

Black colleges here to stay, say educators

United Press International
When a Nashville, Tenn., gas company threatened last April to cut off the heat at Fisk University because of an overdue \$170,000 bill, there was reason for administrators of black colleges across the country to shudder.

One of the nation's most prestigious predominantly black schools was in the fiscal cold with a \$2.8 million debt that threatened to close its doors. Some educators had been predicting an end for the black schools for years. But none had ever failed.

In contrast, this month ground was broken at private, predominantly black Johnson C. Smith University in Charlotte, N.C., for a new \$3.5 million dormitory.

And top officials insist that Fisk's problems, while not unrelated to the times, are isolated ones and the nation's black schools are going to weather the recession, Reaganomics, and declining enrollments.

"The doubting Thomases sitting on the sidelines for 25 years or more and speculating the private black schools are going to die should give up that negativism, realize these schools are here to stay and get on board positively," said Christopher F. Edley president of the New York-based United Negro College Fund.

The fund set a fund-raising goal of \$28 million in 1983 for 42 black private schools and reports that it is hopeful of meeting when all donations from last year are in.

"While virtually all of the schools have very tight budgets and are engaging in belt tightening, they're making it," Edley said. "They will continue to offer underprivileged students, those with little capital resources, and students who have attended high schools that didn't properly prepare them

for college, a solid, affordable college education."

According to the U.S. Department of Education, there are 103 traditionally black accredited colleges and universities in the country. Some 42 of them are private, and nine-tenths are located in the South or its border states.

Many of the schools, the private ones in particular, live on the brink of a financial quagmire with one eye on falling enrollments and the other on the student aid and grant programs proposed by the White House and Congress.

Black college enrollment has tripled in the past 20 years, but the percentage of black students attending traditionally black schools has fallen by nearly one-half. At the same time, competition among major universities for top black students has become intense.

Dr. Robert Albright, a former U.S. Department of Education policy official who now heads Johnson C. Smith, echoed the sentiments of other administrators saying situations like the one at Fisk can be expected from

time to time. Edley said never has one of his organization's 42 members failed, but some have looked over the edge.

Albright said the umbrella organization, the Washington-based National Association for Equal Opportunity in Education, identifies four schools in addition to Fisk that are facing considerable financial difficulties. He said five to 10 others are experiencing "trauma of some kind."

School officials are reluctant to talk about their finances and decline to name the schools since adverse publicity hurts critical enrollment figures. Fisk officials, for instance, worked quietly behind the scenes during years of financial trouble, saying little up front until the school went in debt by \$2.8 million.

"At any given point in time we always have two or three schools facing financial difficulties that which could lead to preliminary closings," said Edley. "But it has never occurred."

There are a number of examples. Knoxville College, founded in 1875 in Knoxville, Tenn., was unable to meet its payroll two years ago and was on the brink of closing. Enrollment in 1983 was up 19 percent over the previous year.

"We were sort of like Chrysler," said Knoxville President Clinton Marsh. "If we had not come along with some good moves it could have reached a state of financial collapse some years ago."

Albright said Johnson C. Smith rode a rocky road several years ago, but now operates in the black. Many believe Fisk, with renewed efforts, also will survive.

While most civil rights groups don't give President Reagan high marks, many black educators feel the administration is with them and that he believes black schools are meeting a real need of the underprivileged.

According to the United Negro College Fund, nearly half the 45,000 students enrolled in

its institutions come from families with less than \$13,700 in annual income. The average annual income for the average American college student is \$24,024.

Ninety percent of the students enrolled at the 42 Fund institutions rely on financial aid. The organization says its education is a relative bargain, with tuition fees and housing costing one-third less than the average for private schools overall.

Because some members of their constituency would have

"Because of these goals a black arts college catering to the unique needs of black students of talent is more important today than at any time in the history of higher education."

Reagan this fall issued a White House "initiative" in which he pledged support for the schools and a belief they are needed. But two years ago he nearly dealt a fatal blow when he proposed massive cuts in student aid and loans. Reagan reversed fields, and now plans in aid to the middle-income students, while actually increasing the aid available to those near the poverty line.

"I think he tried to cut the money two years ago and met with such resistance from the entire academic community, both black and white, that he backed away," said Albright, noting small private predominantly white schools face many of the same problems as the black schools.

"But I really think there's a change in philosophy. He believes that people who can pay their own way should."

To illustrate the impact government student aid has, the United Negro College Fund said freshmen enrollment at its member schools dropped by 10 percent after Reagan threatened student aid cuts. Overall private school enrollment fell only 3.1 percent.

Albright, who helped draft policy in the Carter administration, said the problem is in dealing with the bureaucracy and not with the White House, particularly in trying to get grants for capital improvements.

"The money is still flowing," said Albright. "It's just harder to get. You have to jump through the hoops."

To deal with the enrollment problem, school administrators say they must become more competitive.

"With equal opportunity in existence white scholastics to fill their classrooms," said Dr. Walter Walker of Lenoir-Rhyne College in Lenoir, N.C. "The top black students are at a premium."

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problems surviving in the mainstream of higher education, black college officials say the small black private school has found its place in the modern educational system.

"Today's challenge deals essentially with even more fundamental matters: assisting young black men and women of ability and promise to free themselves of the self-stereotypes that have been transmitted to them by the American culture and helping them to face the resistance that custom puts in the way of their legitimate aspirations," said Fisk President Dr. Walter J. Leonard.

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United Press International
AUSTIN — South Texas businesses hard hit by December's record freeze may be eligible for federal disaster loans of up to \$500,000, the Texas Economic Development Commission said Wednesday.

Director Charles B. Wood said his agency will provide technical assistance in the form of loan packaging for Rio Grande Valley area businesses that qualify for federal Small Business Administration loans.

Wood said TEDC workers will be available at the Western Chamber of Commerce and at the agency's temporary office in Pharr to provide assistance.

Hidalgo, Willacy, Cameron and Starr counties were declared federal disaster areas in the wake of the freeze that destroyed much of the Valley's citrus crop.

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