

CHAPTER 6

Humiliating to Plead for Our Humanity

Negotiations

Just as the Silent Vigil was ending, the *Duke Chronicle* wrote on April 12, 1968, about the “new Duke University” that had emerged from the protest.¹ Thanks to the vigil, the paper noted, Duke faculty members had become more engaged, and more students were socially conscious and politically active. Even the university’s board of trustees showed signs of listening to students and workers, exhibiting at least some concern for the social impact of the university’s labor policies. Many students returning for the fall semester of 1968 experienced the “new intensity” on campus that John Cell observed after the vigil.

Duke was indeed changing. A new chemistry building and Perkins Library addition were almost ready for occupancy. The East Campus science building was being transformed into an arts center. New rules allowed women on East Campus to sign out of their dorms overnight, no longer requiring permission from a house counselor. On West Campus, returning men encountered what the *Duke Chronicle* called, only half-jokingly, “a drastic change in their lives.” “Starting this September,” the newspaper reported, “maids will no longer make beds for West Campus students.”² In many areas, Duke appeared to have become less regional, less isolated, more in the mainstream of American universities that entertained national ambitions.

If some sensed the emergence of a new Duke University in the fall of 1968, however, one group did not—the school’s Black students. Arriving back on campus, these students faced essentially the same challenges that had made their lives so difficult in the years since desegregation. Cell wrote in late 1968 that desegregation at Duke had meant permitting Black students to “enroll as members of the student body” but without any of their distinctive needs and concerns acknowledged. Through what Cell characterized as a policy of “passive acceptance,” the university had “thoughtlessly” adopted an “assimilationist model” of desegregation—Black students would be admitted to Duke, but the university would not change. Cell was correct. Duke had done nothing to address the needs of its Black students, who, he noted, were called on “to do all the adjusting.”³

Compounding matters, administrators seemed almost totally unaware of the problems that Black students were facing. According to Cell, the reason was straightforward. “From the fall of 1963 to the fall of 1968,” he wrote, “there was no effective communication between the black students and the University at large.” Administrators and faculty made little effort to get to know these students or to develop relationships with them. In his classroom interactions, Cell encountered a “formidable barrier of distrust and suspicion” in the Black students he taught. Without communication, white administrators had no chance to learn about, or try to understand, the reality Black students at Duke were experiencing every day.⁴

Because Duke administrators remained so passive, racial matters at Duke were static, even as the university was undergoing rapid change in other areas. “In effect,” Cell wrote to provost Marcus Hobbs in February 1969, “there is enough of the old climate left to lend substance to the students’ impressions [that Duke is racist]. ‘Dixie’ and Hope Valley memberships are but the tip of the iceberg,” he added. The school’s Black students still remained isolated; as of the fall of 1968, Duke only had one Black administrator and two Black professors. Black students comprised just over 1 percent of those attending Duke’s undergraduate, graduate, and professional schools. In the employment area, Duke’s director of employee relations described the school as having “a white top and a black bottom.” Fully 70 percent of the 1,500 unskilled laborers and service workers at the university were Black. Yet outside campus, the university had no business contracts with Black-owned companies in Durham. This created a deteriorating situation. “As the tone of the Black movement has turned from legal rights to economic and social equality,” Cell warned in December 1968, “it has grown more militant. . . . Black awareness has

increased, [and,] as the crisis in American society has deepened, the situation in the microcosmic community of Duke University [has] worsened.” With the increase in Black militancy nationally, Bertie Howard saw the atmosphere on campus begin to change. “People no longer thought they needed to be solicitous of Black students,” she remembered. There was “more open hostility,” more “mistrust.”⁵

On October 4, 1968, representatives of the Afro-American Society (AAS) met members of the administration for the first time to discuss the issues Duke’s Black students were facing. This meeting—along with several follow-up sessions—provided a singular opportunity for the university to address the concerns of its Black students prior to confrontation. Yet with little prior communication and few, if any, relationships between students and university administrators, this already difficult task proved nearly impossible. As events would soon show, race not only created the problems Black students were facing but undermined the efforts of students and administrators to find a path forward together.

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President Douglas Knight met for the first time with Duke’s Black students to ask for a list of their concerns on January 9, 1968, just as the spring 1968 semester was getting underway. The Orangeburg Massacre had followed in February, then the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in April. After the King assassination, historian Ibram X. Kendi wrote, “higher education shuddered in a paroxysm of . . . black student power.” Black campus activism was present in almost every state—Iowa, California, Michigan, Connecticut, Wisconsin, Illinois, Massachusetts, Oregon, Alabama, and New York, among many others.⁶

Although the massacre and assassination were watershed events for Black students at Duke, it was the Silent Vigil—an event Charles Becton described as “mostly a white vigil”—that was the focal point for protest in the immediate aftermath of King’s death. As these events were unfolding, assistant dean of Arts and Sciences William Griffith followed up on Knight’s request that Black students provide him with a list of their concerns. Initially, Griffith contacted Lee Hatcher and Joyce Hobson. He was, according to a chronology prepared by vice president for institutional advancement Frank Ashmore, “assured that the list would be forthcoming.” Yet by May, the list had still not materialized. Hence Griffith had lunch with a group of Black students, repeating his request for a “written report.” Again, nothing was sent, leading Griffith later in May to

suggest to Chuck Hopkins that a group of Black students meet with “faculty and administration over the summer for an in-depth discussion of problems related to black students on campus.” Griffith told Hopkins that the university would underwrite the travel costs of the Black students. Although Hopkins agreed to the meeting, no further contact occurred over the summer.⁷

