



Graphic by Lem Butler

## "A Mind Is A Terrible Thing To Waste"

### On Minority Scholarships

By Debbie Baker  
Assistant Editor

A college education opens up the door to a wide range of economic and social opportunities. In a highly technical and computerized society, a college degree is becoming increasingly important. Students who want to attend college are bombarded by a wide variety of problems. Economics seems to be the main concern for most students who seek a post secondary education. And of course economics as a factor will affect students from low-income families. A disproportionate number of African-American students come from economically-disadvantaged backgrounds, which may inhibit them from seeking higher education. The federal government has created several financial aid programs to provide all students with an equal opportunity to attend college. However, in December of 1990, the U.S. Department of Education declared that racially-based scholarships violated the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The education department's ruling

aroused controversy because it could have a detrimental effect on the number of African-American students who want to attend college.

In order to understand the ruling's potential effects on black college students, it is important to examine recent statistics on African-Americans concerning economics and higher education. The Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies conducts research designed to provide information to help blacks make progress. According to its research, there are two million black families that live below the poverty level. Studies also show that 87 percent of black children who live in single-parent households are poor. In addition to this, the average black child will spend 15 years of his life in poverty in the United States.

Economic and social disadvantages have affected black opportunities for higher education. The American Council on Education reports that only about 30 percent of black high school graduates from low-income families attend

college. The Council also reports that black students from working class and middle class families also lack the financial resources necessary to attend college. The number of black students attending college from middle class households dropped from 53 percent in 1976 to 36 percent in 1988.

It is obvious that many blacks just do not earn enough money to support their families and finance college educations for their children. Thousands of African-American students would not be able to attend college without financial help from the government. The declaration by Michael Williams has the potential to destroy the dreams of many talented black students from economically-disadvantaged backgrounds.

The controversy surrounding the minority scholarship decision has been a complicated affair. The controversy has increased the tension that exist between the Bush administration and the black community. In December 1990, Michael Williams, assistant secretary of education for civil rights, wrote a letter declaring that ra-

cially-based scholarships were illegal. Williams said that colleges and universities supported by federal funds could not designate scholarships for minority students. Under the Williams ruling, private money given to universities also could not be used for minority scholarships because it also could be classified as public money. White House Counsel C. Boyden Gray and lawyers from the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice agreed with the Williams ruling. The President and the White House staff claimed they knew nothing about the Williams plan until it reached the press.

When the Williams ruling reached the press, black people got mad. Black journalist Tony Brown called Michael Williams a "rogue" and an "anti-Black, niggardly Negro" and demanded his resignation. Dr. Benjamin Hooks, executive director of the NAACP and Reverend Jesse Jackson, director of the Rainbow Coalition, both vigorously expressed their concerns over the decision. Even Congress appeared to become upset by this attempt to deny minority students the chance to a higher education. The U.S. House Education and Labor Commission held a hearing to discuss the passage of a law to protect minority scholarships.

The ruling even upset a few people in the Bush administration. White House Chief of Staff John Sununu went so far as to order a reversal of the Williams declaration. He also asked lawyers to draw a legal distinction between private and public money given to universities for scholarship funds. Some officials in the Bush administration did not agree with Sununu because they said a reversal would further embarrass the president. Several officials said the Department of Education should suspend the ruling while a lengthy review was conducted. Others said the language of the ruling should be reworded to avoid more political and legal problems. In other words, rearrange the words so that nobody understands the ruling because blacks won't become upset if they don't understand.

President Bush has tried to save his administration from further embarrassment on the minority scholarship issue. Bush is not known as a friend to black people with his dislike of racial quotas and his veto of the Civil Rights Act of 1990. He cannot afford to do anything else to heighten the dis-

like that African-Americans feel for him and his staff. Consequently, in late December 1990, the President invited 12 top black publishers and editors to the White House to discuss the matter. Those in attendance included black historian Lerone Bennett, executive editor of *Ebony* and Marie Smith of Black Entertainment Television (BET). No one knows why Bush invited 12 people to discuss an issue that will affect millions of students. He should have called up students and administrators from all the Historically Black Institutions to get their opinions. But then again, he knew better than to mess with the masses of black people.

The controversy surrounding the minority scholarship issue forced the White House to modify the original Williams ruling. In essence, the administration has declared a new stance concerning racially-based scholarships. White House press secretary Marlin Fitzwater called a press conference to discuss the administration's response to the Williams declaration. Fitzwater claimed the President believes that minority scholarships are important to ensuring that all Americans get a good education. Fitzwater also said the administration wanted to revise the Williams policy. Under the new policy, colleges can award minority scholarships if the money comes from private donations or from federal programs created to help minority students. In other words, the revised policy is a reversal of the original policy, but Fitzwater did not want to say that. However, the revised policy still does not allow minority scholarships to come from general funds, which is a source of money used by many institutions of higher learning.

The revised plan issued by the White House still has the potential to keep many talented black students from attending college. The administration is trying to save face—but the damage has already been done. Nothing Bush does can change his reputation in the black community. The revised plan is insufficient because the original policy should not have been issued in the first place. When Michael Williams declared that racially-based scholarships violated the Civil Rights Act of 1964, it is obvious that he had never even read it. And the lawyers who agreed with him should be disbarred.

Minority scholarships do not