

Chapter 6: 1968-69

“Project Opportunity and the Madrona Report”

In April and May 1968, Whitworth students, both white and Black, demanded that the college take more action to recruit more African American students. In response, President Koehler and his cabinet made decisions that were the most significant actions regarding race relations in the college's history up to that point. The context for that decision-making was particularly intense; in 1966 Stringfellow's indictment and Jeff Tucker's critique came precisely at the time in which the civil rights movement of the '60s was reaching a pivotal moment. In that same year, Stokely Carmichael gave voice to Black Power, and in Oakland the Black Panther Party established itself. Riots in the streets of Detroit, Newark, and other cities across the nation accelerated a sense of crisis. King's assassination early in April 1968 prompted increased rioting in many major cities. Younger African Americans all over the country rallied around the importance of their identity as Black individuals who were no longer willing to assimilate into a larger white culture. America's history of slavery, Jim Crow laws, lynching, and other forms of violence and discrimination were realities, past and present, that Black students expected privileged white students to acknowledge. In keeping with the national ethos,

increasing numbers of Black students demanded that Whitworth faculty and the curriculum reflect the realities of the Black experience in America.

All of these factors led Whitworth to decide that they must dramatically expand the college's efforts to recruit more African American students by fall 1968. The most effective strategy proved to be the cultivation of Young Life connections in Harlem, New York, and in Seattle. The presence of African Americans Frenchy Lamont and Gerald Toney, both from New York, in spring 1968 must have assured a number of other African American students that Whitworth would be an acceptable institution.

This endeavor to recruit a larger population of Black students was coupled with what became known as "Project Opportunity," an academic support program. The purpose of Project Opportunity "was to give an opportunity of the college experience to competent but disadvantaged young men and women so that they might develop their talents and increase their ability to deal with the world beyond the ghetto." The Whitworth administration and faculty asked: "Could a young person, raised in the ghetto, grow and develop in the demanding learning environment of an upper middle class college? Would the social environment allow these students the extra-curricular activity necessary for a well-rounded experience?"¹

Initially chaired by faculty member Jasper Johnson, the planning committee met four times over the summer and recommended that the college hire Dr. Lewis Archer, an English professor, as director of Project Opportunity. At the time, Archer was living in Oxford, Georgia, and teaching at Oxford College of Emory University. Archer had served as a Methodist missionary in South Africa.²

The composition of Whitworth's entering class in fall of 1968 was uncertain as late as August 19. Even at that late date (with classes beginning in less than three weeks), school officials were unsure how many students of color would be coming to Whitworth. Admissions staff told the president of the college that anywhere between three and eighteen African American students might be matriculating. Faculty expected that the first semester would be a difficult adjustment period and recommended that the maximum load for each student be three courses instead of the normal four. "Just what services in fundamental skills we will be providing is still hazy." Many of the specifics seemed to be on hold until the new director, Lewis Archer, arrived in Spokane. One faculty member, Dean Ebner, wrote to President Koehler saying, "I think the program is off to a bit of a late start for this year, but with Dr. Archer's enthusiasm and ability I trust we will move forward rapidly. Please send any suggestions or guidelines you have directly to me while Dr. Archer is in transit."³

The fall semester opened officially with nine Black and two white students enrolled in Project Opportunity. However, the total number of 23 Black students on campus raised the overall number to 2.2 percent of the approximately 1,200 total students attending Whitworth. This percentage made Whitworth, overnight, the institution with the highest per capita number of Black students of any college in the state of Washington. The next highest was the University of Washington with 1.4 percent of its students being African American; Washington State could only count .72 percent and Gonzaga, .70 percent.⁴

When students arrived on campus, news leaked out that only \$7,439 had been raised toward the goal of \$120,000 for the King Scholarship. Consequently, there were no additional monies to be distributed.⁵ In an attempt to provide a visible Black presence on the faculty, Whitworth hired Edker Matthews, who had graduated in 1965, to serve as a teaching assistant to

Professor Mark Lee in the Speech Department. As a consequence, Whitworth could claim at least one person of color on the teaching staff, but this simply underscored Whitworth's all-white faculty.

