



IN THE GOVERNOR'S OFFICE awaiting the signing of SB 2 are Representatives Garrison, Grover, Cole, Eckhardt, Shipley, Floyd, Whitfield and Miller. Senator Baker stands beside Governor Daniel.

June 17, 1961: Governor of the State of Texas Price Daniel signs SB 2, which brings the University of Houston into the state school system effective September, 1963.

For Their Successful Efforts in Bringing State Support to the University of Houston

The 1961 HOUSTONIAN
Pays Tribute to —

Lt. Governor Ben Ramsey . . . Speaker of the House James A. Turman . . . the Administration . . . Faculty . . . Student Body . . . Alumni . . . Citizenry of Harris County . . . numerous Supporters throughout the state . . . and all News Media.

And

Special Tribute to —

The Harris County Delegation:

Senator Robert W. Baker, Representatives Criss Cole (chairman of the H/R delegation), Robert C. Eckhardt, Paul Floyd, Don Garrison, W. H. Miller, Henry C. Grover, Don Shipley and J. Charles Whitfield, Jr.

Texas Governor Price Daniel and legislators awaiting the signing of SB 2, as seen in the *Houstonian* yearbook, 1961.

All photos courtesy of the Digital Collections, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

University of Houston Integration Records: A Difficult Path to Desegregation

By Bethany Scott

Despite its current status as one of the country's most diverse universities, the University of Houston, like numerous institutions of higher education, was founded in an era of segregation. In the 1920s, the Houston Independent School District (HISD) board unanimously passed a resolution that authorized the founding of two junior colleges: Houston Junior College for white students and Houston Colored Junior College for Black students.¹ At the time, Texas's public facilities remained racially segregated, including the public high schools where the colleges met. Both colleges began operations in 1927, and enrollment quickly grew, leading them to become four-year institutions in 1934.

The University of Houston (UH) moved to its own campus in 1939, and after World War II the number of students

expanded by the thousands, which included many veterans on the GI Bill. By 1945, UH had grown too large for HISD to manage, and it passed control to a board of regents created by the state to administer UH and Houston College for Negroes as private institutions.²

The following year, an African American man named Heman Sweatt applied to The University of Texas at Austin School of Law (UT). UT denied his admission based on his race, but the state had no law school for Black students to comply with the "separate but equal" doctrine established by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) to address segregation. The State of Texas, hoping to avoid integrating its campuses, offered to establish the Texas State University for Negroes with a law school. In 1947, the state

U. OF H. BIDS FOR STATE SUPPORT



AERIAL VIEW of the center portion of the main campus, featuring the Ezekiel W. Cullen Building and reflection pool.

State Aid . . . state aid . . . STATE AID!

took over the Houston College for Negroes and founded Texas State University for Negroes (TSU, now Texas Southern University) as Houston's first public state university. TSU offered educational opportunities in "pharmacy, dentistry, arts and sciences, journalism, education, literature, law, medicine and other professional courses" – and stipulated these courses must "be equivalent to those offered at other institutions of this type supported by the State of Texas."³

Eventually, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Sweatt v. Painter* (1950) that the new TSU law school did not satisfy the separate but equal provisions. The court identified extensive quantitative differences between the white and Black schools, such as the number of facilities, full-time faculty, and library collections available to prospective students. Additionally, justices found experiential differences related to UT's location in the state capital, which provided white students easy access to the Texas Bar and opportunities in public and private practices that TSU law students lacked in Houston. Thus, the Court stipulated that Black students, including Sweatt, must be admitted to the UT School of Law. The case served as a precedent in the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision four years later, overruling the separate but equal notion, declaring it inherently unequal and paving the way to desegregate educational institutions at all levels. Nevertheless, school integration moved unbearably slowly.⁴

As a private institution, the University of Houston struggled with financial issues caused by dips in enrollment

The *Houstonian* yearbook highlighted the need for financial aid as a major reason for the University's bid to become a state school.

