

CHAPTER 2

Like Bare Skin and Putting Salt on It

First Encounters

When five Black freshmen entered Duke University in the fall of 1963, it represented a profound change for the university. For the first time, Duke would have Black undergraduates as participants in all aspects of campus academic and social life. Significant in its own right, desegregation also required the university to address aspects of its racially exclusive past, especially if the school were to move toward a future of multiracial equality, acceptance, and respect. “You have a Southern way of life,” Black undergraduate William C. Turner Jr. explained, “where everybody has their place [and] where everything [is] tiered.” For Turner and many others, the key question was whether, following desegregation, people would come to Duke to “learn how to . . . perpetuate this Southern orthodoxy and tiered society. Or,” as Turner asked, would Duke become a place “where people can come and participate in the opening of society?”¹ The HWCUS that were desegregating throughout the South at this time all confronted this central issue.

The first encounters between Duke and its new Black students thus loomed large in defining the school’s racial future. Would these initial contacts lead to greater communication and acceptance between white administrators, faculty, and students and the new Black students on campus? Or would they serve to

reinforce, or even accelerate, historic antagonisms? What factors would determine the path the school would follow? A careful look at how Black and white students perceived and interacted with each other as they made this historic step helps illuminate these important questions.

Called the “chosen few” by some members of Durham’s Black community, the Black students who came to Duke during the early years of desegregation shared a common background. Almost all were from the South. Born in the 1940s and early 1950s, these students had spent their childhoods in segregated communities. As Turner noted, the first Black students at Duke “grew up in an all-Black setting. . . . We came up in all-Black churches, all-Black schools, all-Black communities—all-Black everything,” he said. Growing up in this environment, family, school, and church helped determine one’s sense of self-worth and advancement. In rural Ayden, North Carolina, “the entire Black community was united,” law student Charles L. Becton recalled. “It was a family. People would always call your mother or your parents if you were not doing what you were supposed to be doing. The teachers would spank you and call your parents and you would get spanked again. People were looking out for each other because no one in the white community at that time . . . cared much about Black youth.”²

The first Black students at Duke grew up in “protective Black communities,” Brenda E. Armstrong explained, “that had [an] incredible history [and people who] demonstrated by example the dignity that our ancestors had been able to call on to . . . convince themselves that they were real people and they were good people.” Armstrong learned that history from her father, Dr. Wiley “Army” Armstrong, a prominent Rocky Mount, North Carolina, physician and civic leader. Driving to the country to see patients, Dr. Armstrong would take his daughter along. Only three generations removed from emancipation, he taught his daughter during these long car rides about Black history in North Carolina and shared stories about the courage, resiliency, and faith of their family. He told “these stories with such passion,” Armstrong recalled. “Even though I was young, I never forgot them.” When she talked to her friends at Duke, Armstrong found that “they had the same experiences.” Almost all had learned about their ancestors and their people through powerful stories communicated by family members.³

Janice Williams, a Black undergraduate at Duke in the late 1960s, learned of the courage and stoicism of her great-great-grandmother: “My grandmother told us the story [of] her grandmother. She had been a slave. Because she would not cry when she was whipped, the slave master cut her thumb off. So what she did, was slung her thumb, and the blood, and walked off, and *still* did not cry.” “The moral you got,” Williams remembered, was “‘You’re gonna be beat, you’re gonna be strong, and you are not gonna cry.’” For Michael R. McBride, hearing the price his father paid for refusing to follow dehumanizing Jim Crow codes of behavior had a powerful impact. McBride’s father was a county agent for the segregated farmer’s extension service in Alabama. “I resented that my father had to flee Alabama when my mother was pregnant with me,” McBride recounted, “because he wouldn’t say ‘Yes Ma’am’ to a white woman who handed him his checks. I came to Duke with that resentment.” While in college, Turner was told by his father about the brutality his great-grandfather suffered based on the false claim that he had violated Jim Crow social norms. He was lynched in Person County, Turner was told, after being accused of consorting with a white woman. “Social mixing was not a thing to be done in the pre-Civil Rights South,” Turner explained, “on pain of losing your life.”⁴

When learning about their ancestors, Duke’s first Black students heard about the paramount importance these men and women placed on the value of education. This focus became apparent immediately following emancipation. “Virtually every account by historians or contemporary observers,” historian James D. Anderson commented, “stresses the ex-slaves’ demand for universal schooling.” “To a school official in Virginia, trying to convey his thoughts about the freedmen’s enthusiasm for education,” historian Leon F. Litwack wrote, “the phrase ‘*anxious to learn*’ was insufficient; ‘they are *crazy to learn*, . . . as if their very salvation depended on it.” “Few people who were not right in the midst of the scenes,” Booker T. Washington observed, “can form any exact idea of the intense desire which the people of my race showed for education. . . . Few were too young, and none too old, to make the attempt to learn.” “If I nebber does do nothing more while I live,” one freedman declared, according to Litwack, “I shall give my children a chance to go to school, for I considers education next best ting to liberty.”⁵

The passion felt by freed slaves for education did not arise externally from white philanthropists, northern missionaries, or federal government largesse. In fact, as historian Herbert G. Gutman observed, “the ex-slaves’ educational movement was rooted deeply within their own communal values.” Ex-slaves

“have within themselves,” Freedmen’s Bureau superintendent John Alvord wrote in July 1866, “a vitality and hope, coupled with patience and willingness to struggle, which foreshadows with certainty their higher education as a people in the coming time.” Even as early as 1866, Alvord could see “that the incipient education universally diffused as it is, has given these whole four millions an impulse onward never to be lost. They are becoming conscious of what they can do, of what they ultimately *can* be. . . . Self reliance is becoming their pride as it is their responsibility.”⁶

Passion for education in the Black community endured, even as Jim Crow policies and practices became entrenched throughout the South. “When the lights went out in the 1890s,” theologian Samuel DeWitt Proctor wrote, “when the political currents swirled against black progress, . . . hope still bloomed within the black community. We learned that the key to the future was education. Somehow we believed that we, too, could bloom, darkness notwithstanding.” Faith was the key. Proctor’s grandmother, who was born into slavery, possessed “intrepid confidence,” he said, that “rested on a simple uncomplicated notion: God created all people; any inequalities among us were due to unequal opportunity.” From his grandmother, Proctor learned that “hatred and vindictiveness were always destructive. ‘No use fretting or crying,’” he recalled her saying. “‘If you do your part, God will do the rest.’” Elders “spoke to us children in the subjunctive mood,” Proctor recollected. “Not what is, but what *may be*, when our faith flowered into reality.”⁷

The values embraced and transmitted through the generations by their forebears were reflected in the communities where Duke’s first Black students grew up. Education was of primary importance. We were fortunate, Armstrong wrote, to attend “strong but segregated primary and secondary education systems” defined by “caring, protective, high-achiever teachers.” Teachers were “always supportive and encouraging,” Becton remembered. “Every teacher I had cared about us and what we could become.” Many of the schools these students attended covered grades 1 through 12 and traced their roots to private academies established for Black students during Reconstruction throughout the South. Even in the 1950s, Turner explained, “these schools operated in the shadow of Reconstruction.”⁸

