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Black students: Duke study shows deeper problems

By Martha Waggoner
RALEIGH (AP) - An unpublished study by Duke University researchers that says black students are more likely to switch to less difficult majors has upset some students, who say the research is emblematic of more entrenched racial problems.

The study, which opponents of affirmative action are using in a case they want the U.S. Supreme Court to consider, concludes black students match the GPA of whites over time partially because they switch to majors that require less study time and have less stringent grading standards. Opponents of affirmative action cite the study in a case they want the U.S. Supreme Court to consider.

About three dozen students held a silent protest outside a speech by black political strategist Donna Brazile that was part of the school's annual Martin Luther King Jr. observance. Members of the Black Student Alliance have met with the provost to express their unhappiness with the study and other issues on the Durham, N.C., campus.

"I don't know what needs to happen to make Duke wake up," said Nana Asante, a senior psychology major and president of the Black Student Alliance.

The reaction from black students has surprised one of the researchers, who said he wanted to show the need to find ways to keep minorities in difficult majors such as the natural sciences, economics and engineering.

Peter Arcidiacono, an economics professor at Duke, wrote the paper in May 2011 along with a graduate student and sociology professor Ken Spenner. Both Spenner and Arcidiacono are white. The paper has been under review since June at the Journal of Public Economics.

The statistics would likely reflect trends at other schools, Arcidiacono said. The study notes that national science organizations have spent millions to increase the ranks of black science students.

"It's not just a Duke issue. It's a national issue," he said.

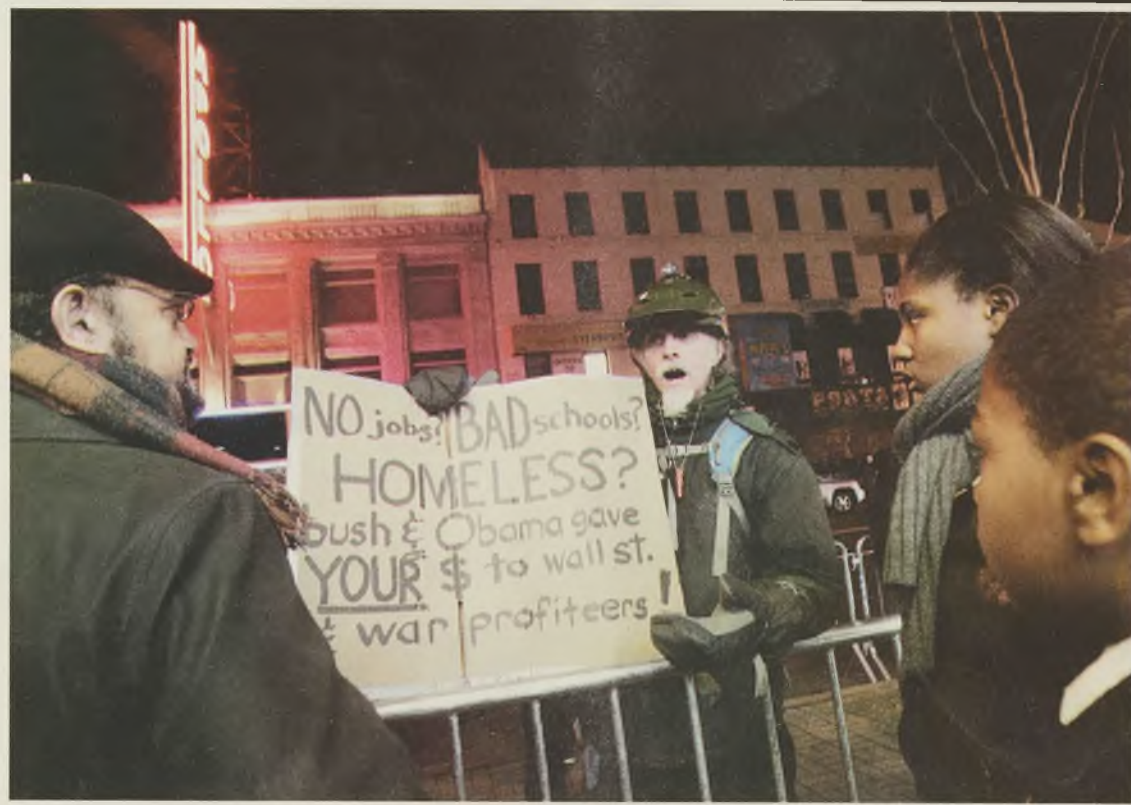
The researchers analyzed data from surveys of more than 1,500 Duke students before college and during the first, second and fourth college years. Blacks and whites initially expressed a similar interest in tougher fields of study such as science and engineering, but 68 percent of blacks ultimately chose humanities and social science majors, compared with less than 55 percent of whites. The research found similar trends for legacy students - those whose parents are alumni.