Duke administrators and faculty assumed that Black students would readily produce their list of concerns and were baffled when they failed to do so. Since they had no effective lines of communication with the students, faculty members and administrators could only speculate on the cause. Ashmore reasoned that the students simply did not consider preparing the list a priority. “The students intended to prepare the report, but simply never got around to it,” he observed. Griffith attributed the delay to tactics. “I couldn’t help but [feel],” he recalled, “that they didn’t . . . want to identify everything. . . . They were reluctant to put [the specifics] down . . . because then [in two weeks] there might be another problem that they’d see.”⁸

Given the lack of contact between university administrators and Black students, it is not surprising that these were erroneous observations. It was not that the students lacked focus. Rather, generating a list of specific concerns was not easy given their own internal political conflicts. By January 1968, the group faced real divisions. “Black students were far from monolithic,” Kendi explained. Like any other group of students, “black student communities comprised collections of minigroups ordered by charismatic students, fraternal connections, artistic talents, hometowns, and mutual interests and friendships, to name a few distinguishing factors.”⁹

Internal political conflicts came to a head with the AAS leadership elections in February 1968. With Brenda Armstrong’s election as chair of the AAS, the group had a leader who could unite varied factions and move the group forward. Yet even with her leadership, significant ideological and political challenges remained. The Black students—none “professional educators”—were operating in a rapidly changing political and social environment, fraught with tension. Neither the Black campus movement nor academia had developed a template of concerns that set forth the institutional changes a white southern university should make to eliminate decades of racial exclusion. “Just as white universities [had] failed to anticipate the impact of the Black influx onto their campuses,” historian Allen B. Ballard wrote perceptively in 1974, “so had Black intellectuals and Black students failed to conceptualize exactly what was wanted from the white universities into which they were entering.”¹⁰

Students held widely differing views about what to include in their list of concerns. Some issues, such as the need for a Black barber on campus or a ban on the playing of “Dixie” at university functions, were noncontroversial. But others, like Black studies and the high attrition rate among Black students, were ideologically more complicated. They generated significant internal debate. To avoid splintering further, the AAS would need to reach consensus on which concerns to focus on. William Turner described one aspect of the challenge the students faced. “As students we could not articulate [the issues] as perhaps we can now,” he recalled. “The things that are closest to you and that are most a part of your life—they’re the most difficult to talk about and rationalize.”¹¹

Although for the most part the list of concerns was finalized by late spring, Armstrong and other leaders decided not to give it to the administration until the fall. “One of the things we were very careful about,” Armstrong explained, “was what we said to the administration . . . and when we said it. [Even] the silences were planned.”¹²

“A lot of the concerns we had were crystal clear by the end of the [school] year,” Armstrong remembered. “But we felt that there was no reason to meet with the administration in May, when summer would come, [and] everyone was going home. Giving them a set of grievances [and] the summer . . . to answer them,” she explained, “would be one way to defuse the issues.”¹³

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By September 1968, Knight had recovered from his relapse of hepatitis. As he prepared to resume a full-time schedule, he reached out to Griffith for an update on how things were going. “Sometime before the fall,” he wrote Griffith in August, “I hope we can get together and talk about what’s been planned, during the summer, concerning our black student groups.” Knight recalled “how they came to see me last winter, and I think I need to catch up on where we stand at the moment.”¹⁴ By his own admission, Knight had been out of the loop. Indeed, he was unprepared for what he was about to confront.

Yet this was only one of the problems Knight faced upon his return. Perhaps most challenging was his relationship with the board of trustees. They had become increasingly concerned with maintaining order on campus. The Silent Vigil intensified these concerns. Early in 1968, the university had announced a new policy that sought to ban “illegitimate” protests that disrupted the “orderly operation of the institution.”¹⁵ As subsequent events showed,

board chair Wright Tisdale, along with other trustees, worried that existing policies were not sufficient to maintain order. They also wondered whether university administrators could be trusted to respond effectively to disruptive activity.

Just after the vigil, in May 1968, university counsel Edwin Bryson informed his administrative colleagues about a recent conference call with Tisdale. According to Bryson, Tisdale “stated that he had polled the members of the executive committee by telephone. [They] were unanimous in their decision” that the existing rules regarding picketing and demonstrations should be rescinded and new ones adopted and made immediately effective. Under the new rules, “disruptive practice[s],” including sit-ins, violence, injury to person or property, or specific threats to person or property, would “not be tolerated.” Any person (including faculty, students, or nonacademic employees) engaged in such practices would be notified that “he is in violation of University regulations . . . and that unless he should forthwith discontinue such practice he will be arrested and summarily dismissed from the University.”¹⁶ Instead of using the time since the Silent Vigil to encourage greater administrative recognition of student concerns, the trustees had instead sought to make certain that these concerns were stifled.

Before Tisdale’s new rules were implemented, a special committee of university administrators was formed to consider ways to strengthen the school’s existing “pickets and protests” policy. When the special committee presented its proposed changes to the Executive Committee, they were rejected as *not strong enough*. The special committee was instructed to “give the report further study . . . and to present revised recommendations . . . as soon as possible.”¹⁷ Clearly, a wide gap existed between university administrators and the executive committee on how to respond to campus protests.