Mary Mitchell Harris and Nathaniel White Jr., two of the five Black students in the first class after Duke desegregated, attended Hillside High School in Durham. Tracing its roots to the Whitted School, founded in 1887, Hillside was the only Black high school in Durham. Parents, grandparents, other relatives, and members of the community had also attended the

school. “The people in my church, the people in my community,” Hillside alumna Minnie Forte explained, “were all Hillside graduates. My dentist, my doctor and my pediatrician were all Hillside High graduates. [Hillside was] intertwined with everything I knew.” “There was not a Black student in Durham who did not know everybody,” Hillside graduate and language teacher Jeanne Lucas remembered: “We knew every community, every student, every neighborhood, most of the families. . . . We knew everybody who went to every church, so there was the community neighborhood. . . . The teacher, the church, the community and the home [were] so connected that you couldn’t fail.”⁹

Despite the fact that Hillside used hand-me-down books from the all-white Durham High School and lacked the financial resources of other schools, its students never doubted the quality of their education. “I never felt inferior,” Forte recalled. “I knew that I was getting the best education that was available to me. . . . I wasn’t worried about going to college and I wasn’t worried about the SAT exam. . . . I knew that I was well equipped to do whatever I wanted to do.” This confidence came from the Hillside teachers. To ensure that they knew every student and every family, Hillside teachers visited the home of every student before the school year began. “If they had 150 kids,” Lucas explained, “they would visit 150 homes.” The message that Hillside students received from these teachers, according to Forte, was that “you could be all that you wanted to be, there were no limits. . . . There were people [at Hillside] that would help you gain and rise to whatever level you wanted to go, regardless of your resources and your background.” Hard work was the key. “One of the things [the teachers] said,” Jacqueline Williams, a 1965 Hillside graduate, recalled, “is that the white man’s skin color was going to get him over so you as a Black person had to work twice as hard.”¹⁰

Teachers taught students, Hillside graduate Sterlin Holt recounted, that “as African Americans, we come from a long history of achievements . . . against a lot of odds and a lot of adversity.” Lucas explained that Hillside “protected, educated, nurtured, prepared, groomed—oversaw—the total growth of students.” Because the pastor in her church was committed to seeing Hillside students in his congregation go to college, virtually all did so. Doing so required great sacrifice. “Even though our parents were maids and dry-cleaning people,” Lucas recounted, “worked for the university professors, [were] factory people, they borrowed money from the bank to educate us.” “We were all poor,” she reflected, “but we knew that we were going to have a college education.”¹¹

The teachers in the schools these Black students attended were extraordinary. “We grew up in segregated times,” George Creed, a childhood friend of White, explained. “The big advantage for students was [no matter] how much education a person had, about the best you could do was be a teacher. Because our smartest people could not do anything else,” he described, “they taught us.” “You’ve got folk all over the South with PhDs and master’s degrees [teaching] in the Black high schools,” Turner recalled. “So you have the best teachers in the Black schools.” These teachers, Williams explained, stressed not only strong academics but also a specific life philosophy. “That philosophy,” she recounted, “was that in order to be Black and to achieve, you’ve got to be better than the next person.”¹²

Armstrong, who came to Duke in 1965 as a member of the third class of Black undergraduates, attended Booker T. Washington High School in Rocky Mount, North Carolina. Tracing its history back to the Rocky Mount Graded School for Colored Children that started in 1901, Booker T. Washington High School opened as a separate high school facility for Black students in 1927. Although its resources and regular weekday curriculum were not on a par with the white high school in Rocky Mount, Booker T. Washington students knew they were getting an excellent education. The tone was set at the start of the school day. “The teachers met us as we walked into school,” graduate Otis Cooper described. “They were there to help and set the tone each morning when we arrived.” Because school board rules required that courses in Black schools be taught at only a basic level, teachers found ways to compensate. Most remarkable was a “Saturday Academy.” Armstrong explained:

What we could not be legally taught Monday through Friday, we were taught on Saturday. . . . Living about 70 miles from Raleigh, [we would pool our money so] we could go to the state capitol, museums, concerts. We even went over to the University of North Carolina campus to see what the possibilities were. . . . Even though the school board wouldn’t let them teach the things we needed during the week, they taught us on Saturday. And nobody complained.

“Who would ever think,” Armstrong asked, “that people who worked five days a week in a substandard facility would come back on Saturday to create . . . a Saturday Academy?”¹³

Teachers at Booker T. Washington were deeply involved in their students’ lives. “They were part of our life at home,” John H. Perry recalled. “They knew our parents and they knew us outside of the classroom.” “Teachers

visited our houses,” graduate Tolokun Omokunde remembered. “I would go home and the teachers would be sitting at the kitchen table—eating up my peach cobbler!” This caring was expressed in myriad ways. If a daily assignment was not finished, Guion C. Davis would meet his teacher at her house and together they would complete the work. “She would feed me just to make certain that I was cared for,” Davis recalled. “The teachers did what they had to do.” Another teacher would give any needy student money and send them “downtown to buy whatever you needed.” Teachers were role models. “They built a strong family among us,” Delores Battle Powell explained. “We respected them and they respected us.” Being a “family” meant students looked out for each other. “If there was a student who was not doing well, [fellow students] would come together as a group to help,” recounted Helen Mercer Dixon. “And while we were helping one another, we were learning from one another.”¹⁴

Booker T. Washington High School had a lasting impact on its students. Teachers communicated that Booker T. Washington students were as good as anyone. Although “some said our education was ‘substandard,’” Armstrong pointedly recalled, “we knew our education was *not* substandard . . . because of the adaptations that the communities we came from made. . . . The kids in the public and private schools that were segregated—we had the same education, we just had to go about it a different way.”¹⁵

What was not addressed at school were the increasingly dramatic challenges the civil rights movement was making in the South to segregation and other aspects of Jim Crow. Otis Cooper recalled that while his teachers certainly knew what was happening in the United States, “they couldn’t speak out against the system for fear of losing their jobs.” Instead, teachers “worked within the system” teaching students to navigate a segregated world. “The teachers instilled strength,” Cooper remembered. “We knew of the injustices and were prepared to face an unjust society.” One teacher told Omokunde that education “would get [him] through anything—even Jim Crow.” Looking back, Omokunde said, “she was right.”¹⁶

It was at home that the most direct discussions of social injustice and social change occurred. Lenora Bradley’s teachers did not talk about segregation much in class, “because we learned that at home. Our parents were teaching us what to do out in society. The teachers and parents were working together.” For Armstrong, home was a place of intense focus on civic matters. Deeply involved in the voting rights movement, unions, and the Black churches in Rocky Mount, her parents made the civil rights movement a constant topic

of conversation. And Armstrong's exposure was not limited to family discussions, however frequent and intense. "Everything they did, and everywhere they went, they took the children."¹⁷

On November 27, 1962, Martin Luther King Jr. visited Rocky Mount and spoke to a crowd of almost two thousand people in a packed Booker T. Washington gymnasium. At the time, Armstrong's father was vice president of the Rocky Mount Voters and Improvement League—the organization sponsoring King's visit to Rocky Mount. In the late afternoon, Armstrong's father told her, "I've got a meeting to go to, and I want you to come with me. I want you to sit and listen." The meeting was with King and a handful of other attendees. At the meeting, King's speech that evening and the upcoming March on Washington were discussed. Armstrong had a chance to shake King's hand. "This is history," her dad told her. She told her mother later in the evening, "I'm never going to wash my hand again."¹⁸

Armstrong's father was seated on the dais behind King during the speech. Before going on the platform, he found the tallest person he could and asked if his daughter could sit on his shoulders. King's speech that evening—"Facing the Challenge of a New Age"—was notable because it was among the early times he used "I have a dream" as a cadence in his talk. In the speech, King noted the many young people in the audience and implored them to be ready to take advantage of the changes happening around them.

