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## PROBING EDUCATION

### Cheyney University of Pennsylvania: the Oldest Black College in America

Directed Readings and Analysis  
By Rev. Charles Brock  
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*Editor's note: This Jefferson Publications series examines ancient universities that thrive today – how they have shaped the world and influenced education methods, citizenship, the meaning of government, and cultural life. In the wake of last week's U.S. Supreme Court decision striking down Affirmative Action for educational institutions, today's article features Cheyney University of Pennsylvania, the oldest Black college in America.*

#### 16th in a Series

Cheyney University of Pennsylvania is a public historically Black university in Cheyney, Pennsylvania, near Philadelphia. Founded in 1837 as the Institute for Colored Youth, it is the oldest university of all historically Black colleges and universities in the United States. It is a member of the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education and the Thurgood Marshall College Fund. The university offers bachelor's degrees and is accredited by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education.

Built on land donated by the prominent Cheyney family, the university was founded as the African Institute in February 1837 and renamed the Institute of Colored Youth (ICY) in April 1837. The African Institute was founded by Richard Humphreys, a Quaker philanthropist who bequeathed \$10,000 (equivalent to \$293,133 in 2022), one-tenth of his estate, to design and establish a school to educate people of African descent and prepare them as teachers.

Born on a plantation on Tortola, an island in the British West Indies, Humphreys came to Philadelphia in 1764. Many Quakers were abolitionists, and he became concerned about the struggles of free people of color to make a living and gain education in a discriminatory society. News of a race riot against free Blacks in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1829 inspired Humphreys to bequeath money in his will for higher education for free Blacks. He charged 13 fellow Quakers to design an institution “to instruct the descendants of the African Race in school learning, in the various branches of the mechanic Arts, trades, and Agriculture in order to prepare and fit and qualify them to act as teachers.”

The university has traditionally offered opportunities to many students from Philadelphia's inner-city schools. Its alumni have close ties in the city and state. It became part of a 1980 civil rights lawsuit against the state government; it alleged that the state had unlawfully underfunded the historically Black university. The suit was settled 19 years later in 1999. In the settlement, the state agreed to provide \$35 million to Cheyney over a five-year period, particularly for construction of needed buildings and academic development. By comparison, the university had an annual budget of about \$23 million at the time. *Wikipedia Famous Alumnae*

**Reba Dickerson-Hill (1940):** Dickerson-Hill was an artist who painted in the Japanese brush technique sumi-e. She graduated from Cheyney State Teachers College in 1940 and taught elementary grades in the Philadelphia School District before becoming a full-time painter. Her mediums included watercolor, oil, and acrylics. She also produced prints. She participated in major exhibitions for Black artists in Philadelphia in 1969 and Washington, D.C. in 1971, as well as local shows. She won awards from the Sumi-e Society of America.

**Octavius Catto (1858):** Catto was the class valedictorian in 1858 at the Institute for Colored Youth (later Cheyney University). An activist, Catto was influential in getting the Fifteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution passed in 1870 giving Black men (but not Black women) the right to vote. Catto is also the founder of the first Black baseball team in the United States (the Philadelphia Pythians, 1867) and an early member of the National Equal Rights League (October 1864). *Wikipedia*

### **Affirmative Action in American Universities (*Guardian UK*):**

The ongoing racial backlash in this country extends beyond affirmative action. We're witnessing a battle over ideology, and higher education is at the center. The efforts to ban diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives; dismantle the faculty tenure system; restrict how aspects of Black history are taught; and withhold billions from Black universities are also part of this sinister movement. The movement limits Black presence, Black thought, and even Black control of Black institutions to return *all* of academia to white, elitist control. Those

seeking control have no desire for higher education – the environment most concerned with solving complex problems – to have any role in redressing the legacy of racism.

The dismissal of race and racism dialogue in higher education should alarm all Americans because the Supreme Court decision is not about restricting unfair racial advantage in college admissions – it is about maintaining the social inequality that has long restricted most Americans, regardless of their race, while a few are allowed to preserve and maintain their privileged status in society. The result is a weakened university that does not solve racial problems but instead upholds them.