Once the revised pickets and protests policy had been finalized, Tisdale directed that it be sent to every Duke student at home over the summer. In his transmittal letter, Knight described the policy as a “framework” through which various members of the university community could “resolve, as reasonable people, the differences which may from time to time arise among us.” Tisdale was much less accommodating. “I hope these [policies] are studied by others as well as the trustees,” Tisdale wrote to Knight in late August. Tisdale explained, “In my view, there is [a] clear . . . need to take a firm hand and not let a few create another situation like we had [during the vigil]. Many students have gotten the impression from the acts of a few, and our reaction, that we are weak and they can have what they want.”¹⁸

Undoubtedly, part of this more aggressive response to student protesters reflected the university's increasingly difficult relationship with its alumni and donors. In December 1967, Ashmore had provided the Duke president with a list of "Criticisms of Specific Actions of University by Conservatives." Seeking to make Knight aware of how changes at Duke were affecting the school's development program, Ashmore set forth what he characterized as the "Extreme Interpretations" of recent developments at the school. "Admission of students without regard to race, color, or national origin" was seen by some, according to Ashmore, as a "liberal sell-out to attract Federal money." Election of Knight as president, "a non-Methodist, non-Southerner, Ivy League product," was seen as "Duke becoming another Harvard, Yale, or equally liberal and dangerous institution." Faculty and student participation in demonstrations meant that these groups were "not restrained properly from radical and un-American causes." Those holding an "extreme interpretation" perceived the election of a Black May Queen as a "deliberate insult of all white people, especially women, and [an] example of student defiance of all authority." Finally, such people saw the administration's response to the AAS study-in over segregated facilities as "giving in to student demands [and] failure to exercise control and create examples."¹⁹

Ashmore concluded by providing Knight with "Generalizations Being Made about Duke's Administration and Policies." According to Ashmore, those raising questions believed that "Duke is being run by a group of liberal, fuzzy-minded intellectuals; . . . the University is changing in character from Southern to national, from religious to pagan, from moral to amoral, from controlled environment to complete lack of control, and the students are running the University." "I think a number of our people," Ashmore told Knight in a cover letter, "likely feel as I have described their thoughts here."²⁰

The reactionary attitudes described by Ashmore had certainly been inflamed by the Silent Vigil. To these "conservatives," the vigil provided further evidence that Duke students were out of control, with an administration unable—or unwilling—to impose order. For them, the vigil meant that cherished "traditional" values were being cast aside, as Duke moved ever further into the mainstream of liberal, secular, national universities.

Starting early in Knight's tenure, Duke also began experiencing significant physical and cultural changes. In 1965, the university had announced its Fifth Decade Plan, Knight's strategy for transforming Duke. The plan promoted significant investment in new buildings and other resources as well as the largest fundraising initiative in the history of the university.²¹ New buildings were

appearing on campus, the quality of the student body was increasing, campus social policies were relaxed, and changes to the curriculum were made. Knight never missed an opportunity to point out Duke's rapid transformation, or the connection it had to his national ambitions for the school. But as Duke changed, many trustees and alumni, particularly those from North Carolina, became concerned. According to director of alumni affairs Roger Marshall, they worried that "the university was not going to serve its *region* in its efforts to serve the nation." Many donors, he explained, "became uncertain, somewhat bewildered, [and] weren't real sure just what their contribution was going towards, what kind of institution it was supporting."²²

Compounding all these issues, the university faced a significant budget shortfall in 1968–69. In May, dean of Arts and Sciences Harold W. Lewis wrote to department chairs, deans, and directors, alerting them that the salary increases promised to nonacademic employees at the time of the Silent Vigil required that "every possible economy must be made in all areas of the University" for 1968–69. Lewis announced a hiring freeze, asked that "small enrollment" and "non-essential courses" be considered for elimination, and drastically limited budget increases for nonsalary items. Even with savings from these measures, vice president of business and finance Charles Huestis told his colleagues in late August that his "latest calculations set the proposed 1968–69 deficit at \$2,009,000." In September, Huestis urged that the need for permanent replacements for vacant positions be "critically reassessed" and asked that word be "passed along" that future facility renovations would be "attractive but Spartan."²³

As the 1968–69 school year began, Knight's days as Duke president seemed numbered. The timing of his leave of absence for health reasons—just as the Silent Vigil was starting—could not have been worse. "If you're taken out of the picture at the critical time of the university's" life, Griffith explained, "it would be self-evident that [Knight] would have lost the chance to get back in as a viable president." Many trustees, including those on the Duke Endowment board, no longer supported the Duke president. William Anlyan, dean of the School of Medicine, remembered times he was with Duke Endowment trustees "when some of them . . . would take Barnes Woodhall and me aside to try to persuade us to help them get rid of Doug Knight." Knight recalled "constant veiled threats of the withdrawal of Endowment support." Finally, there was a meeting in the late 1960s, Knight recounted, where Endowment trustee Amos R. Kearns "finally came out from under his rock" and confronted him. Unhappy that Knight had failed to carry out the wishes of the Endowment on

university matters, Kearns told Knight angrily that “you haven’t done what we told you to do.” Soon thereafter, Knight was eliminated from monthly Endowment board meetings, and direct encounters with Endowment board members stopped. “They’re going to get him,” a member of the Executive Committee told board chair Charles Wade after this confrontation with Kearns. “They’re after [Knight], and they’re gonna get him.”²⁴

Knight recalled 1968 and 1969 as an “embattled time.” Yet he believed that he was “moving and getting things done” upon returning in the fall, despite “the fact that the Endowment members of the Executive Committee literally no longer spoke to me. They acted,” Knight remembered painfully, “as though I wasn’t there.” Still, the stress was taking a huge toll on his family. Years later, Knight recalled an evening during the fall of 1968 “when I said to my wife . . . ‘I’m feeling a lot better and there’s still so much to do and I think I can stick it out for a while.’” But as he looked over at her, he saw “tears were running down her face.” “You can’t do this to these people who are your family,” he said to himself. “I knew at that moment that I had to find a decent way out.”²⁵

