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UA1B2/1 Integration at Western Kentucky University

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Integration at Western Kentucky University

The violent scene that accompanied integration at most southern universities, most notable the image of Alabama governor George Wallace standing in the doorway at the University of Alabama, was not mirrored by that of Western Kentucky University. While the surrounding Bowling Green community remained mostly divided by the color line, there was little protest or problem surrounding the admittance of the first African Americans into Western.

Even before Western’s admission of black students, administrators maintained a passion for African American students. Lowell Harrison’s history of WKU, aptly titled Western Kentucky University, notes black sympathies expressed by Western’s earliest president, including Henry Hardin Cherry and his successor, Paul Garrett. Harrison notes that Cherry worked to bridge the gap between the Kentucky Education Association and the Negro Education Association. In fact, C.B. Nichols, principal of Booker T. Washington High School in Ashland wrote to Cherry in 1926 the following memo: “I appreciate everything you are doing for the advancement of my race.” ¹ Garrett not only pledged his support to president R.B. Atwood of Kentucky State College, a traditional all-black school, but also served on a Governor’s Advisory Committee dealing with African American education. In a letter to the president of Eastern Kentucky University, Garrett wrote, “I have felt for a great many years that the Negroes of the state are due on first-class college, and I hope we may lie to see them get it.” ² Despite this sentiment,
African Americans were still denied admission under the Day Law of 1904, which maintained a strict color code.

The landmark Brown vs. Board of Education case was not the point of the sword for integration of Kentucky's public higher education, rather, the case was much closer to home. Louisvillian Lyman T. Johnson sued for admission into the University of Kentucky's graduate school because Kentucky State, the all-black college, did not offer the coursework he wanted. The University of Kentucky did not appeal and, according to Harrison, “over two dozen blacks enrolled in the graduate college” in Lexington.³ The amendment of the Day Law, to allow blacks into colleges only if their chosen coursework was unavailable at Kentucky State, was a precursor to the Kentucky Council on Public Higher Education's ruling to allow the admission of black student. Kelly Thompson, the acting president of Western Kentucky who had himself rejected black applicants to his school,³ was the spearhead behind the ruling. In the summer of 1956, Thompson himself proposed African American admission and the motion passed unanimously.

The change in the policy, announced in the May 24th issue of the Park City Daily News, simply stated that the integration of the Western Kentucky University would commence in the following summer term, of 1956, with the admission of “12-15 Negro students all doing graduate work”⁴ The integration of Western was closely followed by the desegregation of Bowling Green public schools.

The integration of Western Kentucky University lacked the drama surrounding that at other universities. Despite its southern location, and the southern racial mores of the Bowling Green area, Western enjoyed a fairly calm integration. Because of the affordable price of the university, it quickly became a popular destination for African
American students. In his book, *Breaking Barriers*, one of the first African American undergraduate and athletes admitted to WKU and the first black coach at any university in Kentucky, Clem Haskins, calls WKU, “the leader in the south in integration”. Haskins’ statement is reflected in the enrollment numbers. By 1962 there were sixty-five African American students, both graduate and undergraduate. While these students lived off-campus, and most found it difficult to receive housing because of racial considerations, the numbers of black students continued to grow. In 1970, Western’s four hundred and thirty-seven African American students belonged out of the student body of ten thousand one hundred and forty five ranked second in the state of Kentucky to only Kentucky State, a traditional all-black school. While other Kentucky campuses were caught in the throes of protest, namely Murray State University and the University of Louisville, confrontation was kept to a minimum with only one sit-in protest recorded, dealing with the placement of a black cheerleader on the varsity squad. Western’s campus also housed an anti-bias institute for the integration of public schools.

Harrison, however, notes that “differences (between the races) were legion, and adjustments were slow.” There was, however, some clash between the races. In an April 5th, 1970 article of the Louisville Courier Journal, a roundtable discussion with African Americans, including dean-to-be Howard Bailey, outlines the “folk segregation” that existed on the Hill. These students made mention of the lack of places for blacks to gather, the lack of classes focusing on the African American experience, and the non-existent organizations for black students to join. Further, a female student noted that her skin color disqualified her from being Homecoming Queen, and thus competed instead in the Miss Black Western pageant, which still continues today.
While Harrison attributes the smooth desegregation to Thompson and his administration, he also notes the important role athletics played in reconciling white students with their African American counterparts. The outstanding athletes recruited in 1963 only made up a fraction of the student body and yet had a profound impact on Hilltopper basketball and racial sentiments at the school. Crowds arrived in throngs to see Clem Haskins and Dwight Smith, the first black athletes in WKU history, push the basketball program to new heights as the All-Americans compiled a 66-15 record over their three varsity years which included one NIT appearance and two NCAA tournament appearances with a questionable foul called that would have sent the Hilltoppers to the national championship game. Clem Haskins would later coach at WKU and earn National Coach of the Year Honors at the University of Minnesota in 1997. Another African American athlete, Jim McDaniels spurned becoming the first African American athlete to play under the University of Kentucky’s Adolph Rupp and instead was a three-time All-American at Western’s already integrated program. While Haskins himself notes that the same people that cheered for the team spurned them in the community because of their color, the importance of the All-American African American Hilltopper teams cannot be ignored. Although crowds packed E.A. Diddle Arena to cheer on the Hilltoppers, and did so with Confederate flags waved to the tune of “Dixie” (a practice which ceased in 1970) African American athletes no doubt soothed the ruffled feathers of otherwise segregationist students.