The study's claim that majors such as natural sciences required more study time was based on students' responses to survey questions about how many hours they spent each week on studying and homework. The study found that those fields required 50 percent more study time than social sciences and humanities courses.

"I view the lack of (minority) representation in the sciences to be a problem, and I include my own field of economics," Arcidiacono said. "I'd like to see programs that are successful in increasing that representation."

Black students at Duke haven't taken that impression from the study, which came to light when the Chronicle of Higher Education wrote about it earlier this month. Affirmative action opponents cite the study in briefs involving a challenge of the undergraduate admissions policy at the University of Texas at Austin.

(Continued On Page 15)



Occupy Harlem protester John McDermott, center, talks to a passerby at Assita and Hamzata Diallo listened to the conversation across the street from the Apollo Theater where President Barack Obama held one of several fundraisers he attended in New York, Thursday, Jan 19. (AP Photo/Kathy Willens)

GOP campaign rhetoric raising racial concerns

By Jesse J. Holland
WASHINGTON (AP) - Hoping to win the hearts of Southern conservatives, Newt Gingrich leaned into his argument that President Barack Obama is a "food stamp president" and that poor people should want paychecks, not handouts - a pitch that earned him a standing ovation in South Carolina during a presidential debate on Martin Luther King Jr. Day.

"I believe every American of every background has been endowed by their creator with the right to pursue happiness, and if that makes liberals unhappy, I'm going to continue to find ways to help poor people learn how to get a job, learn how to get a better job and learn someday to own the job," Gingrich said. A day later, he turned the moment - complete with the cheering conservative crowd - into a TV ad as he works to claw his way to the top of the leader board in the closing days of the South Carolina campaign.

Rhetoric like that from Gingrich and other candidates is stoking concerns among some blacks that the political discourse is rewinding to the days of "Southern strategy" campaigning that uses blacks as scapegoats to attract white votes. Yet, it's unclear whether this strategy - if that's what it is - will work on an electorate now accustomed to seeing African Americans in high-ranking positions.

"I see it as a retreat to the sort of bread-and-butter rallying of those who we might call racist," said Charles P. Henry, chair of African American Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. "I see it as a desperate strategy to draw in those voters and South Carolina would be a better testing ground because of its sizable black population."

While blacks are of 1.1 percent and 2.9 percent of the population, respectively, in New Hampshire and Iowa, they are almost one in three in South Carolina, where the Civil War began in 1861. That means scapegoating minorities stands to work better there than in either of those previously contested states, Henry said.

"If it works, then one could expect to see it repeated in other primaries where blacks might be a force in state politics," he said.

Gingrich's standing ovation came Monday during an exchange with debate panelist Juan Williams, who sought to revisit Gingrich's assertions in New Hampshire that he would go before the NAACP and talk about "why the African-American community should demand paychecks and not be satisfied with food stamps."

"Can't you see this is viewed, at a minimum, as insulting to all Americans, but as particularly to black Americans?" Williams said.

"No, I don't see that," Gingrich replied.

Williams said his email and Twitter accounts were "inundated with people of all races who are asking if your comments are not intended to belittle the poor and racial minorities."

Williams wasn't the only one wondering.

Last week, when Gingrich faced a crowd at a black church in South Carolina, one woman said his words came across "so negatively, like we're not doing everything for our young people." The NAACP, the Urban League and others condemned Gingrich for dredging up racial stereotypes, and pointed to 2010 Census data showing that, nationally, 49 percent of food stamp recipients were non-Hispanic whites, 26 percent were black and 20 percent were Hispanic.

Gingrich is not alone in using what some blacks interpret to be racial rhetoric or imagery.

Rick Santorum, in a discussion about Medicaid in Iowa, said: "I don't want to make black people's lives better by giving them somebody else's money." Santorum later denied that his remarks were aimed at blacks.

Ron Paul chose the South Carolina Statehouse grounds, surrounded by Civil War icons and the Confederate battle flag, to talk recently

about states' rights to possibly ignore federal laws they don't like, which in the past would have included civil rights and voting laws. Mitt Romney spent King Day campaigning with anti-immigration activist Kris Kobach, architect of two of the strongest immigration crackdown laws in the country. Romney also has said that, if elected, he would veto legislation that would allow illegal immigrants brought to the U.S. as children to earn legal status if they went to college or joined the military.

