

# Introduction

## *A Historic Encounter*

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As they arrived on campus, Black undergraduates who entered Duke University in the early years following desegregation were busy with the tasks all new students face. There were boxes to unpack in too-small dorm rooms, roommates to meet, and tearful, proud parents to send on their way home. Soon orientation would be over, classes would begin, and extracurricular commitments would ramp up. Before they knew it, the first semester of their freshman year would be in full swing.

But although their daily activities tracked those of their white counterparts, these Black students experienced Duke very differently. Gene Kendall, one of the first five Black undergraduates, arrived on campus in the fall of 1963. He stood on the carefully manicured main quad and surveyed the magnificent gothic-style buildings surrounding him. “I was a wide-eyed kid who was fascinated when I looked up at the chapel for the first time,” Kendall recalled. “I thought, ‘What in the world am I into?’”<sup>1</sup> Brenda Armstrong was overwhelmed by the transition from the predominantly Black atmosphere of her childhood to Duke’s “sea of white.”<sup>2</sup> Chuck Hopkins recalled waking up one morning early in his freshman year and seeing “all these Black men raking leaves” outside his dorm window. “It was like a plantation,” he recalled thinking.<sup>3</sup>

Kendall, Armstrong, and Hopkins were not alone in these sentiments. They were among a vanguard of talented Black youngsters who, in the early 1960s, gained admission to historically white colleges and universities (HWCUS) throughout the South.

The arrival of these Black students marked a profound change for these historically white institutions. For decades, Jim Crow and segregation had defined the organization and daily operations of these schools. For whites, segregation was a given—both entrenched and pervasive.

Hence, when desegregation occurred at HWCUS, it created immense challenges for all parties.<sup>4</sup> White administrators, faculty, and students, many of whom had never interacted with a Black person other than in a service capacity, were forced to learn how to relate to Black students. Likewise, these Black students, the vast majority of whom had never interacted with white individuals as equals, faced their own challenge: how to deal with white administrators and faculty, and white students as peers. This was a historic encounter.

How would they live and work together at Duke? Under Jim Crow, the academic and social opportunities offered by Duke were for white students only. The “Duke Experience” was a training ground for advancement in white America. Theoretically at least, desegregation meant that Black students now would have the chance to share in these opportunities. But how desegregation played out depended on whether Duke was prepared to invest the political capital, as well as economic and human resources, to allow Black students to realize their full potential at Duke. Would the curriculum be changed to reflect the rich history of African American life, culture, and thought, now that Black students were a part of the institution? Would the composition of the faculty and administration change to reflect the presence of Black students on campus? In sum, what resources was Duke willing to reallocate to create an inclusive environment that could serve the needs of all students—both white and Black?

By the end of the 1960s, college campuses throughout the United States were engulfed in Black student protest.<sup>5</sup> At Duke, significant white and Black student protests dominated the campus in the last years of the 1960s. As Black protest at Duke was accelerating, a group of primarily white students and faculty held a “Silent Vigil” in April 1968 in response to the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. The vigil, with more than 1,500 students and faculty eventually occupying the campus’s main quadrangle, demanded that Duke University take bold steps to show its commitment to racial and economic justice. The vigil was followed just ten months later by the takeover of key areas

of the Allen Building, Duke's central administrative headquarters, by Black students. The Silent Vigil and the Allen Building takeover show the different ways white trustees, administrators, and faculty perceived—and reacted to—white and Black student protest. How persistent were the assumptions of Duke's Jim Crow legacy?

Looking back fifty years later, how should the actions of Duke trustees, administrators, and faculty be judged? The school's basic principles "have remained constant," Duke's bulletin for the 1963–64 school year declared. The school motto, "Eruditio et Religio," expressed "a fundamental faith in the union of knowledge and religion" and the values of scholarship, freedom and truth, tolerance, and service. Through "changing generations of students," the bulletin announced, the objective of the school has been "to encourage each individual to achieve to the extent of his capabilities an understanding and appreciation of the world in which he lives, his relationship to it, his opportunities and responsibilities."<sup>6</sup> It seems fair to ask to what extent Duke leaders were able to embrace those values and reach for those objectives as they confronted the reality of Black students in their midst. More simply, when Douglas M. Knight, Duke president during this period, and others said that they were acting in "good faith" to address the needs of Duke's Black students, did their actions meet that standard?

I started my study of Black campus activism at Duke in 1978, when I was twenty-three years old. After a thirty-five-year career in corporate law practice, I decided to return to the subject. As a retired lawyer who had spent most of his adult life in business and social settings shaped by white privilege, I saw Black student protest at Duke during the 1960s very differently. Having sat on many law firm "diversity" committees and task forces, I saw how ineffective these initiatives could be. Without substantial investment of resources by the law firm, little was accomplished to advance the hiring and promotion of people of color. Being a parent also shaped how I viewed events when I revisited them. "Black activists" I interviewed in 1978 when I was twenty-three became for me "kids" by 2016—youngsters who entered college with the same swirling mixture of excitement, aspiration, strength, and vulnerability that all children experience at this auspicious moment. As a result, I became fascinated by questions I never thought to ask in my twenties. When talking to Black activists—most of whom were now close to seventy—for a second round of interviews, I knew more and had different questions. I wanted to know about their families, schools, and communities and how parents and other relatives responded to their participation in campus protest. Among

Duke leaders, I wanted to understand the attitudes and institutional framework that blocked them from responding to Duke's new Black students with more empathy and professionalism. For Knight, the liberal Duke president, I wanted to explore why his progressive attitudes on race did not translate more forcefully into leadership on issues he claimed that he cared about. In essence, I wanted to come to terms with the human dimension of people and events that I had previously understood largely as abstractions.

This story challenges the comfortable narrative that has emerged over the decades about the role campus protest played in the history of Duke. That narrative focuses on change—the role Black and white student protesters played in successfully forcing a provincial southern school to confront its Jim Crow legacy. Although some aspects of this narrative may have merit, it overlooks the powerful shape-shifting resiliency of traditional racial attitudes at Duke. As this account shows, Duke deployed an array of strategies to resist change, even when faced with protest. Change, when it did occur, came very slowly because racial inclusion was never a core value of the university.

From the moment it was established, Duke University aspired to greatness. William Preston Few, the president of Trinity College when it became Duke University, told students that they would have an important part in “launching one of the great education establishments of the world.” In its “aims,” the new university aspired to “advance learning in all lines of truth; to defend scholarship against all false notions and ideals; to develop a Christian love of freedom and truth; to promote a sincere spirit of tolerance; . . . and to render the largest permanent service to the individual, the state, the nation, and the church.”<sup>7</sup>

The events that followed desegregation at Duke expose the conflicting forces that converged as a segregated southern institution was forced to confront its long history of racial exclusion. They show that race and the struggle for inclusion stand at the center of the university's story—and the story of the nation. Indeed, Duke University could not approach its lofty aims nor achieve its national ambitions until it came to terms with a racial past defined by segregation and exclusion. The story tells us a great deal about Duke University in the 1960s as well as the dynamics that played out following desegregation at other HWCUs and the country at large. It also illuminates conflicts and challenges that continue to resonate at Duke, within higher education North and South, and throughout the country to the present day.