On the present-day hill, Western boasts not only a Black Student Union, but also a number of traditionally black sororities and fraternities alongside a Minority Student Affairs department and a curriculum in African American studies. While Western has
been under fire for its minority-teacher hiring practices, it boasts a thriving community that embraces all people regardless of color. Western has not been immune to the problems surrounding desegregation. With that said however, Western has served as a model for the integration and fair treatment of students, regardless of race.
Students Describe 'Folk Segregation'

The Courier-Journal & Times

April 13, 1966

Guest Editorial

'Dixie' Should Be Replaced

Black cheerleader demand delivered to WKU president

By BETTY HOGAN
Dixie cheerleader demand delivered to WKU president

This letter is not aimed at any par-
ticular group, but it has consequence in any community. It is aimed, how-
ever, towards the black community in Iowa City.

Worn-out Gown

In support of my opinion I offer this essay appearing in the United
States Society of March 15, 1966, writ-
ten by Orrin Hoff, the Editor of

Some observers thought Western
Kentucky student would have been red
induced in Western's, too, in Western's,
Western Kentucky students would have
Charleston High and proceed around
the city with their banners during
the game. The idea of a black cheer
leader received the least possible pro-
duct. They should have been a men-
ch of cheer at Western when the Tornadoes
cheerleaders were there. Probably there
was a reason for that.

Dixie Hogan

Student sit-in

Black cheerleader demand delivered to WKU president

(Blacks sit-in the lobby of the student center demand to be
included in the cheerleading program.)

The students who staged the sit-in have
been president

There should have been a method of
down at Western when the Tornadoes
cheerleaders were there. Probably there
was a reason for that.

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down at Western when the Tornadoes
cheerleaders were there. Probably there
was a reason for that.
Mr. Kelly Thompson
Acting-President
Western Kentucky State College
Bowling Green, Kentucky

Dear Kelly:

The Negro Women from Franklin who sought the privilege of attending Western the Fall Semester, 1955, is Mrs. Millie Gumm, P. O. Box 16, Franklin, Kentucky.

In my conversation over the telephone to her at your suggestion I indicated that we are awaiting for instruction from the Attorney General and due to the brevity of time before the new and the opening of school that there is little assurance that any arrangement will be worked out for integration. She responded in a very satisfactory manner and stated on being asked that she understood the situation and she would cooperate with us by waiting.

I indicated at your suggestion also that there is a possibility of the problem being worked out before the beginning of the second semester.

Sincerely,

E.H.

E. J. Canon
Registrar
WESTERN KENTUCKY STATE COLLEGE
BOWLING GREEN, KENTUCKY

May 21, 1955

In compliance with the recommendations of the Council on Public Higher Education and in conjunction with all other state colleges in Kentucky, Western will accept colored students for matriculation beginning with the summer school, June 7.

According to present indications, 12 to 15 colored students, all in graduate work, will enroll for summer school.

Kelly Thompson
President

September 15, 1955

[Signature]

Dear [Name],

Because of circumstances, one of which is the fact that we do not have a permanent president, our Board of Trustees has not decided to make a new明确了 the policies at this time.

All of us at Western are completely by trying to work out problems with a view that an announcement of any policy change will be made when a need of action arises and the Board will exhibit your patience and understanding.

Sincerely yours,

Kelly Thompson
Acting President

cc - [Name]
In compliance with the recommendations of the Council on Public Higher Education and in conjunction with all other State colleges in Kentucky, Western will accept colored students for matriculation beginning with the summer school, June 7.

According to present indications, 12 to 15 colored students, all in graduate work, will enroll for summer school.

Kelly Thompson
President

KT:kw
Western To Be Opened To Negroes

President E. Kelly Thompson today issued a statement saying the college would permit the enrollment of Negro students beginning with the opening of the summer term June 7.

Thompson said the "doors of Western were being opened" to comply with the recommendations of the Council on Public Higher Education, and in conjunction with action by all other state colleges in Kentucky.

In the statement released by the president, 12 to 15 Negro students, all doing graduate work, are expected to enroll for the summer term.

Questions as to whether any formal applications by Negro students had been received by the college, Thompson said there had been several inquiries.

He explained the procedure under which Kentucky's state colleges operate requires application only during the stated registration period.

The Western president added that the college hoped to accomplish the transition to an integrated institution "in stride."

A reliable source in the city school system said today at least two teachers at High Street School are expected to enroll at Western for the summer term.

He identified them as Coach J. S. Ownby and F. O. Moxley, industrial arts instructor at the school.

City School Superintendent L. C. Curry said today the City Board of Education had not reached a decision on when the city schools would integrate, but he imagined it would be "right away."

The City School Board at an earlier meeting decided to wait until either Western had taken the first step in integrating or until the city and county school boards and

Continued on page 10 column 4

Western could all release their decisions at the same time.

An integration committee was set up by the city board last September comprised of both races. A report was returned some time later by the committee recommending the school board abide with the Supreme Court ruling on the matter.

The County Board of Education may take action on the matter within the near future, County Superintendent C. T. Clemens said this morning. So far, little has been done in the county school system on integrating. A committee has been set up to study the matter and work out some solution, but no report has been made.