Houstonian yearbook, 1961.

during the 1950s. To compensate, UH sought to become a public university, making it eligible for state funding, which occurred with passage of Texas House Bill 291 in 1963.⁵ In the years leading up to that, university administrators realized that as a state school, UH would be held to the desegregation standards resulting from the *Sweatt* and *Brown* decisions.

The administration's rationalization for deciding when to admit or reject Black students is documented in the President's Office Records,

which contain correspondence, applications for admission, and inter-office memos between UH presidents A. D. Bruce (1954-56), Clanton W. Williams (1956-60), and Philip G. Hoffman (1961-77), as well as other university officials. Over 100 of these documents are digitized and freely available online through the UH Libraries' Digital Collections. Through the University of Houston Integration Records, several disappointing trends emerge in the administration's response to desegregation over time.⁶

UH admitted the first African American students in 1962, but prospective Black students had been applying for or



SENATE STATE AFFAIRS COMMITTEE listens as University of Houston Vice-President McElhinney answers questions concerning the University's financial status.

The Texas State Senate held hearings on granting the University of Houston status as a state university.

Houstonian yearbook, 1961.

inquiring about admission for many years. Documents show Black students applying to UH but being referred to TSU, Prairie View A&M (another historically Black college about fifty miles away), or UT, which had already integrated. One of the earliest examples in the digital collection includes correspondence from 1955 to 1957, in which a student named Ulysses S. Dotson first requested admission to the freshman class of 1956, and later asked to transfer to UH from Ohio Wesleyan University.⁷ The application was forwarded to the president's office, and Clanton W. Williams sent a canned response that was repeated to Black applicants at each admission cycle between 1957 and 1960, noting that "the matter of desegregation is currently a subject of serious study on the part of the University and its Board of Governors."⁸

Despite assurances that UH was seriously studying the matter, a March 13, 1956, memorandum from Williams to A. D. Bruce concerning a faculty committee report on integration paints a different picture. The report outlines the "problem" of integration, which UH officials had been studying for a year, including the assumptions that UH would be "subject to the laws and court decisions" – namely *Sweatt* and *Brown* – making it "inevitable" that Black students will have to be admitted eventually. The report also noted the "moral and ethical responsibilities" involved in the decision to admit Black students but used "sociological factors" as a rationale to delay the desegregation process.⁹

Furthermore, the report alludes to three cases of qualified Black applicants that "may not be so easily dismissed." These three cases include:

- Dr. Freda C. Gooden Richardson, who obtained her doctoral degree from the Chicago College of Optometry in 1953 and sought to attend refresher optometry courses at UH to pass the Texas State Board of Optometry examination;
- TSU communications instructor Clarence W. Mangham, who was pursuing his Ph.D. at Leland Stanford Junior University and wished to take highly specialized courses in radio and television at UH – a program no southern Black-serving institution offered;
- Rachael D. Gardner, a Houston special education teacher who held a master's degree from TSU and sought to continue graduate-level special education coursework, which only UH, UT Austin, and Southwest Texas State Teachers College (now Texas State University) in San Marcos provided.¹⁰

In outlining these cases of qualified Black applicants, Williams noted that he recommended to "keep stalling." He stated that one UH attorney "sees no escape – that we may have no hopes that a court ruling would be favorable to our refusal to admit academically qualified Negroes."¹¹ As a result, Williams and the committee members recommended that the Board authorize admission of the three graduate students listed above; if additional qualified candidates applied before the fall of 1956, that they also be admitted; that the UH administration be empowered to admit



A. D. Bruce served as president of UH from 1954 to 1956 and as chancellor of the UH System from 1956 to 1961.

UH Photographs Collection, ark:/84475/do94881n650.