- Excerpts from Eddie R. Cole, “*The Supreme Court’s blow to U.S. affirmative action is no coincidence*,” The Guardian, UK, June 29, 2023.
- Eddie R. Cole is an associate professor of education and history at the University of California, Los Angeles, and author of “*The Campus Color Line: College Presidents and the Struggle for Black Freedom*.”

We can add this on affirmative action in the universities. In a historic commencement address at Howard University on June 4, 1965, President Lyndon Johnson laid out the intellectual and moral basis for affirmative action. Speaking less than a year after the passage of the Civil Rights Act and two months before the passage of the Voting Rights Act, he invoked a metaphor that remains resonant 50 years later: “You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race, and then say, ‘You are free to compete with all the others,’ and still justly believe that you have been completely fair.”

But there are alternatives to racial quotas. The Washington Post’s editorial argues: “The most promising approach is giving a boost to applicants with low or no family wealth, an approach that Melvin L. Oliver, a former president of Pitzer College, favors. This would enhance socioeconomic diversity on campus, a good in its own right. The racial wealth gap is even larger than the racial income gap, so using wealth as an admissions factor would tend to help Black and Latino applicants – and to reward students who achieved success despite difficult circumstances. This is what happened after UCLA’s Law School instituted such a system.

Some steps are straightforward, experts say. Colleges will push harder to obtain diverse applicants from high schools and regions previously overlooked. They will scour an applicant’s essays, recommendations, and life experience, often gleaning relevant information about racial and ethnic background. They will fiercely woo underrepresented students who get admission offers.

The University of Michigan has a commitment to a “truly holistic” admissions review, said Michigan President Santa J. Ono. “That means relying less on grades, numbers of AP tests, standardized test scores, ACT and SAT, and focusing more on responses to essay questions where students can actually articulate their context, their challenges that they’ve overcome.” The university has managed to recoup much of the loss in racial diversity it suffered after the state’s ban, but Black undergraduate enrollment has not recovered. The share of Black undergraduates was 7 percent in 2006, university data show, and 4 percent last fall.[1]

Writing in 1978, when the court first upheld race-conscious university admissions, Justice Lewis F. Powell Jr. noted that “the nation’s future depends upon leaders trained through wide exposure to the ideas and mores of students as diverse as this Nation of many peoples. Campus diversity exists for the benefit of all students, not just those from underrepresented groups. That principle was the right one then, and it still is.”[2]

We need diversity on college campuses to bring about a more accepting society and an America trying to live up to the *Declaration* on equality. Colleges have been one way forward and should continue to find ways to do so.

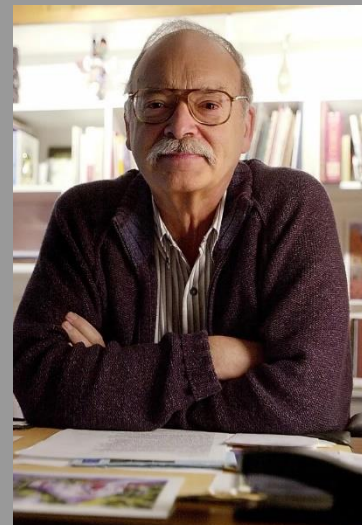
[1] Washington Post article July 1, 2023, *Without affirmative action, how will colleges seek racial diversity? None of the options — from eliminating legacy preferences to reducing slots for athletes — is simple*, By Nick Anderson and Susan Svrluga

[2] Washington Post editorial June 29, 2023

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Rev. Charles Brock**, an Erie native, is an Emeritus Fellow, Chaplain, and Director of Ministerial Education at Mansfield College, Oxford, UK, where he taught for 35 years. He serves as the Director of the Institute on the American Dream at Penn State Behrend. Rev. Brock is acting minister of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Girard, Pa., and he is a Founding Member of the Jefferson Educational Society. Rev. Brock serves as the Director of the Brock Institute for Mega Issues Education at the Jefferson and serves as Secretary of the Jefferson Educational Society’s Board of Trustees.



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