Opportunities are coming to us, today's young people, that did not come to our mothers and fathers. The great challenge is to prepare ourselves in order to be ready to face these challenging opportunities. . . . We must work hard. We must realize that because of conditions of oppression . . . we may have to work a little harder than other people. . . . A challenge comes to us to do a good job. And to do that job so well that the living, the dead, or the unborn, couldn't do it better.

For Armstrong, propped on a man's shoulders, the speech was a "transformative moment." Even at thirteen, her family, her church, her school, and her community had prepared her to take in King's words. Looking back, Armstrong realized that she grew up "in the presence of geniuses, people who figured out how to compensate for the viciousness of racism. And not to be so angry that it made us angry. It made us proud. Because they were able to use their genius to make things available to us. Everything they said to us was couched in 'you're going to have opportunities that we didn't have and you are not going to waste those opportunities.'"¹⁹

Five years later, Armstrong was off to college. Like the other Black students at Duke, she was sent to college by her family, teachers, church, and community to take her place as one of the “most successful, well-exposed, ambitious, and focused group of people to benefit from the earliest successes of the civil rights era.”²⁰

The Black students matriculating at Duke in the early 1960s benefited richly from the strong families, schools, and communities that produced them. All were among the most gifted students at their schools, each with excellent grades, strong SATs, and impressive records of leadership. Many were National Merit or Achievement scholars. “The [Black students] who came . . . were go-getters,” Becton recounted. “They were all hard workers. There were no ‘legacy admits’—people who came because their parents went [to Duke] and think they can just sail through.” R. Taylor Cole, the Duke provost, told the board that the five Black undergraduates admitted for the fall of 1963 “would have merited admission to almost any college or university in this country.” A good example was Wilhelmina M. Reuben, who arrived at Duke as one of the first Black undergraduates in 1963, having completed high school ranked at the top of her class. Her father was the president of Morris College in Sumter, South Carolina, and her mother was on the faculty. Gene Kendall was recruited by MIT and Princeton but came to Duke because he got a full scholarship. Kendall’s community was “ecstatic” when he chose Duke. A superb student, Brenda C. Brown was one of the first Black students to desegregate the public high schools of Greensboro, North Carolina, in 1963. Brown came to Duke because her high school guidance counselor advised her not to. “He had a fit,” Brown recounted. “He said, ‘If you go, you’ll flunk out.’” Brown, who graduated from Duke after only three and a half years, responded, “If I flunk out, I’ll have done what I could do, so I’m going.” Turner attended high school in Henrico County, Virginia, where he was a standout student and athlete. Although Turner had planned on attending a historically Black college like Howard, Morgan, or Virginia State, he ended up at Duke, he explained, because the math teacher and football coach who had “cultivated and trained” him “put the application in my hand. He got it. He had it. And he told me to fill it out,” Turner remembered. “And he had made such an investment in me I would do anything he told me to do.” Armstrong, who arrived at Duke in 1966, was a National Merit Scholar and a finalist for the university’s prestigious Angier B. Duke scholarship. Accepted at Michigan and Radcliffe, her first preference was to go to a historically Black university

such as Shaw or Meharry. She came to Duke because it was her father's preference and to be close to home.²¹

Duke's first Black students arrived at the school having prepared for a unique historical moment. "You . . . had a generation of elders around you [that] . . . were uncanny in their prescience, their knowledge of the times," Turner explained. "They knew that things were going to change—had to change. . . . They had a sense of what time it was in history." Turner and his colleagues were among a cadre of young men and women from segregated communities in the South who were ready to take advantage when doors started to open. "It was in the atmosphere," Turner recalled, "the way you were nurtured and trained and counseled and advised. It's not something that we sat around and talked about," he remembered. "It's just the way we had been groomed . . . just been formed, developed, and shaped that way." These students entered college under the weight of great expectations. "When I went to Duke," Joyce A. Hobson described, "I went with the blessing and the responsibility of the whole community. Personal advancement was what I sought to do," she recalled, "but it was very closely linked with advancement for my entire race." "We were there," Constance Jackson Carter recounted, "to allow students after us to go to schools wherever they wanted to." Asked why he and other Black students chose to come to Duke in the first wave of desegregation, Turner explained that it had to do with the notion of "responsibility to your race. . . . You do it for your mother, your father, your people, your community, your church. This is your duty." These talented students arrived at Duke, Armstrong observed, "with the purpose to take our places as the next generation of Black leaders."²²

For most of the Black students arriving at Duke in the early 1960s, the adjustment to campus life was extremely difficult. Turner recalled going from the all-Black setting of his precollege years to the "complete antithesis" at Duke as "almost as complete a shock as you can encounter." Even though he grew up in Durham just four miles from Duke, White had no frame of reference once he got on campus. "There was no relationship," he said. "It was complete discovery. I can't express . . . how much the town that I lived in as Durham and the town that I moved to as Duke were such separate enterprises." "The experience was surreal," Mary Mitchell Harris, another Black student who grew up in Durham, explained. "It was like another world altogether."²³

This is not to say that every Black student arriving at Duke in the early 1960s experienced campus life in the same way. Some students, including many matriculating in the first years following desegregation, had little problem adjusting. Reuben, for example, came to campus in the fall of 1963 feeling a “responsibility to create the environment you desire” and quickly became involved in an array of academic and social activities. “Duke made [this engagement] a comfortable possibility for me,” Reuben remembered, “and it was fun!” Mary Mitchell Harris, also a member of the first class of Black undergraduates, remembered being treated as a “curiosity” upon arrival. “It wasn’t unnerving at all,” she recalled. “It was great receptiveness.” Having been among the first Black students to attend a desegregated high school in Greensboro, Brown quickly acclimated to life on campus. “I had people threaten [me] in high school,” she recalled. “Duke . . . was a real big step up from what I had experienced. . . . My expectation was for a lot worse.” White saw the small number of Black undergraduates immediately following desegregation as a reason that fewer problems occurred. “The numbers were so small, we were fairly negligible,” he recalled.²⁴ Despite such positive experiences, however, the vast majority of Duke’s small number of Black students in the early years following desegregation faced a difficult transition. The reason was the Jim Crow racial attitudes and practices that continued to pervade Duke.