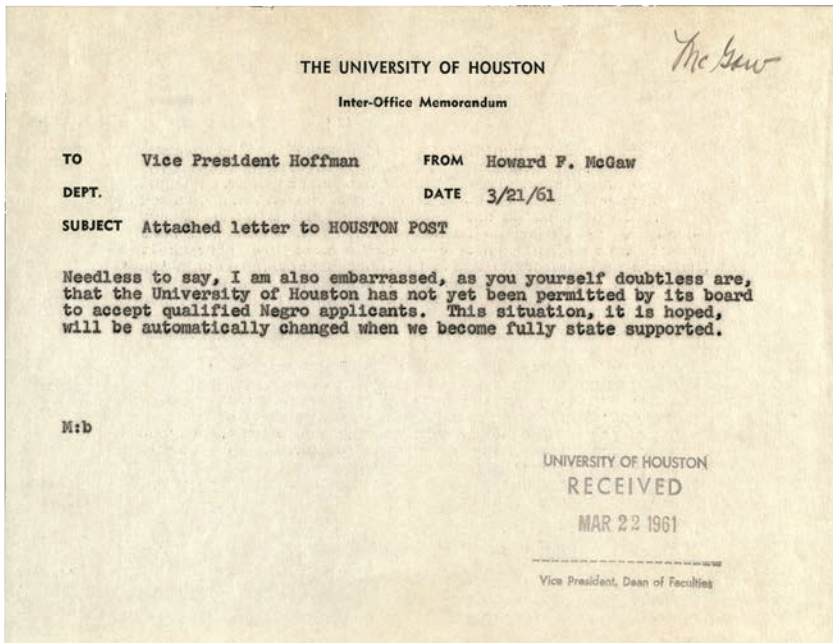
qualified candidates without board approval; and that press releases announcing UH's desegregation be prepared and released at a favorable time.

Despite all this, and against the recommendations of the faculty committee, in an excerpt from the minutes of the executive session of the Board of Regents dated June 12, 1956, then President A. D. Bruce made the following statement:

In the light of current events, local and national, and in considering the problem from a long-range viewpoint, I do not feel now is the time for the University of Houston to integrate.

I do not feel that integration has progressed to the extent we first thought, and since this is a political year, making it difficult to get a clear picture of the real problem, I feel the University should not make a decision at this time.

From Dr. Williams' report which was mailed you a week ago, you learned we do not expect to have any suits on our hands. With the nation as a whole holding this matter in abeyance as it now appears to be doing, I do not feel the University of Houston should take the lead in integrating.



A memo from Library Director Howard F. McGaw to Phillip Hoffman expresses his embarrassment that the university had not yet desegregated. President's Office Records, ark:/84475/d02252j772t.

For this reason, I recommend that the University of Houston continue its study on the subject, following the same policies we have observed in the past. If and when Houston becomes integrated, it is not my belief that the University should be the first to do so. [Emphasis in original.]

This recommendation is not for publication, and I do not care to announce it at this time.¹²

Despite the committee's recommendation to admit qualified Black applicants, Bruce's assessment resulted in the opposite outcome, giving the impression that the university's board and other leadership sought any excuse to indefinitely delay integration and justified it on the absence of lawsuits against UH. While continuing to tell applicants they were studying the matter, behind the scenes, UH administrators expressed dismay at the situation. In a March 1961 inter-office memo to then Vice President Philip G. Hoffman, Library Director Howard F. McGaw wrote, "[N]eedless to say, I am also embarrassed, as you yourself doubtless are, that the University of Houston has not yet been permitted by its board to accept qualified Negro applicants. This situation, it is hoped, will be automatically changed when we become fully state supported."¹³

Finally, by 1962, action on integration was set in motion. A memo dated January 15, 1962, from the registrar, Ramon A. Vitulli, to Hoffman, who by then had become the university's president, states that in 1961 the Office of Admissions had received approximately 175 inquiries from prospective African American students in person or by phone, and thirty-three rejection letters were mailed to both domestic and international applicants. Vitulli provided this assessment: "Based on the assumption that as a fully State supported

institution the University will be required to admit qualified Negroes in the fall of 1963 and thereafter, I recommend that we admit qualified Negroes in the fall of 1962 or before." He stated that integrating before any legal action forced it to occur would prevent harmful confusion and negative publicity to "the institution and the student body."¹⁴