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The summer of 1968 was a turbulent one across the globe. In June, presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated just after winning the important California primary. Prague Spring continued in Czechoslovakia as protests against communist rule intensified. In August the Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia with 200,000 Warsaw Pact troops. Ralph Abernathy, Martin Luther King Jr.’s designated successor, spearheaded the establishment of Resurrection City on the National Mall as an antipoverty protest. Approximately 2,500 people occupied Resurrection City for almost six weeks, until the encampment was raided and demolished by police. Thousands of protesters gathered in Chicago in August for the Democratic National Convention. “In response,” one historian has written, “Mayor Richard Daley had turned the city into a virtual fortress, mobilizing almost 12,000 police, preparing to call out 7,500 national guardsmen, and denying demonstrators the right to hold protest rallies.” After the demonstrators convened one protest, the police responded violently. “The cops had one thing on their minds,” one journalist reported: “club and then gas, club and then gas, club and then gas.” At least 100 protesters went to emergency rooms after the melee and more than 150 were arrested.²⁶

With these tumultuous events as a backdrop, 104 Black students enrolled in degree programs at Duke for the fall semester of 1968. Of these, 82 were undergraduates, 12 attended graduate school, and 10 were in professional schools; 43 Black students matriculated as freshmen. While the number of Black students at Duke had increased steadily since 1963, their number remained miniscule—just over 1 percent—at a school with a total of more than 8,000 students.²⁷

Still, the increased size of the Black student body was significant. “I remember [in the fall of 1968] there were a lot more Black students on campus,” Brenda Brown recalled. With more students, perceptions changed. “We felt,” she explained, there were “enough of us here, they have to deal with us. . . . There were enough [of us] that our demands could not be shut off to the side.”²⁸

Griffith remained intent on establishing a dialogue with the Black students. His persistence, Cell commented, came because he “sensed unrest among the Black students before anyone else did.” Few others in the administration shared Griffith’s urgency. Assistant dean of instruction Annie Leigh Broughton, for example, wrote administrators in July 1968 suggesting that more consideration be given to the needs of Duke’s Black students. But for Broughton, any such discussion could wait until well into the fall semester.²⁹

Griffith, by contrast, wanted to move quickly. Just after classes started, he again approached Hopkins, asking him to assemble a group of Black students to discuss their concerns. At the meeting, Griffith suggested that an ad hoc committee of Black students, faculty, and administrators be assembled for “in-depth discussions of problems related to black students.” The students agreed and members of the ad hoc committee were jointly selected—Cell, Robert F. Durden, and Richard L. Watson Jr., all professors from the history department; dean of Trinity College James Price, acting dean of the Woman’s College Jane Philpott, and assistant dean and vice provost Frederick Joerg; students Tony Aham, Becton, Vaughn Glapion, Hopkins, Bertie Howard, Stef McLeod, and Katherine Watson. Griffith chaired the committee.³⁰

Two factors loomed large for Black students as they considered a meeting. The first was recruiting incoming freshmen into the AAS. “We felt . . . that the problems we thought were pivotal [in the spring] would get magnified,” Armstrong explained. She believed October was the “ideal time” for an initial meeting because, by then, freshmen had been on campus for “six or eight weeks” and would have had the chance to be exposed to the AAS.³¹

A second factor had to do with planning for Black Week, the student-organized festival of Black arts, drama, culture, and politics, to be held during

the first week of February 1969. A much smaller version of the event had occurred in early 1968. “All of us recognized from the year before,” Armstrong remembered, “how you could draw even the quietest students out by allowing them to express themselves in their own ways during Black Week.” A meeting with the administration in October, therefore, seemed well timed. Armstrong explained that the AAS could “make a statement of the issues in October, and then have our students work for two months on Black Week—knowing that the issues were out there.” The first meeting of the ad hoc committee was scheduled for October 4, 1968, at 5:00 p.m.³²

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Hopkins opened the meeting of the committee. “The problem,” he said, “is how can we together solve the problems of black students on a white campus?” Hopkins explained that the assimilationist approach of the university was deeply flawed. “Integration,” he explained, “is not [just] taking a person into a society which is almost totally different from his own and asking him . . . to forget who or what he is and assume the appearance of something else.” “Sociologists, anthropologists, and educators . . . tell us,” Hopkins noted, “one of the foremost goals of education is the passing of culture from one generation to the next.” This made the process of finding one’s identity central to the educational process. For white students, this was “easy,” Hopkins explained, “because their elements of identification are interwoven throughout the educational structure.” For Black students, however, “the situation . . . is quite different.” A Black student faces three choices: “accepting the educational structure [at a white institution] as it is and seeking his real self outside of it; . . . rebel[ling] at the lack of himself in the [existing] educational structure with extreme expressions of militancy; . . . or . . . attempt[ing] to have some of his own ideas and culture [be] incorporated into the overall structure of the educational institution. . . . We are here this evening,” Hopkins explained, “to discuss the [last] alternative.”³³

Hopkins then outlined twelve areas that he urged the committee to address “as quickly as possible.” He presented these as “concerns” and not “demands.” The first group of concerns involved the Black educational experience. First, the Black students asked for the establishment of a Black studies program, preferably taught by Black faculty members, as well as additions to the library’s book and magazine holdings on topics relevant to the Black experience. When it was pointed out that a course, *The Negro in America*, was already offered

in the sociology department, Black students highlighted “problems inherent in” the course, including, in their view, the fact that the professor “is not up to date in the material presented.”³⁴

The size and composition of the Black student population at Duke represented a second area of focus within this first group of concerns. The students asked that the number of Black students on campus be increased, with a focus on recruiting Black athletes and those from urban areas.

Finally, regarding the Black educational experience, the students sought the establishment of a summer program for incoming Black students and the appointment of a Black adviser with an administrative connection to senior university leadership. The summer program would focus on English, math, and foreign languages and would also ease the transition to college by giving Black students “a feel for the Campus before the beginning of the academic year.”