Encounters with faculty and deans over academic matters presented an initial challenge. “Some teachers were hostile, overtly so,” Turner remembered. “Some were more subtle with it, but there was a tension you could feel in almost every class.” During his freshman year, Michael LeBlanc encountered a political science professor who was openly racist. The professor would talk, LeBlanc recounted, “and he would say, ‘the “nigra” over there, what do you think?’” For the first two or three classes, LeBlanc, the only Black student in the class, “took it.” The next time, however, he confronted the professor. With sweat pouring down, LeBlanc stood and said, “Excuse me Professor Simpson, . . . I’m a Negro.” The professor responded, “Nigra, sit down.” LeBlanc again said, “No, I’m a Negro.” “We had a battle . . . for the whole semester every time he said ‘nigra,’” LeBlanc recalled. “To be seventeen years old, that was not easy.”²⁵

Charles W. “Chuck” Hopkins recalled one episode in a freshman composition course that illustrated “a stereotype of Black students that they weren’t supposed to be able to write.” The professor had been open with Hopkins that, in his opinion, “Black people are not smart enough to be successful at a school like Duke University.” Hopkins recounted that after he produced a strong

paper in English class, this professor accused him of having his roommate do his essays. “He just couldn’t believe I could write,” Hopkins recalled. Bertie R. Howard had a similar experience. Her freshman English teacher “would be surprised when I wrote a good paper, but would never find a reason to give me an A. . . . At one point [when] I wrote what I thought was a *very* good paper, he was really surprised [and asked], ‘Did I go to a tutor?’” For Clarence G. Newsome, one of Duke’s first Black scholarship athletes, his English literature professor’s comments required no interpretation. As Newsome was leaving class one day, the professor stopped him. Looking directly into his eyes, the professor told Newsome, “Blacks can’t write. And especially Black males.” “It was an attempt to pierce my spirit and my soul,” Newsome thought. Armstrong remembered that she got her first freshman English paper back marked with a D+. Devastated, she sent the paper to her mother, asking, “Mom, is this right?” Armstrong’s mother, an English teacher with graduate degrees from Columbia University, saw the quality of the paper, telling her daughter, “You didn’t write this well when you were with me!” Marguerite Armstrong wrote to the Duke administration on her daughter’s behalf, demanding an apology and a revised grade and threatening legal action. Armstrong never got the requested apology, but she did get an A on the paper.²⁶

Discriminatory grading practices were so common that Brown tended to steer toward science and math classes, where “either you could answer a question or you couldn’t. I definitely felt the professors, especially English and history . . . graded us differently,” she remembered. Yet sometimes, even courses with a quantitative focus provided no protection from overt prejudice. As a freshman, Claudius B. “C. B.” Claiborne and three of his fellow Black students took an engineering class together. Uncertain about the homework assignment, they asked the professor for clarification, telling him, “We want to get an A on the assignment.” “I’ll never forget it,” Claiborne recounted. “This guy who was an old professor . . . said, ‘Don’t worry about it, you won’t get an A.’ He didn’t know anything about us. . . . We all came from [strong academic] backgrounds; we were expecting to do well.”²⁷

White also experienced grade discrimination. In one case, a professor went so far as to change the grading system for the entire class to justify giving White, the only student to earn a perfect score on the midterm, a C. Turner recalled that some students even devised ways to test the integrity of the grading process: “They would write a paper in one night, then write another paper and spend a week or two on it. No matter what paper they wrote, what the quality of the paper was, they got a C. Always. One friend of mine said he

actually took a paper from a white fellow who had received an A on it. He turned that paper in and got a C." Discriminatory grading "happened to all of us," Armstrong remembered. Soon, a consensus evolved among Duke's Black students: "If you're Black, you're a C student."²⁸

"Most of my professors were indifferent," Hopkins remembered. "They had not been sensitized to the special needs of the Black students." Samuel DuBois Cook, Duke's first Black professor, shared this perception. White professors "can often be unwittingly insensitive," he observed. "They can't empathize, they can't see what Black students have gone through, [and] what they have experienced." Because of this lack of empathy, these professors do things that are "utterly insensitive," according to Cook, "because Blacks are just outside the orbit of their experience. And often [outside] of their compassion." Without empathy, Cook explained, "they just can't reach out, just can't perceive what it means to be Black and the kind of hurt that Blacks may have."²⁹

Academic deans and other university personnel exhibited similar attitudes. In the early weeks of her freshman year, for example, Armstrong went to her dean. She explained: "My English achievement scores should have allowed me to place out [of freshman English]. But when I found out, it was too late. So I went to the dean and asked if it was still possible to place out. Her comment was, 'Well, you *need* to be in first-level English.'" Because of her plan to attend medical school, Armstrong also sought "guidance and counseling [from her dean] on being a premed." Her attempt met with frustration. "I was virtually written off," Armstrong recalled, "as possibly being a premed." White's interaction with an athletics administrator communicated a similar message. When White urged the administrator to start recruiting Black athletes to Duke, he received a lecture about how Duke had high academic standards. "I told him," White remembered, "I didn't think I'd gotten in without meeting those academic standards."³⁰

Years after graduating, Armstrong described the attitudes Black students faced.

We were the objects of the worst kind of racism in the classroom, where we started out at a deficit. It was incomprehensible to have been considered smart enough for "A" work, especially when subjective grading of essays or term papers, or theses were concerned. The few of us in science battled the results of that isolation even in areas where subjective grading would have been harder. We were not given the benefit of old tests, or the lab assistant's

tutelage. We were thought of as “dumb” when we asked for help. The white students were characterized as “competitive” for the same request.³¹

These academic issues contributed to one of the biggest problems faced by Duke’s Black students—a chronically high attrition rate. Armstrong recalled that during the years 1966 through 1968, almost 50 percent of Duke’s Black students left school after one or two semesters. Of the fifteen Black men in Armstrong’s freshman class, for example, only ten remained after the first year. Given their academic performance in high school, the academic difficulties these students faced at Duke were a shock. “Everyone was under real pressure to do well,” Howard remembered. “I just didn’t realize that everyone here was from the top of the class and that somebody was going to be on the bottom,” Brown explained, “and most likely it was going to be you.” Students came to refer to dismissal from school as having been “punched out.” For some, departure from school had life-or-death consequences. Brown remembered her close friend Warren Franks, who lost his student deferment when he dropped out of Duke after his sophomore year. “He was killed [in Vietnam] a month before our graduation,” Brown recalled. Because of the likelihood that they would face the draft, Armstrong recalled feeling “awful terror” when male students left Duke.³² Despite these problems, the university initially created no programs to prepare Black students for the academic challenges they would face and provided little support when they encountered academic difficulties.

Contacts with Duke’s campus security added to the picture. Black students were frequently stopped on campus and asked by campus security to produce university IDs. This often happened in the university gymnasium. “Apparently it was just assumed,” Turner explained, “that anybody Black down there playing was not a Duke student and should be asked to produce an ID on the spot.”³³

The contempt certain members of campus security had for the Black students is reflected in a memo from W. C. A. Bear, the chief of campus security, to Cole. While the purpose of the memo was to transmit to the provost a report on a campus altercation involving a Black student, Bear used the exchange as an opportunity to express his feelings toward Black students at Duke generally. Stating that the report pertains to a “negro student,” Bear told Cole that he wanted the provost to see the report so that he may be familiar with “what our men must put up with from these people.”³⁴

Other encounters with university personnel were also problematic. “I know of instances,” Becton reported, “where you would go into the Dope

Shop [the campus snack bar] and the people there would go out of their way to wait on everyone else except the Black kids.” Howard recalled times when she was first in line at the Dope Shop but sixth to be waited on. As a result of these practices, Becton remembered, “you go into the [Dope Shop] and it takes you twenty minutes to eat because they’re serving everybody else first.” Becton did not take this treatment passively. At the cafeteria, when the cashier would attempt to help a white student behind him in line, Becton would say, “No, no, no, I was in line first, I’m giving you money.” “I was six-four and I wasn’t menacing in any way,” Becton recalled, “but I would just simply speak up. And the person would typically defer.”³⁵ The absence of a Black barber was another issue. Although the university maintained a campus barber shop, no one there was able to cut hair in the styles popular among Black students. Consequently, they went into Durham if they needed a haircut.