The following week, Hoffman provided his remarks to the Board of Regents, echoing Vitulli's sentiment and stating that he hoped to "voluntarily and privately move towards" integration by admitting the first Black applicants in the summer of 1962 before it was legally required. A few new factors also encouraged the change. For four years, the National Science Foundation (NSF) had provided a grant to fund a summer institute in mathematics and electronics at UH aimed towards teachers in technical schools and junior colleges. In 1962,

one of the applicants was a Black TSU professor. Hoffman anticipated that the NSF's criteria for continuing to fund such programs would include "the absence of discriminatory policies," leading him to conclude that "this would be an opportunity on a very small scale to integrate both the institute and the University at a period when the reaction would be at a minimum."¹⁵



During Phillip G. Hoffman's tenure as president, UH admitted its first Black students who enrolled in classes in 1962.

Houstonian yearbook, 1962.



A meeting between the executive committee of the UH Board of Governors and various UH administrators.

Houstonian yearbook, 1961.

In response, a board member identified as Underwood provided the following anecdote: “I have had practical experience at Vanderbilt, and the way Dr. Hoffman has suggested worked like a charm there. Vanderbilt admitted two young [Black] students to the Law School some years ago. The Alumni just about died. However, the Ford Foundation was involved in a grant to Vanderbilt’s Law School, and on this basis, the President and Dean were able to select two extremely well-qualified Negro student[s] for admission to the Law School. One of these students was so outstanding that it is doubted anybody ever gave his color a thought.”¹⁶

Board member Fleming stated that in addition to admitting Black students, he would like to “establish a relationship with the TSU administration and faculty where we [UH] are known to be helpful to them in graduating [Black] teachers.” President Hoffman confirmed that UH had received “the fullest cooperation” from TSU president Dr. Samuel Nabrit and the TSU faculty. As an example, he explained that Dr. Freda Gooden Richardson, one of the three qualified Black applicants from 1956, had her application resolved when UH “got TSU to hire a teacher of ours to teach the subject she needed over there, and this was handled quietly and most satisfactorily.” In the end, several other board members expressed their approval of Hoffman’s approach, indicating that “he had their backing in any way needed.”¹⁷

With the board finally supporting desegregation, UH enrolled its first Black students in the summer sessions of 1962. Patrick J. Nicholson, at the time a director of development, provided a suggested integration policy statement for consideration by the governing board: “The University of Houston, as a final stage in its continuing study of integration, will now accept qualified colored students at all levels. This follows the successful completion of earlier stages in

which colored students were accepted first at the graduate level.” While the policy was apparently not discussed in the September 25, 1962 board meeting, at least twelve Black students were admitted and enrolled in the fall of 1962.¹⁸

As frustrating as it is now to witness the slow pace of change, the racially coded rationalizations, and the personal stories of qualified Black students who were rejected due to UH policies, it is impressive that this history has been preserved despite the negative light it sheds on the internal workings of the UH leadership at the time. The President’s Office Records provide a valuable, unfiltered perspective into the conversations taking place in the 1950s and 60s – but this is only one side of the story. While the administration asserted that “no racial discrimination was in effect” at UH in the years following the admission of Black students, the work of the Afro-Americans for Black Liberation (AABL) student group and their 1969 list of grievances demonstrate that Black students continued to experience segregation and discrimination at UH throughout the 1960s.¹⁹ Archivists in UH Libraries’ Special Collections look forward to highlighting this side of the story by creating future digital collections that will document the AABL student group and its significant role in the civil rights movement at UH and in Houston. **HH**

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The Digital Collections in the University of Houston Libraries can be accessed at <https://digitalcollections.lib.uh.edu/collections/6m311q71c>.