A second group of concerns focused on the need for social arrangements to be developed on campus for Black students. In this area, the students requested official university endorsement for Black Week, a Black barber in the campus barbershop, office space for the AAS, and the opportunity—if they wanted—for Black students to live in an all-Black dormitory. The minutes of the meeting noted that the Black students “strongly felt that . . . local fraternity chapters are racist.” As to independent dorms, the students objected to the significant cost of participating in a social program that “does not speak to the black student.”

A third group of concerns called for the elimination of racist symbols at the university. The students asked for a complete ban on the playing of “Dixie” and a regulation against any display of the Confederate flag at university functions. The Black students also made clear that the president’s country club membership remained an area of “great concern,” signifying “support of segregated institutions and thus an abdication [to] those racial inequalities which Duke is attempting to overcome.” They again demanded that Knight resign from the club.

The October session lasted about ninety-five minutes and included what Griffith described as “a fair bit of discussion” about the concerns raised. Cell characterized the tone of the meeting as “friendly.” When submitting the minutes to Knight, Griffith reported that a group of senior administrators—the Provost Group—had already met to discuss the issues. That group “felt that a number of the items were valid and did have solutions” but that “others were of a more difficult and perhaps questionable nature.” The administrative group

recommended that the ad hoc committee be reconvened “to identify ways in which to [immediately] deal with a number of these questions.” Griffith also invited Knight to make any suggestions he might have.³⁵

Knight soon responded. On most issues, he showed a continued adherence to assimilation as the appropriate model for integration. Regarding university support for Black Week, Knight commented that there was “obviously some dynamite” in the prospect. Knight also stated that he was “disturbed about the [potential reverse segregation] aspect” of having a Black barber and a Black adviser and emphasized that he was “very opposed” to the idea of a separate dormitory. “This is an integrated” university, he declared. Perhaps most revealing, Knight was dismissive toward the request that symbols of racism, like the playing of “Dixie” and the display of the Confederate flag at public university events, be eliminated. Characterizing the issue as a “mixture of [the] truly important and truly unimportant,” he observed “how touchy this is, but the very touchiness is worrisome.” Apparently Knight believed that “Dixie” was not a “segregation song” but “originally a black man’s song.” Hence, he was unable to grasp the significance of the issue. Knight was apparently unaware that “Dixie”—the anthem of the Confederacy—had originated as a “plantation song and dance” in the racist blackface minstrel shows of the mid-nineteenth century.³⁶

Knight’s strongest reaction, though, came in response to the demand that he resign from Hope Valley Country Club. The statement that his membership “signified support of segregated institutions” and represented “an abdication [to] those racial inequalities which Duke is trying to overcome,” Knight commented, was “False, Untrue, Unfair.” If they forced him to resign, Knight explained, they “nullify any opportunity I have to accomplish anything constructive in that area.” In Knight’s view, resigning would only strengthen those in the community who opposed racial progress. “This is rough language (and you will have to tone it down),” he told Griffith, “but if they want to work for those very people they think they are resisting, there isn’t a better way to do it than to push me in this way.”³⁷ Knight knew he would pay a political price if he resigned from Hope Valley. Given how little political capital he still had, the Duke president hoped to delay any decision on his Hope Valley membership for as long as possible. In doing so, he failed to recognize the import of his response to Black students at Duke.

Knight’s final comments reflected how limited his insight was into the world of Black students at Duke. Knight commented that the Black students “have to realize we are working on the good will and the truth.” If they didn’t share this perspective, “nothing can be done.”³⁸ Here, Knight was reflecting

a view shared by many white administrators that Black student demands constituted “reverse discrimination.” The Black students, he wrote, “must not think they can solve problems by [discriminating against] others.” The Black students will “make me useless,” Knight concluded dismissively, “if they push some of these useless things.”³⁹ With these words, Knight seemed to equate Black hostility to segregation with reverse racism.

Still, in his desire to advance the dialogue on the issues Black students had raised, Griffith convened a second ad hoc committee meeting on October 15. In his opening remarks on October 4, Hopkins had asked that the twelve issues he raised be addressed “as soon as possible.” Yet if Black students had hoped that they would quickly receive positive feedback from the university, they were disappointed. Instead, following the suggestion of Dean Price, the committee chose to designate subgroups to address each issue. The subgroups would then meet “with the appropriate persons to pursue further the individual questions raised.”⁴⁰

On the key issue of Black studies, administrators described a “general feeling . . . that at least a number of departments would be receptive to . . . courses dealing in subject matter more germane to the Black history and culture.” Yet funding and “the ability to secure competent teachers,” they said, were problems. Given the budget issues, the group reached a consensus that “the first approach should be made through the departments, with a possible secondary approach through the sub-committee on curriculum of the Undergraduate Faculty Council.” The subgroups working on other issues were referred to the appropriate university administrative channels.⁴¹

During this time, Knight seemed completely out of the loop on the issues raised by Black students. In late October, Provost Cole had seen a note from Knight suggesting the “appointment of a committee to look into the development and experiences of the Negro undergraduate at Duke.” In his reply, Cole reminded Knight of the informal ad hoc committee chaired by Griffith that “has [already] been functioning in this area” and suggested waiting for a report from that group before appointing another committee. Knight responded that Cole “was absolutely right about the informal committee. All I want,” he added, “is to make sure that we are ahead of our own black students in working with the puzzles of their position here.”⁴² Why and how Knight saw these issues as “puzzles” says much about his grasp of the concerns that Black students had presented to the university.