Certain university practices were also deeply disturbing. Among these was the long-standing tradition at Duke athletic events of playing “Dixie.” White remembered that “Dixie” was “practically like the national anthem because everyone would stand up [and sing along]. People went wild over that song.” White refused to participate. “I never stood for ‘Dixie’ at any time, anywhere,” he recounted. In fact, White, along with other students, “would organize sit-downs.” White recalled that eventually they had “a whole section that wouldn’t stand when it was played.” During a football game in 1968, the Georgia Tech marching band started playing “Dixie.” When the music started, Turner recalled, “two Black students had a Confederate flag that they unfurled [and] set it on fire. One man decided that this was an affront to him, so he came down and jumped in the flames and put it out. Some white students joined him. It was a little altercation. When the police arrived, only the Black students were removed.” “If there was something going wrong between white students and Black students,” Turner recounted, “it was assumed . . . the Black students were at fault.”³⁶

Howard’s reaction to tangible symbols of racism at Duke like the playing of “Dixie” and displays of the Confederate flag is typical. While she understood them as “part of accepting going to a white school in the South,” she found them to be “repulsive.” Ernie Jackson was a consensus All-American football player at Duke. But the thing he recalled “more than anything else,” he said, was walking “through the dorms on the way to practice every day.” “Most of the football players,” Jackson recalled, lived in fraternities. “When you saw the Confederate flag hoisted out of their dorms all the time,” Jackson remembered,

“it was extremely difficult to have to go to war with those guys and play with them from a teammate perspective.”³⁷

Duke’s practice of holding school-sponsored events at local facilities with racially restrictive policies, such as Hope Valley Country Club, was also problematic. Many Duke administrators and faculty were members at Hope Valley and campus organizations had, for decades, hosted events at the segregated club. But as the Black student population at Duke grew, this practice would become increasingly controversial.

Social and cultural issues confronting Black students at Duke added to the problems. The most dramatic issues involved overt physical harassment. “Once [fraternity men] found out that Black students were sensitive,” Hopkins reported, “it was fun for them to provoke stuff. [You’d] walk past dorms and somebody would throw a plastic bag full of water—drop it on you. . . . Silly stuff like that.”³⁸

But other interactions were not at all “silly.” “I was in the laundry room one night,” Hopkins remembered, “and something moved in the corner of my eye. I turned toward the window, and just as I turned . . . this big rock came and hit me in the chest.” “I had friends,” Turner reported, “who told me there were incidents in which they would literally be told . . . ‘All right, Nigger, let me see you run. Somebody pull out a switchblade. Make him run.’” Occasionally, these incidents would escalate into fights. “There were almost little mini-wars,” Turner noted. “Black students and white students against each other and they’d be armed.”³⁹

For Turner, attempts at physical intimidation did not create serious problems because of his size and the aggressive stance he adopted. “If somebody bothered me, I’d let them know something right quick,” Turner recalled. “I’d have people [slip] up and call me ‘boy.’ I’d say, ‘You see a boy, you slap him.’ And it wasn’t likely they were going to do it. Back during those days I bench-pressed over three hundred pounds, and anyone who saw me could tell it. That was just my way of taking up for myself.”⁴⁰

But not all students had Turner’s physical strength to fall back on. Asked how others responded to intimidation, Turner responded, “With knives, with screwdrivers, staying together in groups. Literally fighting.” Duke’s female Black students felt especially vulnerable in the face of the overt hostility they encountered from some segments of the campus. “We needed the brothers to literally escort us to the basketball games to protect us from the racial slurs that effused from the [Kappa Alphas] as we walked by their house on the way to the indoor stadium,” Armstrong remembered. “Those were some crazy

people” who lived on Animal Quad, Howard recalled. “The rednecks of Duke were in [Kappa Alpha]—and they made threats. There had been lots of intimidation of Blacks by those people. . . . I had a lot of people proposition me, or [make] a lot of lewd remarks.”⁴¹

Other interactions with the Duke community were less overt but communicated an equally clear negative message. Armstrong recalled what it “felt like when we sat down at a table in the dining room and everyone else got up. On the bus and even in the classroom everyone else moved over.” Cassandra Smith had similar experiences. “Some of the students would cross the quad rather than speak to me,” she recounted. “Or they would look the other way when they walked past.” Like other Black students who attended Duke, Smith had grown up in a “very sheltered environment.” “It really hurt,” she recalled. “I hadn’t ever been treated like that. For a long time, I put it out of my mind because it was so unpleasant.”⁴²

The dormitory provided no respite. “The dormitory life . . . was the worst part of my experience at Duke,” Armstrong explained. “I had a Black roommate my first two years. She and I clung to each other because I couldn’t talk with anyone else. No one else understood anything,” she remembered. “They had . . . decided that my . . . experiences . . . were so different from them that they looked on us as unusual people.”⁴³

In the dorm, Black students were the objects of stares, giggles, offensive name-calling, and unimaginable isolation. So many dorm mates stared at Armstrong and her roommate “going about their business” that “you got the feeling that something was wrong with you.” Overt acts of racism were also not uncommon. Armstrong explained, “Some of us came back to our dorm rooms to find Confederate flags on the doors with ‘nigger go home’ written over it.” On her first day of classes, Armstrong was in her dorm bathroom, washing her face and brushing her teeth before class. A white dorm mate approached and, touching Armstrong’s face, announced, “This is the closest I have been to a colored person, and I wanted to see if it came off.” Armstrong was deeply offended. “If you put your hand on me,” Armstrong warned the young woman, “one—it’s assault; and two—you are going to have a hard time getting up off the floor because I’m going to hit you.” Turner recalled verbal harassment. “Football players and fraternity men would get drunk out on the quad,” he remembered, “and just holler: ‘Ahhhh you niggers, cut out the lights.’” Harry DeMik, a white student, remembered a heckler at a basketball game shouting, “Get out of the game you dumb Nigger” to a Black Duke player who was having an off night. Hopkins recalled that he and two other

Black students were approached one evening by a “white guy living down the hall from us. He came to us,” Hopkins recounted, “and asked us to procure a Black woman for a fraternity party he was having.” We said, “‘Wow, that’s crazy.’ We almost got in a fight with the guy.”⁴⁴

Other dorm interactions highlighted the racial insensitivity of many white students. “The woman who worked downstairs at the desk [in our dorm] was Black,” Armstrong recalled, “and they always called her by her first name. After three months of that we finally revolted and said at one of the house meetings: ‘That person is old enough to be our mother. You have no right to call an older woman “Mildred” when she is Mrs. Jones. She is someone’s mother. She is someone’s wife.’” Armstrong remembered that her fellow students responded, “We didn’t think we were insulting her” and “She likes it that way.” But when Armstrong and her friends asked their dorm mates if they had ever asked Jones her preference, the question was met with silence. “It was patronizing,” Armstrong explained. Maybe they let you get away with that in your neighborhood, she told her dorm mates, “but if I called [an adult] by their first name, my mother would stop the conversation and beat me. We were always taught to respect adults.” “You could see them turn pale,” Armstrong remembered. Hopkins was shocked to discover that older Black women were employed by Duke as maids to clean dorm rooms. “Duke is an upper-class southern gentleman type thing,” he recalled. “You had all these old Black women waiting on these white male students hand and foot. . . . Some of us—those were the kinds of things our mothers were doing back home.”⁴⁵

