed in the less challenging "general" track than their white peers. For instance, at Mumford High School, one of the most academically oriented of the city's integrated schools, it was reported in 1958 that 22 percent of black students were in the general track compared to only 2 percent of whites. The facts and figures came to life in 1966, when *Detroit Free Press* reporter Jim Treolar published a searing, two-part report on Jefferson Intermediate School, of the city's majority black middle schools that was underperforming badly. It should not have come as a surprise. Many teachers at Jefferson Intermediate treated their students with

¹⁴ Academic Year 1964-5, Folder: Negro re 1963-4, Box 1, UM Provost Records; Memo from Sain to Miller, January 28, 1964; Draft Report, December 9, 1968 [**provenance uncertain**].

contempt. Many of them regarded their post at a temporary assignment and hoped to find a better position in a different district. One teacher was quoted as saying, “Most of these kids are just plain dumb. You’ll never teach them anything.”¹⁵

Given the rampant inequality they faced, it should be unsurprising that students admitted under OAP, even in its earliest years, did not always meet every requirement for admission. To be certain, it was hoped that they would all “qualify as an admissible student” to the University of Michigan, and the goal was to have every accepted students meet “all of the University’s academic standards.” The avowed intention of the program was not to “reduce admissions criteria” but instead to attract well-qualified students who would otherwise not apply.” Yet intentions did not always translate perfectly into practice. The first OAP cohort was composed of students who were “handicapped by financial and cultural deprivation.” While most of the students “showed sufficient promise to indicate that they were capable of meeting the high academic standards of the University,” it was nevertheless necessary in some cases to make “[c]ertain allowances for academic deficiencies.” Moreover, special counseling and remedial programs in particular areas were made available to students who needed them. In remarks to the faculty given in 1963, President Harlan H. Hatcher had implicitly conceded that it might be necessary to observe some flexibility. The academic preparation of students from “deprived backgrounds” might not enable them to be “competitive initially” at the university, even though there may be evidence of their “ability to do the work once the

¹⁵ *Findings and Recommendations of the Citizens Advisory Committee on Equal Educational Opportunities* (Detroit: Board of Education of the City of Detroit, 1962), 75-9; Jeff Mirel *The Rise and Fall of an Urban School System* (Ann Arbor, 1999), 220; *Michigan Chronicle*, March 15 and 22, 1958; Jim Treloar, 'Just Plain Dumb.' *Detroit Free Press*, September 26, 1966 (pages 1A, 4A) and September 27, 1966 (pages 1A, 4A).

handicaps of poor training are removed.” This did not mean, however, that it would be necessary for the university to lower its standards in order to educate disadvantaged or deprived students. In fact, Hatcher believed it would be “unwise” to lower “standards of graduation.” What it did mean was that Michigan should take the time to be “sensitive” and “responsive” to the “special needs” of disadvantaged students, particularly at the point of admission. “None of us knows the precise solution appropriate for us,” he concluded, “but it is important that we find the proper one.”¹⁶

Cornell was even more explicit than Michigan about the need to search for new ways of assessing academic ability during the admissions process, especially for black applicants. The impetus for Cornell’s affirmative action program began in 1963, when President James A. Perkins established a Committee on Disadvantaged Students and asked it to determine whether and how Cornell could make a “larger contribution to the education of qualified students who have been disadvantaged by their cultural, economic, and educational environments.” Headed up by John Summerskill, the committee recommended in 1964 that Cornell start a “scholarship fund specifically earmarked for the culturally disadvantaged student”—by which the committee meant “students whose racial, social or educational backgrounds would make it unlikely that they would attend a first rate university unless they received special encouragement and aid.” In practice, scholarships would “normally” go to black students, who have “labored under especially

¹⁶ Academic Year 1964-5, Folder: Negro re 1963-4, Box 1, Records of the UM Provost; Press Release, University of Michigan News Service, March 5, 1964; Minutes, Committee on Admissions, April 9, 1964, Folder: Committee on Admissions, 1963-64, Box 143, Records of the College of Literature, Science, and Arts, Bentley Library, University of Michigan; Draft Report, December 9, 1968 [**provenance uncertain**]; Harlan Hatcher, Annual Report to the Faculty, September 30, 1963, Box 58, Hatcher Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

severe social and cultural differences in our society,” but scholarships would occasionally be given out to students who suffered under a different type of disadvantage. The need for such a program was clearly manifest, they argued. There was a “substantial group [of disadvantaged students] capable of doing successful work at a first-rate university whose credentials will appear to be marginal or worse by Cornell admissions standards.” The current admission process was missing them. This was because the “usual criteria,” including SAT scores, were poor predictors of their academic performance—an argument that echoed the point that Kenneth W. Brown made at the Tuskegee conference the previous year. As evidence, the committee cited a forthcoming study by Kenneth B. Clark and Lawrence Plotkin finding that SAT scores were “not clearly associated with college grades” among the black college students in their sample. “If we are to aid the students who fall into this group,” the committee concluded, “we must find new selection techniques and adopt different criteria for admission than we now use.”¹⁷

Cornell’s COP was launched shortly thereafter, and the university took “immediate steps to admit a modest number of students whose racial, cultural, or educational background makes it unlikely” that they would have been admitted. Leonard Sain’s role as a recruiter was played by Lincoln Lewis, who visited twenty-six high schools in New York State with a “substantial enrollment of Negro students.” Lewis was greeted enthusiastically by his hosts, who endorsed the mission of the program and expressed gratitude at the newfound attention from Cornell. But many school officials expressed concerns about whether their students would be competitive. What were the