On the same day that Griffith’s ad hoc committee would meet for a third time, a separate committee of faculty members chaired by political science

professor J. Harris Proctor (Proctor Committee) met for the first time to “consider the desirability of developing a proposal for . . . African and Afro-American Studies at the graduate level at Duke University.” Although the initial focus of the Proctor Committee was a graduate program, the group would also eventually begin to explore a secondary priority—an undergraduate program in African and Afro-American studies. No students served on the Proctor Committee, nor were they consulted about what a graduate or undergraduate program in Black studies might look like. Indeed, since the university made no announcement about the formation of the Proctor Committee, students were unaware of its very existence.⁴³

The ad hoc committee reconvened on November 4 to receive reports from a number of subgroups. Progress was reported on at least some issues. Cell told participants that in a meeting with Robert H. Ballantyne, the director of admissions had explained the challenges Duke had faced in recruiting Black students and asked for a list “*at once*” of people willing to devote time to the project. From that list, one or two students would be selected to accompany Ballantyne on future recruiting trips, where appropriate. Likewise, Watson and Axam reported a productive meeting with the university’s assistant librarian, who pointed out that the library already subscribed to some of the newspapers and periodicals requested and agreed to order others.⁴⁴

McLeod and Cell also offered an encouraging report on their meeting with Knight. The president, according to Cell, was “genuine in his concern” about the issues raised by Black students. Knight made clear, however, that outside funding would be required for initiatives like Black studies to be implemented. His ability to make concessions, he told them, was severely limited by internal budgetary and political pressures. “Knight . . . was a good man,” Cell believed. “He wanted to do the right thing.” But others, like Harold Lewis, vice provost and dean of Arts and Sciences, was one of the “very hard-nosed administrators” Knight had to deal with. “Lewis . . . was reluctant to do anything,” Cell recounted. “He didn’t think Black studies was going anywhere.” In addition to colleagues like Lewis, Knight felt that he had to deal with “silent, perhaps unspoken opposition, but opposition you knew would be there.” Still, he failed to acknowledge his own accountability for the slow progress. Samuel DuBois Cook saw this as a failure of presidential leadership. “It goes back to the president,” he said. Cook saw Knight as “ambivalent” on the issues raised by the students and thought that “had he been more committed to” them, progress could have been made more quickly.⁴⁵

On other issues, little headway was made. McLeod and Hopkins were unable to persuade the Duke bands to voluntarily stop playing “Dixie” or displaying the Confederate flag. After much back and forth, the band voted “not to decide” on the issues, effectively retaining the ability to continue existing practices. “People couldn’t understand the request,” Hopkins commented. As for a Black adviser, Lewis reported that the university “could not create an official position at this time,” although several interim alternatives were discussed.⁴⁶

The greatest amount of time was spent discussing the most difficult and important issue—development of a Black studies program. As at many other campuses, this proved to be an extraordinarily difficult issue to navigate. Black studies, according to historian Martha Biondi, “arrived like an explosion on the American scene.” In the fall of 1968, focus on the idea was still new. The first Black studies program had only been established at San Francisco State College in the fall of 1966. Harvard’s announcement that it would move to create a Black studies department—seen by Ballard as conferring the “imprimatur of academic respectability” on the new discipline—did not occur until January 1969. Moreover, there was little ideological consensus on what a Black studies program would entail. “Some colleges choose to emphasize Pan-Africanism,” Ballard described, “others the Black experience in America, still others concentrated on contemporary Black life in urban areas, while some programs were deep into ‘Third Worldism.’” Whatever the focus, “Black students, faculty, and administrators worked to infuse Black studies with the Black Power ideology,” education professor Joy Ann Williamson explained. Civil rights activist and scholar Vincent Harding has said that these programs were “proudly, openly pro-Black, and recognized predominantly white universities as part of [a problematic] American political structure.”⁴⁷

As they considered demands for a Black studies program, Ballard observed, faculty and administrators at white universities encountered what he described as “a complex set of problems.” According to Ballard, they had to address “serious doubt . . . that any such body of knowledge as ‘Black studies’ existed,” concerns that “the program would be highly politicized and doctrinaire, . . . fear . . . that the quality of the programs would be inferior since there was a severe shortage of scholars . . . trained in the discipline,” and “concern over dangers to academic freedom implicit in the student demands for complete autonomy of the program.” “Black studies was seen by many,” Biondi summarized, “as an academically suspect, antiwhite, emotional intrusion into a landscape of rigor and reason.”⁴⁸

These dynamics complicated the conversations between Duke professors and subgroup members on Black studies. Although Cell found his meeting with Becton and economics professor John Blackburn “encouraging and productive,” clear differences soon emerged. Blackburn suggested an economics course with a “theoretical” approach, looking at how economic systems ought to work and what happens when racial prejudice and discrimination are added to the mix. Becton wanted a curriculum that covered specific conditions in the “ghetto” (such as loan sharking, price fixing, and job discrimination) along with practical responses. Blackburn “strongly oppose[d]” offering any course without a prerequisite of three hours of introductory economics. Without such background, he said, any course would be “second-rate” and “have little interest” in the department. Because economics, like other departments, operated by committee, Blackburn indicated that the next step would be for Cell and Becton to talk with the “departmental committee on undergraduate curriculum.”⁴⁹

Other differences arose in a meeting between subgroup members Axam and Watson and political science professors John Hollowell and Samuel Cook. Axam advocated for a political science course dealing with Black people in American politics and taught by a Black professor. While supportive of a course in which Black politics would be studied in the context of American politics, the two professors thought the topic could be addressed in the introductory political science course or in the existing course *Groups in American Politics*. Hollowell strongly resisted the idea that only a Black professor could teach the course. According to Watson, “Hollowell stated that it was important to recognize the requirements of political science as a discipline . . . and that it should not be necessary to be black in order to teach black politics.” For Hollowell, the principal criteria for selection “should be the academic qualifications for a particular position.” That said, Hollowell indicated that the department would welcome suggestions of available teaching candidates “contingent upon the availability of funds and an appraisal by the Department of the academic qualifications of the candidate.”⁵⁰

