

MINORITY SERVING INSTITUTIONS ORAL HISTORIES PROJECT

JAMES D. ANDERSON

By Angus McLeod



James D. Anderson is one of the towering giants in the history of American education. With his landmark 1988 book, *The Education of Blacks in the South*, he transformed the field of African American educational history. His life experiences and research accomplishments tell the story of a truly extraordinary life that has been dedicated to growing scholarship in the field of African American history and improving the educational lives of Black students across the United States.

Anderson grew up in Alabama amidst the Civil Rights Movement. In the mid-1960's he attended Stillman College and graduated with a B.A. in Sociology in 1966. Growing up in segregated Alabama and attending Stillman, one of the many Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), provided him with unique experiences that continue to inform his research. It was at Stillman that Anderson was first introduced to the intellectual tradition of people like W.E.B. Du Bois and Carter G. Woodson. To this day, he remembers the impact of one of his history professors—the best he had in his life—who introduced him to a vast world of Black intellectual thought. Stillman was not just an island in a sea of simmering White hostility and supremacy, it was a bastion of Black pride and scholarship.

After graduating from Stillman, Anderson continued his studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign by getting an M.Ed in History and Social Studies Education. After finishing his practicum at Marshall High School in Chicago, Anderson returned to the University of Illinois. In a class with renowned education historian, David Tyack, Anderson had to write a term paper and decided to write about Black education. Tyack suggested to Anderson that instead of viewing the structural system of Black education as a failure, Anderson should approach the education of Blacks as successfully accomplishing what the system was meant to do, that is to educate Blacks for a subservient role in society. Anderson had never thought of education in this way. This intriguing thought launched his research into the education of African Americans in the South and pushed him to complete a Ph.D. in the History of Education from the University of Illinois.

While his work on the education system created by Whites for southern Blacks—and the response of southern Blacks with a rich history of academic striving—has been an incredibly important contribution to the field of educational history, Anderson has also been instrumental in the historical research of HBCUs and the historical foundation of affirmative action programs that are designed to right deep-seated, systemic, racial discrimination. As an expert witness in *Knight v. Alabama* and *Ayers v. Fordice*, Anderson has been able to share his own research and that of other scholars into the underfunding and underdevelopment of Black institutions of higher education by the White-dominated state. While Anderson's own experience at Stillman was transformative and eye-opening, he openly acknowledges that as students pursue more career-oriented majors like pre-med and engineering, places like Stillman often lose out to better resourced predominantly White institutions (PWIs).

While the public conversation about HBCUs puts them in competition with PWIs, Anderson's research and testimony reveals the complexity of that comparison. These two types of institutions are operating under very

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different conditions. PWIs often have better name recognition and more robust brands, they operate with greater state and federal support, their alumni base is wealthier, and their physical plant is often newer. HBCUs, he argues, have operated at a distinct financial disadvantage to their predominantly White peers since their inception. On top of that, they have all too often functioned in a context of overt hostility from the surrounding White community and a clear denigration of accomplishments made in the face of adversity. However, Anderson does not end the conversation about HBCUs with an explanation of their deficits. Instead, he focuses on what they have created despite the many obstacles to their fiscal and academic success. Anderson's research shows that HBCUs have trained generations of Black thinkers and have long served as the guardians of the Black intellectual tradition in the United States.

While Anderson is supportive of HBCUs, as the Dean of Education at a predominantly White institution, the University of Illinois, he also sees the importance in attracting and supporting minority students at PWIs. Because HBCUs have valuable experiences working with underserved student populations, they offer important lessons to majority White institutions. By implementing programs like peer tutoring and increasing the diversity of faculty, PWIs can work to better serve their minority students who often feel unwelcome and unsupported.

Anderson helped to launch a new wave of historical research and writing about the education of Blacks in the United States. With contributions from people like Vanessa Siddle Walker and Heather Williams, scholarship has drastically deepened since *The Education of Blacks in the South* was published. This is one of the greatest credits to the skill and long-term value of James Anderson's work. By looking at periods of academic success for African Americans, educators gain a rich and important understanding of the way the Black community values and passes down knowledge. Instead of fixating on the deficit-centered viewpoint of the past, Anderson's work, and the work of dozens of other scholars in the field of educational history, challenges teachers and scholars to build on the deep intellectual history of the African American community and empower Black children to find their voice and place within that broad, proud narrative.

Minority Serving Institutions Oral History Project

The MSI Oral History Project shares a glimpse into the lives of prominent scholars and leaders across the MSI landscape. This initiative was born out of a class titled "Understanding Minority Serving Institutions," in which students interviewed key figures in higher education who have led Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), work to advocate for MSI inclusion in larger discussion within higher education, or conduct MSI-related research. These important individuals range from faculty in higher education to MSI presidents to those working within nonprofit organizations that support MSIs.