H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Melissa Kean. *Desegregating Private Higher Education in the South: Duke, Emory, Rice, Tulane, and Vanderbilt.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008. x + 333 pp. One online resource. ISBN 978-0-8071-3462-7; $55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-3358-3.

Reviewed by Jayne R. Beilke (Department of Educational Studies, Ball State University Tchr Col)
Published on H-Education (December, 2010)
Commissioned by Jonathan Anuik

Lowering the Gates to the Ivory Tower: Desegregating Southern Higher Education

Melissa Kean focuses on the post-World War II history (late 1940s to early 1950s) of five elite private colleges in the South: Duke, Emory, Rice, Tulane, and Vanderbilt. Despite its rather narrow scope, this is an illuminating study of southern private institutions grappling with racial desegregation during the early years of the civil rights era. The book consists of five chapters plus an introduction and a conclusion. Although Kean touches on the protest activities of African Americans in the communities surrounding the institutions, the bulk of her narrative has to do with the white leadership of these institutions and their respective boards of trustees. As a result, the book is rather thin on social context. It may have been the author's intention, however, to convey a sense of the insulation required to maintain the schools' privileged class status and racial hierarchy. Nevertheless, a more comprehensive treatment of the external social pressures might have further strengthened an already good book. Although an online resource is apparently available, there is no mention of it in the text, and I could not locate it.

Kean uses manuscript sources from the archives and special collections of each university, particularly the papers of the boards of trustees, and various local newspapers and magazines. She states that she "conducted no formal interviews, in large part because–unsurprisingly–most did not want to talk on the record" (p. 7). However, she did speak with Harvie Branscomb, the former chancellor of Vanderbilt (1946-63), who was "quite open," and former Emory president Walter Martin (1957-62) (p. ix). The remaining leaders were Rufus C. Harris, president of Tulane (1937-59), Rice president William V. Houston (1946-61), and Duke president Arthur Hollis Edens (1949-60).

Having established regional reputations as undergraduate institutions offering a classical curriculum, these institutions were now striving to expand their institutional missions to become leading research institutions on a national scale. In addition to curricular and programmatic changes, they would now compete nationally for students and faculty who would infuse new attitudes and apply internal pressure for change. Although these changes should have foreshadowed the need for a more expansive worldview on the part of the presidential leadership and the boards, the leadership seemed unable to adapt to or understand the implications. In addition to changes in institutional missions, the issue of racial integration ushered in nothing less than culture wars in these colleges. Although the ruling by the U. S. Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* in 1954 did not initially apply to private institutions, it did serve as a lever for change. Race was a key factor in the desire to retain the southern way of life that was predicated on regionalism, white supremacy, social control, and political conservatism. As the lines of the culture wars began to be drawn, the university presidents and boards of trustees were on one side. On the other were students, faculty, and the tide of historical social change.

Another factor was the need to increase federal and northern philanthropic funding if these colleges were to achieve national rank and prestige. While the administrators in these universities were convinced that they could control social change, the foundations were often in the vanguard of change. Branscomb argued in 1952 that a member of the Carnegie Corporation, an unidentified alumnus of Vanderbilt, stated his belief that "within five years no national foundation will be in a position to make grants for general support to institutions practicing segregation" (p. 71).

The events in Kean's book follow the general trajectory of racial desegregation of public education. When the Legal Defense Arm of the National Association for

the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) challenged segregation, it did so at the level of publicly funded graduate education first. The reason behind the strategy was that graduate students were mature and therefore unlikely to be rabble-rousers, and they possessed character above reproach. They would reassure the white establishment that black uplift would not mean the ascent of black resistance. This was also the strategy employed internally at these universities. As Branscomb insisted, black participation in higher education would be carefully controlled and limited to certain "exceptional" blacks (p. 16). Exceptionalism generally connoted intelligent students who were also well behaved and godly. An interesting aspect of Kean's account is the extent to which desegregation was advocated internally by the students and faculty of theological and law schools within the post-secondary institutions as well as externally by accrediting agencies (in particular, the Association of American Law Schools).

Articulating his philosophy of accommodation to the trustees, Branscomb stated that his two main principles were "to endeavor to be helpful, and yet not to establish regular recurring inter-racial patterns" (p. 23). When librarians at Fisk University and the Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial University asked to use the Library of Congress catalogue held by the Joint University Library at Vanderbilt, Branscomb urged the administration of the black post-secondary institutions to buy the recently printed edition of the catalogue but let them use Vanderbilt's catalogue until their set arrived or if the bound set did not provide what they needed. Branscomb put off decisions that would allow groups whose members included African Americans, such as the Tennessee Philological Association, to hold meetings at Vanderbilt. In this particular example, Branscomb stated that he did not want to be seen on the podium with Charles S. Johnson, the noted sociologist and president of Fisk University, at a University Center event because it might "create a misimpression" (p. 21).