Differences of opinion on Black studies also arose at the November 4 meeting of the ad hoc committee. In discussing a proposed Black history course, Hopkins stressed the importance of a Black professor, arguing that a Black person would be better able to speak “from the reality of the situation.” One faculty member on the committee responded sharply that “it is not the purpose of the historian to solve identity crises.” A report to the board of trustees accurately summarized the uncertain status of discussions on Black studies. “The department chairmen were receptive to the curriculum requests,”

it commented, “but their response was restricted by the lack of precise clarity in stating what was desired, [as well as] by the lack of funds, the lack of expertise, the lack of time . . . required to develop the courses, and the lack of authority to make an outright commitment.” An administration report called the Black students’ response to these developments “somewhat negative”—an understatement.⁵¹

Still, the November 4 meeting was civil. Administrators and faculty were encouraged, believing that the members of the AAS saw progress, however incremental, on the twelve concerns that they had presented weeks earlier. Black students, on the other hand, had a very different take on the sessions. Hoping for resolution of their concerns “as quickly as possible,” they found themselves navigating an increasingly complicated bureaucratic maze with no end in sight. Capturing the frustration and growing alienation felt in the process, Hopkins told the ad hoc committee that Black students found it “humiliating to plead for our humanity.”⁵²

To be sure, some issues did end up being resolved before Christmas break. Huestis committed to the university hiring a barber able to cut the hair of the Black students. Griffith found dedicated office space for the Afro-American Society. The university agreed to provide financial support for Black Week.⁵³

The controversy over “Dixie” and the Confederate flag was also resolved. Facing pushback from students, band members, and alumni, Griffith stepped in. “I met with the officers of the marching band” and told them not to play “Dixie,” Griffith remembered. Later, when the band again balked, he was even more direct. “I finally said, ‘Look—we can talk about this all day,’” Griffith recounted. “As long as you are the Duke Marching Band, you aren’t going to play ‘Dixie.’” Although no formal university ban on the playing of “Dixie” was ever adopted, the band “voluntarily” agreed not to play the song.⁵⁴

By contrast, the university stalled on the students’ request for a Black adviser. Dean Price had said that hiring such an adviser would involve three steps. “First, the administration must be receptive and sympathetic towards the idea,” he explained. “Second, there must be sufficient funds to pay the salary. Third, the right man must be found.” “The administration is hopeful that a black advisor can be found,” the *Duke Chronicle* summarized, “but it is still too concerned with the problems of finding the money and the man to express much optimism.”⁵⁵

In early December, Cell completed a draft proposal to fund Black studies and implement other changes at the university requested by the Black students. The proposal was ambitious. Cell wrote,

If Duke is to meet the challenges posed by these students, it must do so on a massive scale and within a special, enlarged framework. The students are asking for something big, exciting, and expensive, something far larger than they themselves imagined at the outset. Duke cannot solve these problems by means of the adjustment of this or that social regulation, by the appointment of a part-time counselor, or by a couple of additions to our list of courses. The problems demand a comprehensive, well-financed program.

Cell proposed that the university seek \$600,000 in outside funding to be spent over a three-year period on a summer program, new faculty, scholarships, a Black adviser, library support, and cultural events organized by the Afro-American Society. As he had promised, Cell circulated the draft to Hopkins and other Black students on the ad hoc committee.⁵⁶

In fact, Cell received no comments on the draft proposal. “The students and I were supposed to get back together and discuss [the] document,” Cell recounted. “They were to criticize it, react to it, and then we would draw up one that represented what we all thought. That never happened. It wasn’t that I didn’t ask them. They just didn’t do it.”⁵⁷ In late December, Cell decided that he could not wait for student comments any longer. “We are just not going to be able to count on” the students, he told Griffith. “We are just going to have to go ahead.” On December 30, 1968, Griffith sent Cell’s draft proposal to Knight, the other members of the ad hoc committee, and the Provost Group. “The Afro-American Society has some further suggestions regarding this proposal,” Griffith informed Knight, “but they will not be forthcoming until after examinations due to the press of academic work at this time.”⁵⁸

From mid-December to early February, little contact occurred between the AAS and the administration on *any* of the issues.⁵⁹ When students returned in mid-January from Christmas break, exams and planning for Black Week occupied most of their time. As a result, there was no progress on critical concerns like Black studies, the Black adviser, the summer program, and dedicated housing on campus for Black students. Knight had also not announced any decision on his Hope Valley membership and remained a member of the club.

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During the period from October 1968 to early February 1969, fundamentally different perceptions of the negotiating process began to emerge. For

administrators, the view was positive. “I thought it was very clear in these meetings,” Griffith observed, “that communication was occurring.” Cell described the meetings as “extremely informative and educational,” commenting that “both groups have learned something.” Knight had the same sense. “We were going along steadily settling” the issues, he recounted. Many in the administration believed that the university was making a serious effort to address the Black students’ concerns. “The administration has repeatedly taken the initiative in attempting to define the concerns of our black students,” Ashmore reported to the board of trustees, and “diligent efforts have been made to understand and meet these needs within the framework of the established policies and procedures of the University.”⁶⁰

