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Fleming uses this book to address the role of black universities in contemporary society. She begins with the query, “Do black colleges serve a worthwhile purpose in a society that strives for integration in educational settings?” (Fleming 8). Fleming acknowledges the plight of black colleges and questions the practicality of maintaining segregated institutions.

In order to evaluate the role black colleges play in educating today’s students, Fleming establishes a historical foundation. Beginning with the Morrill Act of 1890 mandating the creation of educational facilities for blacks, Fleming works her way through a rocky history of black education. Her timeline addresses the ongoing debate on what type of education should be provided to blacks: vocational or liberal arts. This is crucial to understanding the function black colleges serve in the 21st century.

Much of the discourse around the supposed intellectual inferiority of black colleges has been around the lack of resources that these institutions have access to. This is evidenced by the following statement, “most black schools suffer from serious shortages of funds and employ underpaid faculties…” (Fleming 15).

Another prevailing argument in the debate is that black students should learn to function in a predominantly white institution (PWI). After all, this is typically the post-college environment they will encounter. However, through her research, Fleming concludes that, “Rather than acting to maintain segregation, black colleges appear to effectively impart the orientation and skills that allow black students to function well in the larger society…” (Fleming 153).

Fleming provides a very clear explanation of the research design and methodology utilized in this study. Rather than a longitudinal study of the effects of the institutional experience on students from freshman to senior year, Fleming uses a comparative approach. First year and senior students in both black colleges and PWI’s were compared to one another on a variety of measures, including the Black Ideology Scale, grade point average measures, and assertiveness scales.

When using a comparative approach, it can be difficult to ensure that the differences that arise are not based upon differing experiences upon entering college. For instance, senior students could have come in at a time when admissions were more or less selective, etc. Therefore, statistical controls were utilized to account for differences in backgrounds of students at each type of institution.

In addition to doing a cross-comparison of black first year and senior students within the same institution, the experiences of white students were studied for comparison. Fleming felt it crucial to study the development of white students in college in order to determine if race is the most
salient factor in the difference between student development in black institutions and PWI’s. Essentially, Fleming seeks to answer the question, “...is it true that black students have more difficulty in white colleges because of their race?” (Fleming 129).

In spite of the growing concern over the lack of resources at black institutions, Fleming’s research indicates that black students actually fare better in these college environments. Fleming labels the issue of predominantly white colleges the Social Adjustment Crisis. The performance of white students at predominantly white institutions paralleled those of black students at historically black colleges and universities.

The level of post-graduation ambition, involvement and cognitive growth displayed by each respective group tended to be higher when in a college environment where their race is the dominant group. One issue that affected many students was separatism fueled by the need to protect oneself from ignorance and prejudice, “establishing a meaningful personal identity is a major problem for black students in white colleges, and one that affects a large majority of them (perhaps as much as three quarters)” (Fleming 21).

Fleming’s research is well organized and documented, with appendices revealing the research data included in the book. She is realistic about the potential drawbacks of her methodology and provides an extensive background on what led her to conduct the research in this manner. Furthermore, measuring the performance of white and black students aids in painting a clearer picture of the salience of race in institutional experience.

Although the book was published in the mid-80’s, many of the issues still ring true today. Fleming’s work gives student affairs professionals a better understanding of what black students need to thrive in PWI’s. Knowing that interpersonal relationships and support are critical for success in higher education is certainly important to student affairs work. Not only can this book provide a framework for ways to improve the experience of students of color at PWI’s, it also gives a better understanding of the role that school choice plays in student success. As Fleming states, “For black students, the significance of the 1954 victory is not only the right to enter white schools but also the right to choose which educational environment is best for a given individual” (Fleming 159).