Initially, relations on campus between white and Black students were generally positive. However, at least as reflected in the *Whitworthian*, by November, students began to express opinions and concerns regarding ways in which African Americans and white students were interacting, or failing to interact with one another. White student Bruce Embrey wrote a letter that attempted to dissect the challenges of overcoming distrust between white and Black students and to advocate for interaction, even if that came with a certain risk:

Evidently, communication between the majority of blacks and whites has not taken place. The blacks appear not to trust all of the whites and as one has said: "Why should we?" We whites who are not directly involved with the black Whitworth community are necessarily segregated and seemingly afraid to approach them. . . . Relations are built on interactions such as work, dances, dorm, football, etc. . . .⁶

Embrey further described the general problem as one of apathy, and further said, "So instead of approach we desire interaction, even though interaction will not necessarily bring friendship. In fact, I would hope to gain enemies if I'm not likable, rather than be merely left alone because I'm white. Just the same with whites, the apathy is the problem not the hate, which can be ignored or de-accentuated through positive relationships."⁷

Two weeks later, white student Jon Hussey responded to Embrey by suggesting that the "apathy" described by Embrey was simply the result of "apprehension" over what it would mean

to pursue interaction between the two races. Hussey asserted that most of the responsibility for poor interaction lay with the Black students.⁸

The last issue of the *Whitworthian* in the fall semester featured two additional letters to the editor from African American students: one was from Leonard Dawson and the other written by Claude Brown. Both letters criticized Hussey's assessment of the situation. Brown's letter detailed Black efforts to hold open meetings in hopes of breaking down stereotypes; these conversations would be a foundation for developing the Black Student Union.

Dawson's letter was much longer and more direct in its criticisms. Dawson, who had graduated from Garfield High School in Seattle, wrote his response shortly after visiting his home church, where he and two classmates had shared their first semester experiences at the college.

Dawson described how quickly tensions had developed between Black and white students at Whitworth. He took issue with Jon Hussey's comments about Black responsibility for the poor interaction. Dawson said, "I think the first thing that must be realized is that the problem Black people are facing today is not one of segregation; segregation itself did not hurt the Black Man. What did hurt us was economic and political exploitation So the answer to our problems today is one of gaining political and economic power over our lives."

Dawson critiqued Hussey's letter and said among other things, "The part about patience strikes me this way. I don't understand how anyone can speak of patience when someone's freedom is at stake. No man has the right to put a time limit on someone's freedom." Dawson finished by saying, "Right now the only thing that Black people *must* understand is that we are going to have to act and act *now*, because whites have shown an inability and an incapacity to do

anything meaningful towards rectifying the problem. The burden of understanding, patience, and communication lies with you now. We are not waiting DIG IT? BLACK POWER to BLACK PEOPLE.”⁹

Dawson’s letter clearly reflected his frustration; his diagnosis of Whitworth’s deficiencies reflected convictions informed by the Black Power Movement. His emphasis on economic and political power, coupled with a sense that white America had failed to act by the late sixties, surely led Dawson to embrace the agenda of Stokely Carmichael and perhaps the Black Panthers. Dawson may even have heard Carmichael speak at Garfield High School in Seattle in 1967, when Carmichael gave a blistering address outlining principles of the Black Power Movement.

If Whitworth administrators, staff, and faculty had hoped familiarity among Black and white students would improve race relations, they were mistaken. As the fall semester neared its end, members of the Madrona Presbyterian Church in Seattle presented Whitworth administrators with a blunt critique of what had gone wrong during the fall semester. The “Madrona Report,” as it came to be called, resulted from the visit of three African American students to the Seattle church in November 1968. Leonard Dawson, one of the Black students who attended the Madrona church, presented to an adult education class a description of his experience at Whitworth. His comments were so disturbing that three elders from the church scheduled a trip in early December to investigate for themselves what Dawson and the other two students had reported.

For two days the elders met with college personnel, including the president, dean, chaplain, and faculty members. They attended classes and interviewed eighteen African American students in a group setting for roughly seventy-five minutes (the session was recorded but is no longer available). The committee reported back to the church session (council) and the

session approved the report on February 2nd. The committee returned to Whitworth on February 28 and met with an “evaluative conference” comprised of representatives from the Whitworth faculty, administration, Black students, and the Human Relations Council.