The view of the AAS was starkly different. “We were getting nothing done in the meetings,” Hopkins described. “We were missing each other. It’s almost like they didn’t realize what we were saying, although we were sitting there saying stuff to them.” Although the university might have believed that it was taking the initiative in addressing Black students’ concerns, the students saw it differently. “I don’t think the university had really come to terms with what it meant, practically speaking, to have a significant Black student population on the campus,” Turner observed. “Their lack of . . . responsiveness,” C. G. Newsome explained, “signaled to us that they did not see us, they did not hear us,” and “that they considered us non-persons.”⁶¹

These profoundly different perceptions arose because the negotiations—the first substantive discussions between the university and its Black students since desegregation—had primarily served to highlight the *differences* between the parties, not narrow them. “We were talking about institutional change,” Hopkins explained. “We were talking about new courses, changing courses. And that’s where Watson and Durden sat back and said, ‘We are a top school in the nation. What are you talking about—we are here to teach you. You have critiqued us and said that we are lacking in something.’”⁶²

To Janice Williams, the university’s attitude was “‘This is a plantation and it runs real smoothly and nobody makes waves. . . . By you making waves, you bring attention to this university, to this administration. You’re actually making people question us.’” Turner saw the university’s attitude as patronizing and dismissive. “We have brought you from your impoverished, underprivileged, deprived conditions,” he imagined university officials thinking. “What else do you want? Why keep being a nuisance? Just be nice and appreciate what’s been done for you.” “We were saying we wanted Black courses,” Hopkins recounted, “and Durden and somebody else was sitting there saying ‘we

already have this.” For some in the history department, according to Hopkins, a course was a Black history course even if it only “mentioned Black people” and then only “the proper Black people.” The university’s position, Hopkins recalled, was “that basically there was really nothing much wrong with Duke, so it wasn’t a real open dialogue.” Looking back, Hopkins realized, “we weren’t talking about the kind of stuff *they* were talking about.”⁶³

Friction arose even when the university responded favorably on an issue. “The [discussion] that sticks in my mind was the . . . hiring of a Black adviser,” Kerckhoff recalled. “Marcus Hobbs had said two or three times that ‘the university is committed to this.’” For Hobbs, these words meant that the hiring of a Black adviser was “going to happen, in due time.” Despite these assurances, however, the students kept returning to the issue. Finally, Kerckhoff remembered, “one gal . . . just exploded. . . . ‘We don’t care about that, we want to know is it going to happen?’ Hobbs felt he had said that. He just sort of looked startled at her because it never occurred to him that anyone could have interpreted his words in any other way than ‘Yes, it’s going to happen.’” “Clearly the difference between the soft, academic, bureaucratic, cloudy way of saying things,” Kerckhoff explained, “and the hard-nosed-demand kind of language was a part of the whole difficulty of communication.” University assistant registrar Clark R. Cahow characterized interactions between the university and the AAS even more succinctly. “If ever there was a gap in communication,” he commented, “there was one here that was as broad as the Grand Canyon.”⁶⁴

Most fundamentally, differences arose because faculty and administrators did not share the fierce urgency the students were feeling. “Insensitivity was a basic part of it,” Cook explained. “I’m sure that [administrators and faculty] just thought . . . the situation would go away, that the students would get tired of it [and] forget about pushing their demands.” “The amazing thing is how we were actually missing each other,” Hopkins remembered.

They never realized how intense we felt about things we were talking about. . . . With us, it was an everyday thing. . . . But they were . . . like they were off somewhere and comfortable. It was like they were dealing with another university to have some kind of a collective curriculum. They were just easy, in a very gentlemanly fashion, scholars taking their time. They were on a totally different kind of time frame than we were. And when I look back on it, they didn’t realize that. I don’t see how they escaped it, but they couldn’t pick up the intense feelings we had about this stuff.⁶⁵

In retrospect, members of the administration had clearly failed to see the missed signals. “Around me the attitude was ‘what’s the hurry?’” Knight remembered. “None of us understood their urgencies.” “Circumstances were beyond the insight of any of us right at that point,” he concluded. “And our efforts, as a result, went awry.” “I don’t know what the barrier was,” Watson recalled. “In one way or another we weren’t able to convince [the Black students] that we were seriously interested [in solving their problems].” “We were living entirely different times, different rhythms, different cycles,” Cell observed wistfully. “I was trying to work to use a power structure that I know a little about. . . . I don’t think they were ever in that game at all.”⁶⁶

Without a common view of events and issues, differences hardened. Griffith’s “perception” was that they were not meeting in good faith, he explained. “I certainly felt [that they didn’t want an agreement] after a time.” Even when the university would make concessions, “they would never recognize that we had done that,” Griffith recounted. “That was one of the frustrations.” Cell questioned the failure of the AAS to comment on his draft funding proposal for a Black studies program. “I still don’t know how much of that was sloppiness . . . and how much of it was just tactics,” Cell recalled. “By tactics, I mean . . . the effect of that was to paralyze the administration . . . in the three or four months before the Black consciousness reached its crescendo. I don’t know if [Knight and others] would have done anything. But the effect of this was to paralyze efforts in November, December, [and] early January.” It was “not possible . . . to make any progress” from mid-December through early February, Ashmore told the board, “because black students were not available for the kind of direct involvement they had consistently requested.”⁶⁷

For members of the AAS, it seemed clear that the university could not—or would not—take their concerns seriously. Despite movement in a number of areas, the most significant issues the students had raised were bogged down in university committees that seemed unable to cut through bureaucratic red tape, let alone respond to the existential crisis the students were now experiencing. Even where issues like the Black adviser or summer transition program were agreed to in concept, the students could not trust that the university would implement them in a way that met their needs.

“Soon it got around,” Hopkins recalled, “to the thing where we said, ‘Hey, we got to do something about this to get them to respond.’”⁶⁸