Even when friendships developed between Black and white students, issues of race could intrude. Once, Armstrong was invited to dinner with a friend and her family. After meeting Armstrong, the family “made some excuse for not being able to go.” Armstrong learned later that it was because the group had planned to go to a restaurant or to visit friends at Hope Valley Country Club, where segregationist policies would not allow her to attend.⁴⁶

Duke’s dynamic fraternity and sorority scene—a key social avenue for many students—provided no such outlet for the university’s Black students. Even those fraternities and sororities that did not expressly prohibit Black members found ways to ensure that they remained segregated. In the case of fraternity Sigma Chi, for example, there was no express legal prohibition in the organization’s charter documents on admitting Black members. Still, according to Barney Jones, the fraternity’s “Grand Proctor” “made clear . . . that race is an absolutely decisive criterion for membership.” To enforce this prohibition, the Grand Proctor required that racial data, along with corroborating

photographs, be submitted to the national office for all prospective members. Many national sororities prevented Black students from joining local chapters by requiring that each prospect obtain a “favorable” recommendation from a sorority alumna. In the event of a negative recommendation, there was no right to appeal or to learn the basis for the rejection. Several years after desegregation, a Pi Phi representative told Mary Grace Wilson, dean of undergraduate women, that “several Negroes in this year’s freshman class . . . were ‘good sorority material’” but that no sorority chapters on the campus “could get the necessary (required) clearance as to recommendation.”⁴⁷

While not publicized, these exclusionary policies were known by Duke’s Black students. “When it came to [sorority] rush,” Armstrong reported, “we obviously weren’t wanted.” To Howard, it was clear that there was no reason for her to participate in sorority rush, and she told the woman in charge of the selection process that she did not think “there is any sorority that is willing to admit a Black.” Howard recounted that the woman encouraged her to participate, telling her, “It’s a great way to get to know people, you never can tell.” After going through two or three days of sorority rush, however, Howard was told by the woman that “everyone really likes you, but we can’t get references so there is no way to admit you.” Understandably, Howard came away from the experience feeling that many Duke people she encountered would say, “We really welcome Black people to Duke” but that “you take step one and then there is no room for advancement.”⁴⁸

In the background of these racially charged experiences was the significant socioeconomic gap that existed between Duke’s Black students and their colleagues. White students at Duke were generally affluent. “We were a totally different sort from the average Duke student,” Turner explained. “Most of us were kids from the South . . . from very modest financial and social backgrounds. . . . And we had a totally different mentality and a totally different approach both by virtue of being Black and by virtue of our background.” Marcus Hobbs, who was appointed provost in January 1969, saw little “commonality of interest or background” between the Black students and their white colleagues. “After all,” he commented, the Black students “hadn’t spent the summer at Newport or whatever the hell have you.” Besides inhabiting different worlds at Duke, most Black and white students had no significant interracial contact before college. “We didn’t grow up together,” Turner explained. “The only contacts we had with white youngsters was in fights” or the occasional football or basketball game. Even then, Turner remembered, “the white boys would come to your community; we wouldn’t go to theirs.”⁴⁹

Compounding all these issues was the profound isolation most Black students experienced. Not only did these students stand apart from the mainstream of the university but, during this period, they remained largely cut off from each other. Until the fall of 1966, the main reason for this was lack of numbers. Five Black undergraduates enrolled at Duke in 1963, eleven matriculated in 1964, and fourteen joined the freshman class in 1965, a miniscule number on a campus with almost five thousand undergraduates. Making matters worse, Duke was divided into two campuses located about a mile apart—West Campus for men and East Campus for women. Further, the small number of Black students was spread out in various dorms. “Duke thought the best way to bring us here,” Hopkins recounted, “was to keep us isolated from each other.” “To this day,” he said in 2019, “I don’t know why that was their policy.”⁵⁰

“Seems like you could go on for months without seeing another Black person,” Brown recalled. “I never had a class with other Black students,” White remembered. Turner felt “loneliness and isolation at every point” and likened the experience to “being cast into a foreign, alien world.” “I was the only Black student in my dormitory,” he explained. “There was nobody to go to. No Black staff, no Black faculty. . . . And [there was] the frustration of a college undergraduate in the first couple of years with no one to turn to. . . . If you have another Black student in a class with you, it’s strange and unusual. . . . That’s an experience that almost defies description. It’s more than you can describe.”⁵¹

Before college, Williams recalled, she could always find refuge by coming back to “a Black community, and a Black home, and very familiar cultural surroundings.” At Duke, she explained, “the difference was I never left. I never went back and got recharged. I could never let my guard down. I never could just relax and be myself and not worry about what [I] said or what [I] thought or . . . what [I] did.” Intensifying these feelings was the fact that undergraduates at Duke, like every other college student, were still young. “If you are talking about dealing with adolescents—which is what you are—there are certain identity needs, certain cultural needs, certain emotional needs that you have,” Williams explained, “in addition to the intellectual enrichment they were trying to provide.” To Armstrong, her experience at Duke was “like bare skin and putting salt on it. We were there in the middle of a whole bunch of white folks,” she explained. “We weren’t ready for them and nobody had any idea how to deal with it.”⁵²

These experiences at Duke led most Black students to conclude, as Hopkins did, that Duke “was not ready to have Black students here. They didn’t

realize that integration meant they had to make some changes, too.” According to Hopkins, the administration’s view was that “bringing us [to Duke] was like bringing the natives into civilization.” For Turner, the university’s attitude was “Look—we have granted you the privilege of coming to this great school. You are on scholarship, financial aid, whatever. What else do you want? What else can we give you?” Brown’s view was similar. She saw the administration’s stance toward the Black students as “Shut up. Don’t make waves. And get out. . . . You’re here because we need some Black spots on campus to make things look right. Other than that, we don’t want to hear from you.”⁵³

In the depths of her freshman year, Armstrong called her mother to talk through her college experience. Hearing her daughter’s despair, yet knowing from life experience how difficult it would be to change Jim Crow at Duke, Marguerite Armstrong encouraged her daughter to take the long view. “Somebody has to do this,” she told her child. Alienated from Duke and likely wishing she had ignored her father’s wishes and instead gone to an all-Black school, her response was brief—“Why us?”⁵⁴

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Duke’s Black students were correct that the university was not ready for them. Although undergraduate desegregation may have marked in some ways a significant turning point in the history of Duke, the university made only limited efforts to plan for the arrival of these students or to understand and anticipate their needs. As William Griffith, who by 1963 served as assistant to the provost, recalled, there were planning meetings over the arrival of Black students “but not in a really in-depth kind of way.” Duke, he said, “didn’t make a lot of changes.”⁵⁵

This university failure extended to Jim Crow policies and practices that remained in place at Duke even after the Black students arrived. Although the classrooms, dorms, dining halls, and football stadium were desegregated, separate wards for white and Black patients remained in place at Duke Hospital. No effort was made to require fraternities and sororities to eliminate provisions in their charter documents prohibiting Black members. University organizations remained free to hold off-campus events at segregated facilities. The university continued to use racially restrictive covenants for its Duke Forest homesites.⁵⁶

In the view of President Douglas Knight, the university’s failure to plan was due to the deep ambivalence many felt about desegregation. According to

Knight, many at the university believed that “once we have admitted Blacks, what more do they want?” Administrators also felt that by admitting Black students, Duke’s primary work on race had been accomplished. “We had worked fairly hard to get the decision” to admit Black students made, Griffith explained. “There was a feeling—‘we’ve climbed that mountain, you’re over it, now you can rest a little’ . . . having accomplished what seemed to be the main goal.”⁵⁷

