

A Terrible Thing to Waste

*Envisioning Black Colleges:
A History of the United Negro College Fund*
by Marybeth Gasman

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REVIEWED BY: JANA NIDIFFER

One of the ironies of social movements is that an oppressed group, in their struggle for civil rights and social justice, must appeal to the very group that oppresses them because only the oppressors have access to the power, money, and influence necessary to lift the oppressed. Suffragists needed male allies because the very Congress that could pass the needed legislation was comprised of men only. So too is this irony reflected in the story of the United Negro College Fund (UNCF). In her new book, *Envisioning Black Colleges*, Marybeth Gasman provides a fascinating account of how the UNCF leaders negotiated the challenging dance of a black organization needing serious money from white benefactors in the context of both long-held racial prejudices and dramatic social changes. In short, she chronicles how the UNCF went from being a “new face” in philanthropy to a powerful force in society.

In her well-researched and readable book, Gasman traces the history of the UNCF from its formation in the 1940s through the 1970s with the creation and use of what has been deemed one of the best marketing slogans ever: “A mind is a terrible thing to waste.” Gasman adroitly weaves her two primary story threads: the larger context of race relations in mid-20th-century America and the UNCF’s

Jana Nidiffer is currently an associate professor in the Department of Educational Leadership at Oakland University in Rochester, Michigan. Dr. Nidiffer's primary research interest is in access and opportunity in higher education, largely from an historical perspective. She is currently researching the role of women students as activists for suffrage in the early 20th century. She wrote this review while serving as the Jean W. Campbell Scholar In Residence at the Center for the Education of Women at the University of Michigan.

skillful use of symbols. The result is a fascinating and informative story.

In her examination of the larger social context of race relations that confronted the leadership of the UNCF, Gasman discusses two distinct aspects of the issue. The first is the still shocking manifestations of blatant racism that comprised the daily experiences of African Americans, such as segregation, hate incidents, truncated opportunities, assumptions of intellectual and moral inferiority, and social snubs. Perhaps most startling to modern readers is the “big deal” it was to have white philanthropists and social elites sit at the same luncheon table sharing a meal with African Americans. At one such gathering in Atlanta, the owner of Coca-Cola, Robert Woodruff, chastised the other white businessmen who thought it was beneath them to eat with African Americans by saying, “it ain’t gonna hurt you, God-damn it.”

An interesting aspect of the book is Gasman’s discussion of how the UNCF leadership dealt with the implications of events that had an impact on African Americans, ranging from the publication of Gunnar Myrdal’s 1944 *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and American Democracy*, to radical college student activism for civil rights in the 1960s. Of particular note was the effect of the 1954 *Brown v Board* Supreme Court decision. An ironic and perhaps unintended consequence of efforts at desegregation—ostensibly to provide African Americans access to all-white institutions—was the subsequent attack on all-black institutions as equally segregated. Thus, the *Brown* decision obligated the UNCF to justify the existence of what came to be labeled Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) as unique and worthwhile institutions. Gasman skillfully takes the reader through the evolution of the thinking and the growing political savvy of UNCF leaders.

Just 13 years after the *Brown* decision, the *Harvard Educational Review* published, “The American Negro College” by Harvard professors Christopher Jencks and David Riesman, which was an unrelenting critique of HBCUs. Because of the prestige of both the journal and the authors, this article received wide attention. Again, Gasman demonstrates how the UNCF dealt with the fallout. One response was to criticize Jencks and Riesman on their methodology and lack of attention to scholarly norms, such as their reliance on anecdotal evidence instead of systematic study. Another approach was to point out that the authors compared HBCUs unfavorably to elite white liberal arts colleges and Ivy League universities without noting that the majority of predominately white institutions would not stand up to such scrutiny either. In the end, what evolved was a new perspective where the UNCF began to “carve out an image of black colleges as defined by African Americans rather than wealthy, elite whites.” The UNCF became a force for black agency.

The other large theme of the book is the UNCF’s skillful use of symbols and images to convey its message and how the symbols changed over time. Gasman analyzes the thinking process and conflicts among the UNCF members when

deciding on various symbols and visual strategies. But what is especially effective is her use of reprints of the various advertisements. Numerous pictures accompanied by explanatory text enable the reader to see the evolution from an early ad—a young African American man on a tractor with the caption, “The Negro prefers to live by the American traditions of independence, thrift, and self-help”—to one with a young African American woman looking through a microscope with the tag line, “Who ever said the man who discovers a cure for cancer is going to be white, or even a man?” Dramatically, the pictures demonstrate how the UNCF moved from images designed to please or appease whites, to an “image of black colleges that was defined by African Americans” (145).

In the history of American education, it is often a sign of maturity in the field when scholars turn their attention to what might be labeled “second tier” (albeit quite important) issues and organizations. Not surprisingly, some of the first work on particular groups such as women, African Americans, immigrants, or Native Americans is the history of the actual schools and colleges that educated them—how such institutions were founded, funded, and organized. As the field grows, the scholarship broadens to differences within groups (middle class and poor women, for example) and the social and intellectual milieu in which such education took place. Scholars have paid increasing attention to philanthropy as an agent of educational opportunity. Gasman credits some of this work as an inspiration for her study of the UNCF. *Envisioning Black Colleges* is a worthy addition to the larger field of philanthropic history, and it brings new depth to the study of the history of African American higher education in the US. 