Politicians know the effect of their words and how those words can help them with conservative voters, especially now that Romney "has sewed up the moderates," said D'Andra Orey, chairman of the political science department at Jackson State University in Mississippi.

"This is a calculated move and is not some sort of slip," Orey said. He added that if politicians can successfully pit blacks against whites, "it creates the kind of contagion that will help to mobilize support" among extremists in the Republican Party.

Former President Jimmy Carter also said he heard familiar undertones in some of Gingrich's comments. "I wouldn't say he's racist, but he knows the subtle words to use to appeal to a racist group," Carter said in an interview aired recently on CNN's "Piers Morgan Tonight."

The former Democratic president, who like Gingrich is from Georgia, said Gingrich uses terms about welfare "that have been appealing in the past, in those days when we cherished segregation of the races. ... So he's appealing for that in South Carolina, and I don't think it'll pay off in the long run."

In an interview for the book "Southern Politics in the 1990's," the late political operative Lee Atwater, manager of George H.W. Bush's 1988 presidential campaign and a South Carolina native, was clear about the evolution of racial code words in political campaigns.

"You start out in 1954 by saying, 'Nigger, nigger, nigger.' By 1968 (Continued On Page 15)

Appeals court hears challenge to Voting Rights Act

By Nedra Pickler
WASHINGTON (AP) - Appeals court judges expressed concern Jan. 19 about whether to overrule Congress' determination that some southern states and other jurisdictions still must have federal election monitoring to protect minority voting rights.

Alabama's Shelby County is challenging a requirement under the Voting Rights Act that governments with a history of discrimination obtain federal approval to change even minor election procedures. An attorney for the county argued in federal appeals court in Washington that the South has changed and that extraordinary oversight is no longer needed.

But two of three judges on the panel hearing the case pointed out Congress renewed the provision of the 1965 Voting Rights Act in 2006 after finding that discrimination still exists. A lower court endorsed that finding.

"Why shouldn't we defer to the judgment of Congress?" asked Judge Thomas Griffith, the Senate's former top lawyer and a nominee of President George W. Bush. Judge David Tatel, a former civil rights attorney and appointee of President Bill Clinton, asked similar questions.

Griffith pointed out that lawmakers spent a considerable amount of time weighing evidence of continued racial discrimination and that the Constitution gives the legislature power over decisions that affect the 15th Amendment's protections of voting rights for racial minorities.

"But that can't be without limitation," responded Shelby County's attorney, Bert Rein. He said the numbers of blacks registered to vote and elected to office has increased dramatically since the act was first passed and said those who implemented discriminatory practices in the 1960s are no longer in charge. "The South has changed," he said.

The county, located just south of Birmingham in central Alabama, sued Attorney General Eric Holder in 2010 to stop the monitoring required under Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act. The provision relies heavily on patterns of past discrimination to determine which state, county and local governments must obtain "preclearance" for election changes as minor as moving a polling place or redrawing school district lines. That clearance can come either from a federal court in Washington.

U.S. District Judge John Bates ruled against the county and upheld the law in September after reviewing 15,000 pages of congressional records and deciding that lawmakers were justified in finding that discrimination still existed in the covered jurisdictions.

The judge pointed to several examples of outright discrimination across the South since the 1980s, including legislators in Mississippi and Georgia using racial epithets during redistricting debates and reports of harassment of blacks at the polls in Texas and South Carolina.

According to the Justice Department Web site, Section 5 currently applies to the states of Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Georgia, Louisiana, (Continued On Page 15)

Black farmers file for settlement claims in Durham

(AP) - Hundreds of black farmers in North Carolina who say they were unfairly denied loans and other assistance for years from the Agriculture Department are taking steps to claim their share of a \$1 billion settlement.

WRAL-TV reported the farmers traveled Jan. 16 to Durham file claims. Attorneys were on hand to help with applications at no cost.

Last year, President Barack Obama signed into law the settlement that covers 58,000 black farmers nationwide. Most eligible claims amount to about \$50,000 per family.

Farmer Troy Murray says the money will help, but it won't heal the scar.

The settlement arises from a class-action lawsuit known as the Pigford case after Timothy Pigford, a black farmer from North Carolina who was an original plaintiff.