The fifteen-page single-spaced Madrona report described the elders’ visit to Whitworth. Comments from Black students were organized around the following topics: 1) Pressure to “integrate” and conform to the so-called “Whitworth Spirit”; 2) Individual white racist, prejudiced attitudes and behaviors toward Black students; 3) Problems in dormitory life and relations with the administration of the dormitories; 4) Treatment of Black students in stereotyped ways; 5) Classroom problems with a focus on both curriculum and professors; 6) General problems with the administration’s attitudes and actions; 7) Lack of appropriate or enjoyable social outlets; 8) Inadequate counseling or grievance procedures. These comments were followed by a set of goals. The final section attempted to summarize faculty and administration comments in response to the interviews.

Among the most revealing comments were observations that Whitworth administrators, faculty, and most students expected “integration” to take place on Whitworth’s terms. In many ways, this underscored the expectation of assimilation that had undergirded race relations since the founding of the college. The general assumption was that Black students should be grateful for the opportunity to attend Whitworth. The underlying expectation was that Black students should conform to something called the “Whitworth Spirit”; in general, that meant that Whitworth did not need to change its curriculum or its social norms. Black students found Whitworth to be a place that expressed “latent or open racism,” that it was “afraid to vary from tradition in most ways,” and that it was “hypocritical and self-righteous.”

These observations and judgments from Black students were combined with a sense that administrators, faculty, and white students expressed a certain paternalism. Black students reported that they believed the majority culture at Whitworth assumed the following: “We know you are deprived, need special help, and need what we can give you. We want you to become like us and fit into our style of life here at Whitworth. We want you to believe, think, and act as we do; then you will be fully accepted . . . not before you do this.” Among the most telling of comments, because it revealed so much of what was going on across the country at this time, “Black students feel when the Whitworth community decided it wanted to ‘be integrated’ by recruiting minority students, they were seeking ‘Negro’ students who should be docile, and conform, and make no suggestions for change. They did not want ‘black’ students, who are seeking a cooperative but separate style of community life.”

In the Madrona Report Black students reported several incidents of racism, most notably multiple occasions when “cars try to force black students off the campus roads at night by swerving at them at high speed.” They reported the complaints were dismissed as exaggeration, but “black students are actually fearful of walking on the campus after dark now.” (In that period, cars were allowed to drive on an inner loop road before it was changed into a sidewalk) Students lodged multiple complaints regarding dormitory life. Several stated that they felt stereotyped by student life staff. They reported that one resident assistant refused to supervise the Black women assigned to her wing in the dormitory. Strong criticism was leveled against the dean of women and the associate dean of women.

With regard to curriculum, Core 150 (History of the Judeo-Christian Tradition) was singled out for an occasion when the professor used the biblical story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to underscore the preference for non-violence, while criticizing the use of violence in

recent urban riots with cries of “Burn Baby Burn!”. Black students reported that they felt that the professor ignored evidence that “white violence and white power had also caused the riots.” Black students advanced goals that focused on establishing a Black Student Union, hiring more Black personnel, developing a Black Studies program, and initiating orientation seminars for faculty and administrative staff on issues related to Black culture. It was also suggested that the Madrona Church take a much more proactive role in providing financial support for Black students and in particular the Black Student Union.

The report summarized comments from various Whitworth administrators. Faculty observed that President Koehler “seemed to accept the fact that a problem exists and said he had an ‘open door’ policy into his office that few black students had used to his disappointment.” Dean Simpson expressed concern that “black students do not feel free to come into administration offices” and said he was willing to go to Seattle to “get help in understanding the problems they were facing.” But Simpson was optimistic that “black students will make a successful adjustment to the college with continued help.”

The challenge for Edker Matthews surfaced in the report. Matthews, the only Black individual on the faculty, had agreed to be the advisor to the newly forming Black Student Union. However, according to Black students on campus, “he knows he is not completely trusted by the black students because he tends to go along with the general Whitworth scene without working for change as fast as the black students want.”