I would raise a consideration in regard to Vanderbilt. According to a paper by educational historian Sherman Dorn, George Peabody College for Teachers was "the premier school of education in the South" (p. 2).[1] In Dorn's view, Peabody had the opportunity to shape views about education and race in the 1950s and 1960s: "It had a history as the preeminent graduate school of education in the South, active professional networks throughout the South, and a liberal faculty interested in issues of the day" (p. 22). Kean mentions only two incidents whereby Peabody and Vanderbilt intersected during this period. In an agreement formed in 1936, black students enrolled at Scarritt College (located in Nashville) were also permitted to take courses at Peabody and Vanderbilt. In 1952, two black students enrolled at Scarritt. The Vanderbilt board, according to Branscomb, readily agreed to let the agreement stand. In a second example, Branscomb attended a meeting of the board of directors of the newly founded Southern Education Reporting Service (SERS) at Peabody in May 1954. The purpose of the service was to provide school leaders and administrators with "objective facts about developments in education in the South as a result of Supreme Court action" (p. 96). The service was funded by an agency of the Ford Foundation, which also provided funding for Vanderbilt. Other than these two incidents, it would appear that there was little contact between the two entities.

Kean is currently Centennial Historian at Rice University. In that capacity, she is charged with preserving the school's history and preparing for the centenary celebration in 2012. Her explanation for including Rice, the only institution west of the Mississippi River, was that there was "nearly constant interaction among the presidents of the schools, which makes it impossible to separate one story from another" (p. 7). Although that may have been the case, Rice is dissimilar for several important reasons. The smallest of the five schools, Rice Institute, as it was known until 1960, was dominated by scientific and engineering studies that focused on undergraduate education. There was no school of theology or law, whose graduate students often played major roles in advocating for the admission of African American students at the other four institutions. While President Houston was an Ohio-born physicist, the other presidents were sons of the South, having been born and educated there.

Located in Houston, Texas, Rice did not reflect the same cultural traditions of institutions located in Atlanta, Nashville, Durham, or New Orleans. Importantly, there was no Historically Black Institution (HBI) located in Houston whereas the other cities had well-established, largely private black institutions. Emory, located in Atlanta, had Spelman College, Morehouse College, Morris Brown College, Clark College, and Atlanta University. Vanderbilt, in Nashville, was "a stone's throw" from Fisk, Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial, and American Baptist Theological Seminary. Tulane, in New Orleans, had Xavier University and Dillard University. Carolina Central College was located in Durham while nearby Raleigh was home to Shaw University and St. Augustine's College. This context is significant. Social connections were important, particularly since Kean shows readers that there was contact between students

and faculty at the HBIs and the private institutions and that those relations contributed to the impetus for a civil rights movement. In the case of Rice, there were no such external pressures for change, with the exception of the case of Herman Sweatt.

Denied permission to enter the University of Texas School of Law in 1946 based on his race, Sweatt (1912-82) filed suit against the state and the University of Texas. In response, the state took over the former Houston Colored Junior College, initially an extension of Wiley College located in Marshall, Texas, and established a law school. Supported by the NAACP, the case that became known as *Sweatt v. Painter* went to the U. S. Supreme Court in 1950. The Court was not persuaded that the hastily established black law school was equal to that of the University of Texas and ruled in favor of Sweatt (who is misidentified as *Hermann* Sweatt on page 331 of the index). The absence of social context leads Kean to underestimate the *Sweatt* case as well as that of the expulsion of James M. Lawson Jr. from Vanderbilt by Branscomb for leading sit-in demonstrations in Nashville.

When the institutions finally capitulated to racial integration, it was done grudgingly and without conviction. It is not surprising that the presidents of these institutions lost much of their credibility as leaders during this time. They failed to understand that they could not withstand the social changes that swirled about them or to convince stubborn boards of trustees of the power of black demands for civil rights. It would be interesting to know what lessons the next generation of academic leadership learned from this period and how they transformed the role of presidential leadership.

Despite its shortcomings, this book is a welcome addition to the historiography of higher education. Kean gives readers a lively, engaging narrative that expands the understanding of racial desegregation at elite southern private universities. It also provides a critical analysis of the role of race in southern higher education during the post-World War II period. It should become an indispensable entry on the reading lists of scholars and students of the history of higher education and educational leadership.

Note

[1]. Sherman Dorn, "George Peabody College for Teachers, Race Relations, and Education," paper delivered at the History of Education Society Annual Meeting, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, October 24, 1997.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Jayne R. Beilke. Review of Kean, Melissa, *Desegregating Private Higher Education in the South: Duke, Emory, Rice, Tulane, and Vanderbilt.* H-Education, H-Net Reviews. December, 2010.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=31440

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.