

**A Sociological Analysis of  
The United Negro College Fund,  
1944-1954**

**Melissa E. Wooten  
Assistant Professor, Sociology Department  
University of Massachusetts, Amherst**

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[mwooten@soc.umass.edu](mailto:mwooten@soc.umass.edu)

I visited the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) three times during the 2009 - 2010 academic year. The center's holdings were relevant to research projects stemming from my dissertation. Furthermore, I wanted to learn more about the holdings as I began to extend beyond my current research.

I analyzed the United Negro College Fund's (UNCF) campaign brochures during the first ten years of operation, 1944-1954, as a means of understanding the organization's advocacy of black higher education. The UNCF began as a philanthropic venture in 1944 with the expressed purpose of raising money and awareness for privately controlled historically black colleges, i.e., those organizations that began with the intention of providing a higher education to black students. The UNCF was operated by the presidents of privately controlled black colleges in conjunction with representatives of philanthropic organizations that provided human resources, financial and organizational support.

To accomplish its goal the UNCF held annual fundraising campaigns in which brochures were distributed to potential donors detailing the needs of private black colleges. I was particularly interested in understanding how the UNCF crafted a message for elite audiences. I concentrated my analysis on the reports the UNCF distributed to philanthropic organizations and the glossy brochures the UNCF distributed to wealthy individual donors. After analyzing the brochures, it became necessary to learn more about the philanthropic organizations and the wealthy individuals the UNCF solicited as part of its campaign.

The RAC's holdings were ideal for several reasons. First, the UNCF solicited donations from the General Education Board (GEB), one of the Rockefeller organizations. Second, because of pre-existing relationships with many of the private black colleges the GEB provided the UNCF with administrative and financial support. Third, John D. Rockefeller, Jr. headed the UNCF for many years and solicited on the organization's behalf.

Focusing on the relationship between the UNCF, GEB, and individuals such as John D.

Rockefeller, Jr. led me to argue that scholars can further understand the UNCF's activities by analyzing it from the perspective of social movement theory. The social movement literature highlights instability within the political environment that provides an organization with an opening to make its case, and how the discourse associated with a case is limited by the meaning-making institutions of society.

The context at the time of the UNCF's formation simultaneously provided an opening and limited the organization's advocacy. Legally, American society sanctioned the separation of blacks from whites in all facets of daily life; yet, the institutions supporting racial segregation were coming under attack. Historical evidence indicates that the targets of the UNCF's advocacy, particularly large philanthropic organizations, supported racial segregation and were reluctant to acquiesce to those challenging the legitimacy of the system. Thus, the UNCF confronted the challenge of soliciting those who would not benefit directly from supporting the UNCF and, worse yet, people and groups who were likely to view the UNCF with an air of suspicion.

I argue that the UNCF viewed the attacks on and responses to racial segregation as political opportunities to craft a message that spoke to elite desires to maintain racial segregation. Within a discursive opportunity structure that framed blacks as unruly and in need of control, the UNCF solicited elites by highlighting the need for a talented tenth to contain the black community. Meanwhile, since these elites were alarmed at the mounting political challenge to racial segregation, the UNCF framed private black colleges as a bulwark of segregated education that would provide not political leadership, but social and economic leadership within black communities. By steering between the discursive and political opportunities in this way, the UNCF successfully advanced a compelling message in an otherwise impossible situation.<sup>[1]</sup>

In addition to analyzing the brochures, I also investigated the factors that contributed to an individual school's decision to become a member of the UNCF. In 1943, Frederick Patterson, president of Tuskegee Institute, wrote an appeal in the *Pittsburgh Courier* to his fellow private black college presidents. He highlighted the financial difficulties that all private colleges faced because of the ongoing war effort, and how this situation affected the black colleges more acutely. He challenged his fellow private black college presidents to make monetary appeals to a wider public than they had in the past. Furthermore, he proposed that the colleges tackle this effort collectively through a national fundraising campaign and distribute the proceeds amongst one another on the basis of the amount of effort put into the campaign, school size, and need.