The fact that significant relationships did not exist between Duke officials and Black professionals made it possible for this attitude to persist. In 1963, Duke had no Black faculty or administrators and just one Black secretary. As a result, Waldo Beach noted, “Blacks had no part in the academic life of the school,” and faculty contacts across the color line “were limited to those between [white] faculty and their wives and Black help.” Off-campus, administrators lived segregated lives. “Housing [in Durham] was entirely segregated,” Beach recalled. “There were no Blacks in the all-white neighborhoods.” As a result, the men who ran Duke had no one in their immediate professional or social circles to call on for insight into the needs of Black undergraduates. Although Durham had a thriving Black business community and since 1910 had been home to the all-Black North Carolina College at Durham (NCC), no effort was made to reach out to local Black leaders for insight on the needs of Duke’s new students. The university approached desegregation passively and without preparation. “I’m not sure that anybody here . . . knew what to expect,” Griffith remembered. “There was no one in the Black population to call on,” Griffith noted incorrectly, and “we did not know what the Black experience was or what problems they would face—except everyone knew . . . for a Black student who came from a predominantly Black school it would be quite a different experience.” “In retrospect,” Griffith reflected, “one of the things one might have wanted to do was to go to some institutions that had already been through” desegregation.⁵⁸

Having failed to educate themselves on issues and challenges likely to be faced by Black students arriving on campus, Duke’s leaders simply assumed that the new enrollees would adjust to campus life. After the board’s decision to desegregate, William L. Brinkley Jr., director of undergraduate admissions, visited a number of Black high schools in the South scouting for solid candidates, talking about Duke, and attempting to communicate the school’s “sincerity of purpose.” At Atkins High School in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, Brinkley met with six top-ten students who raised frank questions with him about “integration in the first year.” Brinkley was unequivocal in his response,

giving the students “complete reassurances concerning the climate at the University and that we anticipated very little difficulty with the matter.” Griffith had the same view. “There was a general feeling,” he recalled, that the Black students would “go right into the student body.” Many in the administration felt that Duke was not “going to set up specialized situations because a person is a different color. We’re integrated now.” It was expected, according to Griffith, that Black students would take their place as members of the Duke community through a “natural kind of amalgamation.” We thought it was “a great opportunity for that student to get a good education and [we] lost contact with the . . . problems that student would face.” These assumptions carried significant consequences. “You don’t just accept Black students . . . without trying to sit down and think about what effect it is going to have on them and . . . on the university,” Brown explained. “I remember feeling . . . that with a little bit of forethought, Duke could have avoided most of what happened.”⁵⁹

Once Black students arrived on campus, Duke neglected to establish *any* internal mechanisms to elicit feedback from them on how they were managing. Initially, the Black students did not come forward with concerns. They “did not raise a lot of questions,” Griffith recalled, and Robert Cushman, dean of the divinity school, said there were “no problems” after desegregation. “The Black students came in,” he recounted, “they were received, and they were part of the community.” From the university’s perspective, Griffith recounted, these years were the “easiest as far as not being challenged by any problems.”⁶⁰

As with the decision to admit Black graduate and undergraduate students initially, Duke evaluated the success of desegregation only from its own perspective. Because few problems were articulated publicly by the students, the university assumed that desegregation was proceeding smoothly. With respect to graduate and professional school students, Cole reported to the board of trustees soon after their arrival: “So far, there have been no reports of any major problems which have been created by the presence of negroes in the graduate and professional schools. They have rather melted into the ranks of the student body, as we had hoped and expected they would.”

The university’s attitude was also reflected in a memo written in February 1964 by the assistant dean of Trinity College reporting on the first semester of one of Duke’s Black undergraduates. After reviewing the student’s academics, the assistant dean advised that the student “has been a good citizen” and that “to this point there is no evidence of any problem connected with [the student’s] residence in the College.” The assistant dean concluded that the student’s “affairs have gone so smoothly that it has required a special effort on our

part to remember that the student is here as [one of] our first Negro[s].” History professor Richard L. Watson learned how little he knew about the Black students’ experience when he commented once to a group of these students that “you certainly did not experience any overt antagonism or hostility on campus.” “I made that as a kind of affirmative statement,” Watson recalled. “And the [Black students] who were there laughed when I said that.”⁶¹

Even when potential problems came to light, no follow-up occurred. Griffith remembered that he was “aware of [episodes of physical harassment] only from what they told me. I never saw things going on. . . . But there were problems of harassment, some subtle and not so subtle.” Griffith heard of students carrying screwdrivers for self-defense but was not “physically aware” of such behavior. “Nobody ever pulled out something and said, ‘Hey, look—this is what I am carrying to protect myself.’” Even these reports, however, prompted no administrative action. If the Black students “had problems, I was certainly unaware of them,” recalled Marcus Hobbs.⁶²

“We looked at it from a white perspective,” Griffith explained. “We didn’t know what the black experience was or what the problems that they would face were.” “We were . . . far too simplistic about [the Black students’] presence,” Knight wrote. “We tended to feel that once we had . . . overcome the admissions hurdle, the rest would be easy. In making this assumption,” he explained, “we were . . . saying ‘Come in, be white,’ and that was not what these young people wanted.” In Knight’s view, “much too much was expected from the simple act of admitting relatively few Black students, and much too little thought was given to what it really means to have black citizens of this country be part of the institution.”⁶³

Because of their isolation from teachers, administrators, fellow students, and each other, Duke’s Black students searched for connections elsewhere. A first source of comfort was Duke’s Black nonacademic employees. For Joyce Hobson, Oliver Harvey and his wife, “Mrs. Louise,” a maid in Hobson’s dorm, became her “parents away from home.” Hobson remembered spending “many hours in [the Harveys’] home and attending church with them on Sundays.” Armstrong had the same experience. “The people who treated us with any respect,” she remembered, “were the people who worked in the cafeteria, worked in the dorms, kept up the grounds. They had that quiet pride [in us] that we could detect . . . that, for many of us, kept us going.” “My Daddy told

me, ‘Son—find your people,’” Turner remembered. “In the [men’s dorms] you had maids. And I remember this one in particular . . . Beatrice Spencer. She belonged to West Durham Baptist Church between East and West Campus. And she’d just say, ‘Be ready Sunday to go to church.’ [I’d say,] ‘Yes Ma’am.’ These are people like your mother, your aunt—the same kind of people you had grown up with and are accustomed to. So they treated you just like that,” Turner recalled fondly. “They would just take you to church.”⁶⁴

The “vast city of Durham,” as Turner described it, offered a second critical connection as Duke’s Black students came to know the city’s vibrant Black community and storied history. Drawn by the opportunities to work in the flourishing tobacco—and later, textile—industries, thousands of Black people had migrated to Durham between 1890 and 1930. Over half of these new arrivals settled in the Hayti neighborhood, an all-Black community. By the first half of the twentieth century, Hayti had more than one hundred independently owned Black businesses, including theaters, beauty parlors, restaurants, and stores. North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company, which became one of the largest Black-owned companies in the world, was established in 1905 and provided capital for significant business and residential development in the city’s Black neighborhoods. Because of its level of commercial activity, Hayti came to be known as the Black Wall Street, and by the mid-1920s, a leading sociologist had designated Durham the capital of the Black middle class.⁶⁵