¹⁷ Interim Report: President’s Committee on Disadvantaged Students, August 1, 1964; Report attached to Letter from John Summerskill to James A. Perkins, April 1, 1964; Kenneth Clark and Lawrence Plotkin, *The Negro at Integrated Colleges* (National Scholarship Service and Fund for Negro Students, 1963), 9.

admissions criteria, and what was the range of acceptable SAT scores? Lewis explained to them that a “good risk would probably be expected to fall within at least the low range of our profiles in order to have a reasonable chance of success on our campus.” If there was a thumb on the scale, it was a small one. But he also noted that the “high school record” would be accorded more importance than test scores, and the admissions office would heavily weight the “counselor’s evaluation as to limiting factors which might have affected their progress.” Indeed, every school would be asked to submit one or two recommendations, which would be forwarded to the relevant officials at Cornell, who would decide which applicants looked most promising and invite them to submit full dossiers. COP admitted ten students in 1964, its first year in operation, and five of the students had been recruited by Lewis. The process was greatly expanded in the subsequent year, when COP enrolled 37 students, eight of which were classified as “risk” admits who did not meet the “usual” admissions standards. A brief study of academic performance among COP students was completed by William L. Tetlow, Jr., in 1966, and he found that the set of “standard predictors” of academic performance—among them class rank and SAT scores—were very weakly correlated with grades. If many colleges and universities were experimenting with different types of affirmative action, Cornell was perhaps trying the boldest experiment with wide support from the faculty and administration.¹⁸

The immediate catalyst for affirmative action at Cornell, of course, was President Perkins, but what motivated him to take the initiative? In 1963 and 1964, Cornell students

¹⁸ Lincoln Lewis, Memorandum, July 13, 1964; Cornell University Special Educational Projects, n.d., Box 1; Memo from William Tetlow, Jr. to Admissions Staff, February 21, 1966, all Box 1, Slatoff Papers.

were applying little to no pressure on him, and it does not seem from the archival record that any community groups were even communicating with him on the issue, much less mobilizing to lobby him. Perhaps the best answer comes from Perkins himself in a speech he delivered in 1968 to the United Negro College Fund:

[W]ith the Brown case in 1954 and the rise of a visible concern for equal treatment of minority groups at the beginning of this decade, the atmosphere dramatically change. Our conscience stirred in its sleep—we dreamt that we were not doing what we should, and we woke to find that indeed this was so. Some of us tried to find out why we really had so few Black students. Once the question was raised, we discovered a series of six-foot high hurdles that were effectively preventing the young Black student from seeking admission to our colleges and universities. A passive policy would only guarantee a continuation of de facto exclusion. We correctly concluded that in order to increase the Black student population we would have to encourage Black students to apply, reexamine SAT scores as predictive of academic performance for the disadvantaged.¹⁹

Like many other liberals who presided over northern colleges and universities, Perkins was profoundly moved by the civil rights movement as it staged its classic confrontations with Jim Crow. While the marches, demonstrations, and protests took place hundreds of miles away, in locales he had never visited, they shook him from his dreamy complacency in Ithaca, and they led him to ask why the school he proudly led remained nearly as white as the segregated institutions that he was so quick to condemn. When he looked into the problem, he discovered that it belonged to a different order than problem in the South, and yet the results were hauntingly similar. Institutions of higher learning in the North may not have been racially segregated, but they were far from racially integrated. The severity of racial inequality in public education meant that black students were effectively locked out of Cornell and other top colleges and universities. The only

¹⁹ James A. Perkins, “The Black in the White University,” remarks delivered to a meeting of the United Negro College Fund, Washington, D.C., December 3, 1968, Folder 52, Box 38, Perkins Papers.

morally legitimate response to the situation was to break from the easy satisfaction of having always supported desegregation and non-discrimination. More was needed, more was required. If all Americans were to compete on an equal basis with one another to reap the fruits of an affluent society, then what it would take, as Perkins and many of his peers would argue in subsequent years, was the willingness to experiment with affirmative action.

In a helpful survey of American higher education, John R. Thelin writes that “between 1950 and 1965 concerns about race were incidental at almost all prestigious colleges and universities in the United States—not just in the South.” Thelin is mostly correct. For nearly two decades after the 1947 publication of the Truman Commission’s *Higher Education for American Democracy*, top schools around the country seldom acknowledged the racial exclusivity of college campuses, much less sought to address the issue. But the silence began to fade before 1965. Events in Montgomery, Greensboro, Birmingham, and Selma may have been directed at the White House and Capitol Hill, but their reverberations were also felt—perhaps more deeply—in places like Ann Arbor, Ithaca, Middletown, Swarthmore, and Westwood. Some of the men leading the nation’s best known and highly regarded institutions of higher learning found themselves wondering why their own schools seemed just as racially exclusionary as ones in Alabama, Mississippi, and Georgia. Many of them simply tried harder, and others sought to cast a wider net, but a few of them were moved to take affirmative action, setting their

institutions on a path that would lead to the establishment of new programs that took the race of the applicant into consideration at the point of admission.²⁰

The advent of affirmative action during the “classical phase” of the civil rights movement forces us to complicate the familiar, bottom-up perspective that has dominated historical writing on the subject. It is not that the sense of disorder and crisis provoked by student demonstrations and urban riots did not matter. They surely did. But they mattered because they transformed affirmative action, not because they gave rise to it in the first place. What the early history of affirmative action in college admissions also reminds us is just how much discretion university administrators were free to exercise over institutional policy during much of the period. They were not helpless hostages of student protestors or cowed by the fear of societal breakdown when they instituted affirmative action. The threats they faced at the time were in truth too distant or too small to force their hand. They *chose* to take affirmative action out of a commitment to the ideal of racial integration, and the complex legacy of their choice remains with us today, for better and for worse.

²⁰ Thelin, *A History of American Higher Education*, 305.