In April and November of 1943, meetings were held to plan the activities of the proposed organization. In 1944, the UNCF launched its first fundraising campaign. To enjoy the benefits of the UNCF, a college had to become a member of the UNCF. However, many private black colleges chose not to organize or participate in the UNCF despite their ability to do so. To understand what differentiated those colleges that participated in the UNCF from those that did

not, I first had to identify the schools that decided to participate in the UNCF.

Records from the General Education Board (GEB Archives Series 1.3) documented the colleges that attended the April and November 1943 organizational meetings as well as those colleges that participated in the UNCF's first fundraising campaign. I supplemented the GEB records with historical data gathered by the federal government and the *Journal of Negro Education* to perform statistical analyses that identified the organizational characteristics associated with participating in the UNCF.

The analyses suggest that the organizational characteristics most related to participation in the UNCF were those that indicated a school's level of development, historical resource dependencies, and non-black leadership. The UNCF wanted to have a national character and required financial commitments from participating schools. Thus, larger and more financially stable schools were integral to the UNCF's sustainability. By having larger schools among its ranks, the UNCF could claim to benefit the colleges where most blacks attended. Moreover, schools with larger incomes would have the financial resources to aid the burgeoning organization. Those colleges that were dependent upon philanthropic groups were also ideal candidates for membership in the UNCF. From the perspective of the schools, membership in the UNCF could act as a buffer between the individual college and donor organizations. From the perspective of potential donors, particularly the GEB, prior contact with the colleges provided tacit knowledge of member schools that would speak to the likelihood of the venture's success.

Organizational leadership at these colleges played an intriguing and unexpected role. Those schools that committed their resources toward the UNCF at all three points in time had a lower percentage of black trustees than those unwilling to commit. This suggests that those colleges with a history of black leadership did not immediately perceive the benefits of collective fundraising and chose not to participate at the earliest moments possible. Those schools with a larger proportion of black leadership may have shied away from the UNCF initially because the institutional memory of these schools would have carried remnants of past power struggles with philanthropic organizations over issues of academic freedom and racial equality. As such, these schools appear to have delayed their commitment to the UNCF until the inaugural campaign more so than schools with fewer blacks in leadership positions.<sup>[2]</sup>

I then utilized the archives to conceptualize a new research project. This project is in its early phases and the two research questions that I have sketched out thus far are as follows:

What organizational practices and ideologies were unique to the UNCF and which were more reflective of existing philanthropic organizations, such as the GEB and Rockefeller Brothers Fund (RBF); of existing organizations that advocated for blacks, such as the New York African Society for Mutual Aid; and of existing organizations that advocated for black colleges, such as

the Conference of Presidents of Negro Land Grant Colleges?

Secondly, do organizations started by blacks and/or advocating for blacks illuminate new organizational processes? The current theoretical propositions and statements within the organizations literature are drawn from observations of organizations populated primarily by Euro-centric ideals, values, and people. Would we learn something different about the process of organizing if we focused on organizations that were striving to advance black ideals, values, and people?

Possible research strategies include focusing on the mission and purpose of the GEB, RBF, and UNCF; focusing on the types of projects funded and supported by the GEB, RBF, and UNCF; focusing on the organizational structures of the GEB, RBF, and UNCF; or focusing on the institutional carriers between the GEB, RBF, and UNCF in an effort to discern the organizational patterns, characteristics, and innovations that were unique to the UNCF. I will spend the fall of 2010 developing the research strategy for this project and hope to begin work on it in the fall of 2011.

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## ENDNOTES

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1. The manuscript developed from this research, "Soliciting Elites: The Framing Activities of the United Negro College Fund," has been accepted for publication in *Mobilization*.
2. The manuscript developed from this research, "Organizations Unite!: Collective Action Among Private Black Colleges," is currently being revised.

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