Although Hayti’s best days were over by the early 1960s, the neighborhood remained a hub of activity for the Black community. It was there that Duke’s Black students were able to escape the alienation they felt on campus and obtain needed services. Turner remembered an area that was “teeming, thriving, full of life.” If you got over there, he recollected, “you’re back home.”⁶⁶

Hayti’s churches were also an important touchstone. White Rock Baptist Church was organized in 1866, holding prayer meetings in homes, a cotton gin, and a warehouse before a permanent structure was completed around 1877. In 1891 the cornerstone of a brick structure for St. Joseph’s Church was laid. From 1965 to 1976, St. Joseph’s was led by the Reverend Philip R. Cousin, a towering figure active in the civil rights movement. When we got to church, Turner recounted, “we found out that the people who were there had children just like us and they understood us implicitly.” Howard remembered church as a group activity. “That’s a thing a lot of people did together,” she recalled: “go to church together, go to the community meeting together.”⁶⁷

Another magnet was NCC. Everyone had “homeboys or homegirls” over at NCC, Turner explained. Claiborne, who was from Danville, Virginia, counted

eleven people from his graduating class attending NCC. “I used to go over there every day,” Claiborne recalled. “It was like going back home for me.” Claiborne even had a payment card in the NCC cafeteria and would eat there regularly. Turner went to NCC “every weekend.” Social life was a draw—he would go for parties and to take girls out. Because the Black students had no “space [they] controlled” on Duke’s campus, Turner explained, “whenever we socialized, essentially we had to leave campus.” Because Duke had done so little to accommodate the needs of its Black students, heading into Durham was essential. “The world was still segregated,” Claiborne explained. “There were two Durhams. Once you caught that bus and headed out toward Duke, you were entering a different world.”⁶⁸

Given the many contacts Duke’s Black students developed in Durham, it is not surprising that they became involved with community organizations. One that became particularly significant for Duke students was Operation Breakthrough, an affiliate of the North Carolina Fund. Incorporated in 1963 and established by then governor Terry Sanford, the fund represented an innovative approach to attacking poverty and educational deficiencies in North Carolina.⁶⁹ Operation Breakthrough, an antipoverty program located in Durham, was one of the first initiatives undertaken by the fund.

The North Carolina Fund and Operation Breakthrough became important to Duke’s Black students for a number of reasons. At the suggestion of Sanford, the fund established a domestic service corps composed of college students called the “North Carolina Volunteers.” Operation Breakthrough also established a program in which Duke students on financial aid could satisfy work-study requirements through employment in the Durham community. Through these programs, Duke students were provided the opportunity to work in Durham’s poorest neighborhoods and to develop organizational skills. Perhaps most significantly, these activities allowed volunteers to wrestle with “issues of meaning in their personal lives” while “making direct connections to the civil rights movement and struggles over the nation’s values and moral purpose.”⁷⁰

The impact of Operation Breakthrough on its student volunteers was magnified by Howard Fuller, who was hired in May 1965 to coordinate the program’s community organizing efforts. Fuller’s physical presence was, according to historian Christina Greene, imposing. He was “tall, dark, and handsome,” Greene described, and his “six foot four inch frame . . . made a lasting impression on Durham.” Sally Avery was among those inspired by Fuller. Meeting Fuller for the first time in the spring of 1966, Avery recalled that he

was “one of the most charismatic people I have ever met.”⁷¹ Because he was the leader of Operation Breakthrough, many of Duke’s Black students came to know and work with him. A powerful local and national voice on Black empowerment, over time Fuller became an important sounding board and adviser for many of Duke’s Black students.

Although isolated and alienated from the university, Duke’s Black students spent the first few years following desegregation developing deep personal connections with members of Durham’s Black community and gaining exposure to social and political activities in the city. “Durham was unique in the United States at that time,” Hopkins commented, because it had “one of the most conscious and well organized Black communities. So as a young person . . . we immediately had older people who we could lean on, learn from, who were interested and supportive of what we were doing. . . . Looking back,” Hopkins reflected, “we were lucky that we ended up in Durham.” Their experiences during these years provided a crucial context for the actions Duke’s students would take in the coming years.⁷²

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The racial attitudes held by Duke faculty and administrators were not altered when Black undergraduates arrived on campus. Beliefs about Black inferiority persisted in some and were expressed in behavior toward Black students that ranged from passivity to overt hostility. Those who did not hold these beliefs operated in an institutional context that narrowly defined acceptable modes of relating to the new Black students. One former dean and college president described university communities as “like country clubs—interdependent, intentional communities, characterized by autonomy and a shared value system.” Proactive outreach, engagement, and follow-up with Black students were not part of that “shared value system.” As a result, Black undergraduates, while physically present on campus, experienced a racial climate that left them isolated from each other and alienated from the university. Although Duke had joined the ranks of desegregated southern private universities, Black students, as a group, almost immediately became psychologically resegregated. Because of this separation, many Duke administrators and faculty ignored the new Black students, for the most part dismissing them. With few exceptions, they avoided developing personal relationships with these students and made no attempt to understand the values, expectations, and needs they brought to campus.

According to historian Jason Sokol, white southern author William Styron hoped that the civil rights movement would make it the “moral imperative of every white southerner . . . ‘to break down the old law’ and ‘to come to *know* the Negro,’ his real desires and fears, in fact rather than myth.” Those who ran Duke did not meet this moral imperative. The Black students who arrived at Duke were the best and the brightest in their communities with remarkable records of achievement. Turner observed, however, that the university “didn’t really know who they had admitted.” Turner believed “that a lot of people [at Duke] thought they had just gone up and down the street and just snatched some street urchins.”⁷³

University leaders were unable to move beyond their entrenched belief in “white exceptionalism.” They could not fathom that Black students did not come to Duke hoping to assimilate into white culture. “One of the biggest problems during this time,” Turner commented, was the presumption among Duke administrators and faculty “that whites had the best thing going, [and that] once we’ve [created] opportunities for others, they will be glad to come in to this superior thing that we have already fashioned. They did not have a clue,” Turner explained, “of how much [Duke’s Black students] enjoyed our life. . . . It’s not like we don’t have brilliance, excellence, intellectual, culturally, etc. It ain’t like we don’t enjoy our churches and our singing. No, none of that’s true. So you are dealing with people,” he concluded, “who had no clue as to who we were.”⁷⁴

Viewed from the perspective of the escalating conflict that followed, the university’s failure to relate empathetically to its new Black undergraduates was at best a lost opportunity. It was also a grave mistake. Perhaps the prospect of engaging with Black students as equals—in the classroom, in the dorm, in the dining hall, on the athletic field—was too threatening at a university where many continued to view Blacks as inferior and segregation as a necessary part of the social order. In this context, it is possible that the psychological isolation imposed on Blacks following desegregation was a way for the university to mitigate the perceived threat these students represented.

Whatever the explanation, the absence of meaningful contact between white Duke administrators and faculty and the school’s Black students was a significant contributing factor to the events that followed. Without the personal relationships that could result from such interactions, racial issues at Duke became increasingly difficult to resolve. “I was naive,” Knight remembered. “I believed that the university had made its way toward a time of multiracial acceptance of the world, toward a triumphing over the past that the War Between the States represented. I honestly underestimated the force that [race] could still have when the pressure was on.”⁷⁵