Perhaps the summary of faculty viewpoints reflected most graphically the gap that had grown between the perceptions of Black students and the Whitworth faculty and administration. It is difficult to know how widely representative these comments from faculty were, but they

reveal negative judgments and paternal attitudes regarding Black students. In the Madrona Report, Whitworth faculty were described as believing the following:

- 1) Black students generally lack the academic background for normal work at Whitworth, but the tutorial program and assigned counselors should help them enough;
- 2) Black students tend generally to be overly sensitive and interpret innocent comments or actions as being direct attacks on them or their background.
- 3) Black students have not been willing enough to relate to the white students, most of whom are more than willing to relate to them, but have been continually rebuffed by the Black students when they do try to relate to them.
- 4) Some Black students are spending so much time fighting their alleged problems they are neglecting their studies and may flunk out.
- 5) Whitworth was not really prepared to deal with the problems the college had to face by enrolling so many more minority students on campus this year. But college personnel tried to do the best they could under the circumstances, and are making real progress.

The Madrona church representatives offered their own assessment of the situation as of February 1969. They singled out several problems:

- 1) The lack of adequate preparation for the coming of Black students. This included lack of adequate orientation for the Black students before they started classes, and the lack of adequate preparation of faculty and staff.
- 2) Lack of communication between groups. "Although there is some meeting and word exchange going on, there is ignorance of real feelings of the other side in both cases."

- 3) The Whitworth community's basic ethnocentrism. "The majority Whitworth community thinks well of itself. The majority see little need to change and only positive good in the religious-social subculture of the campus that has been traditional for many years. The majority of Black students feel the burden for change and conforming lies with the minority.
- 4) Black student reactions to a difficult situation. Some Black students have given in to temptation to blame many of their own problems on the white power structure generally and the Whitworth white community specifically, instead of rightfully accepting part of the responsibility themselves. Black students could help themselves more by not continually thinking about all the worst aspects of their life at Whitworth, but by spending their energies in maintaining their best academic records.

In response, the Whitworth faculty and administration issued their own comments in which they expressed gratitude to the Madrona elders who compiled the report. In general, they accepted the findings with the caveat that the comments from and about faculty and administrators in the report represented individual comments and should not be taken as reflective of the entire faculty.¹⁰

More than 50 years after that first semester, it is clear that the effort to recruit a much larger number of African American students into campus life proved more difficult than most, if not all the architects of "Project Opportunity" had envisioned. Whitworth was clearly unprepared for the impact of more than twenty African American students on its campus. Faculty and administrators were generally well intended and wanted to "do something" to improve race relations. They believed that a bachelor's degree for students who otherwise might not attend college would be helpful in the struggle to improve the lives of African American

students, no matter where they lived. Black students who came to Whitworth were diverse in their backgrounds and in their expectations. But clearly several students established their identities as Black men and women at precisely the time they came to Whitworth. As we will see, that critical affirmation of their sense of identity helped them find confidence in their voices and hence their belief that they could effect change on campus. Over the next several years, Black students' beliefs regarding what was best for them as well as best for Whitworth clashed with the views of white college faculty; the expectations of Black students and the white majority were different enough to generate friction and frustration. The Madrona Report did much to identify where that friction occurred. Most importantly, it signaled the beginning of the end of old assimilationist assumptions. From that time until the present day, students of color would attempt to maintain their own ethnic and racial identity while living and working on a predominantly white campus.

¹ "An Attempt at Being Relevant—Project Opportunity," Black Student Union Files, Box 1, Folder 8.

² Letter, J.H. Johnson to M. L. Koehler, July 23, 1968. Black Student Union Files, Box 1, Folder 8.

³ Letter, Dean Ebner to Mark Koehler, August 19, 1968. Black Student Union Files, Box 1, Folder 8.

⁴ *Campanile Call*, June, (Whitworth Alumni Magazine), 1969, p. 7, Whitworth University Archives.

⁵ *Whitworthian*, September 27, 1968, p. 1.

⁶ *Whitworthian*, November 9, 1968. p. 3

⁷ *Whitworthian*, November 9, 1968. p. 3.

⁸ *Whitworthian*, November, 22, 1968, p. 3; author interview with Bruce Embrey, February 8, 2022.

⁹ *Whitworthian*, December 13, 1968, p. 4.

¹⁰ “Report of Trip to Whitworth College by Madrona Session Committee, 1968,” Black Studies Files, Box 1, Folder 4; “Final Report to Madrona Committee – Whitworth Committee,” Edward Lindaman Files, Box 1, Folder 35.