This article discusses the history of African-American women at Hunter College from the first year of their admission in 1873, to the year the institution ceased to be an all-women's college in 1945. This history is particularly important in view of the enormous resistance and opposition that African-American women experienced in their attempts to attend predominantly white institutions of higher education in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

**African-American Women and Hunter College: 1873-1945**

**Linda M. Perkins**

In her seminal study of the history of women's higher education, In the Company of Educated Women, Barbara Miller Solomon was the first to observe that Hunter was unique in its inclusive treatment of women from diverse social, religious and racial backgrounds. She noted that, after Oberlin College, in Ohio, and Kansas State University, Hunter enrolled more African-American women prior to the 1950s than any other institution that was not a Black college.

Throughout the nineteenth century, opportunities for African-American women to attend institutions of higher education were extremely limited. In the South, slavery and later the lack of adequate public primary and high school education kept most African-Americans from attending college. As a result, although institutions called 'colleges' were established for African-Americans during and after the Civil War, until the first two decades of the twentieth century most of these were actually elementary and high schools. In the North, while African-Americans did have access to primary education, it was usually in segregated schools.

Although white female seminaries emerged in the North and in New England during the early and mid-nineteenth century, few African-American women were allowed to attend. When Prudence Crandall, a Quaker abolitionist, admitted an African-American student to her Canterbury Female Boarding School in Connecticut in 1833, the parents of the white students threatened to withdraw their daughters from the school. Crandall closed the school and later reopened it as a boarding and teacher-training school solely for African-American young women. Local opposition then induced the town to pass a law barring schools which admitted out-of-state African-Americans or those who were not residents of Canterbury. Crandall was jailed, and the school was vandalized and burned. After she married in 1834, Crandall abandoned all attempts to establish a school for African-American girls.

In an important move for African-Americans, Oberlin College, established by abolitionists, announced in 1833 that it would admit women and Blacks on the same basis as white men. Many African-American families valued education so highly that they relocated to Oberlin to enable their children, both male and female, to have access to the college. In 1850, for example, when Blanche V. Harris was denied admission to a female seminary in Michigan, her entire family moved to Oberlin. Similarly, Mary Jane Patterson's parents moved to Oberlin from North Carolina in the 1850s. Patterson became the first African-American woman to earn a college degree (1862), and three other Patterson women and one man followed her lead. By 1910, more that 400 African-American women had attended Oberlin College.

While educational opportunities for African-Americans residing in the North were far greater than those in the South, they were still limited. Public education was primarily separate and unequal, except in small towns and rural areas, and attendance in high school was difficult and rare. In Albany, New York, for example, African-American parents had sent their children to Wilberforce School (a Black public school) since before the Civil War. However, when the parents petitioned for admission to the all-White Albany Free Academy, a public school for advanced work and superior students, their children were refused admission until 1871.

In his study on the education of African-Americans in New York State, Carlton Mabee notes that, of the more than 150 academies in the state
from 1840 to 1860, probably only eight accepted African-Americans. In 1870, frustrated by the limited opportunities for higher education, several prominent African-Americans proposed establishing a Black college named after the Haitian revolutionary leader, Toussaint L'Ouverture. Others opposed the plan, fearing that such self-segregation would result in permanently segregated schools, and as a result, the proposal never came to fruition.8

For Blacks in New York City, public education was limited to four segregated elementary schools known as Colored Schools, 1, 2, 3, and 4. African-American teachers for the segregated schools received their training primarily at the Colored Normal School, available to them only on Saturdays. Although New York State legislation in 1873 barred discrimination in public education on the basis of race, the law was not always enforced.9 Hunter College was an exception. Hunter, originally the Female Normal and High School but soon renamed the Normal College, was established as the counterpart to all-male City College. Its primary purpose was to provide the city with a steady supply of well-trained teachers for the rapidly expanding public school system, although graduates were not required to teach. It was the only public school offering education to girls and women beyond the eight years of primary and grammar school; despite its name, it was New York City's first public high school for girls.10

Admission to Normal College (and City College) was based solely on examination scores, age and residency requirements. This was unusual. Equally important, the College was tuition free. In 1873, eight African-American women from the Colored Schools qualified for and were admitted to the Normal College. The Annual Reports listed the names and examination scores of all entering students, as well as the public school each had attended.11 In 1882, Sadie became the first African-American to teach in a predominantly African-American school in Harlem. She remembered that "this was a typical assignment of a colored teacher. (The New York Board of Education) most certainly did not want us in schools where the children were white. The parents would object." When Delany reached the top of the seniority list for the position of teacher in a white school, she applied for the post but deliberately failed to appear for the personal interview, claiming that there had been "a mix-up in the appointment." Delany later boasted that "the plan worked: Once I was in, they couldn't figure out how to get rid of me."12

Another reason for the dramatic decline in the number of African-American students admitted to Hunter in the 1880s and 90s may have been that the growth of schools for African-Americans in the South during Reconstruction and the later decades more the nineteenth century attracted many northern African-Americans. In 1913, after an unpleasant dispute over the question of housing an African-American woman at Smith College, the Seven Sisters campuses were polled on their policies. Only Wellesley College affirmed a policy of nondiscrimination in housing and admissions. Mt. Holyoke, Vassar and Bryn Mawr stated that they did not admit African-Americans at all.13 These colleges were thought to represent finer womanhood and to be the epistle of culture and learning; such institutions were seen as barriers to the advancement of African-American women.14

In 1910, he was appointed editor of The Crisis magazine, the journal of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. During his editorship, a special "Race" issue each August was devoted to higher education and included photographs of graduates of both Black and White institutions. Photos and names of Hunter graduates were often portrayed. These issues also carried letters from African-American students who wrote of their experiences in white colleges. As early as 1900, DuBois had noted the difficulty that many African-American women experienced in attempting to gain entrance into white women's colleges. In his study, "The College-Bred Negro," DuBois asserted that it was easier for an African-American male to gain entrance into a White male college than for an African-American woman to gain entrance into a White woman's college, concluding that the women's colleges were "unyielding" in their prejudices against African-American women.15

It was particularly difficult to gain entrance into the elite Seven Sister Colleges.16 In 1913, an unpleasant dispute over the question of housing an African-American woman at Smith College, the Seven Sister campuses were polled on their policies. Only Wellesley College affirmed a policy of nondiscrimination in housing and admissions. Mt. Holyoke, Vassar and Bryn Mawr stated that they did not admit African-Americans at all.17 These colleges were thought to represent finer womanhood and to be the epistle of culture and learning; such institutions were seen as barriers to the advancement of African-American women.18

18 Normal College students welcomed President Benjamin Harrison to New York for the celebration of the Centennial of the United States Constitution, 1889.
attributes were not considered compatible with the white conception of African-American women. Although there is no record of opposition to the admission of African-American women to Hunter College, this does not mean that he held views common in the late nineteenth century concerning the hierarchy of intelligence based on racial and ethnic characteristics. Categorizing his students by race, Hunter wrote that he believed that the Nordic groups were superior in intelligence while Italians, Bohemians, and Russian Jews were below average. He placed African-Americans at the lowest intellectual level.

The opinions Hunter expressed in his Autobiography appear at odds with statements in his annual reports praising the diversity of the Hunter student body and the college's embodiment of the American ideal of equal opportunity for all. Hunter repeatedly pointed out the high caliber of the student body, stressing that the students were admitted by examination and not by personal recommendations from a teacher or a principal. He also repeatedly boasted of the college's egalitarianism and democracy. In his 1886 Annual Report, Hunter listed the occupations of the students' fathers: these occupations, he said, were of all kinds. Poor and rich attended the college harmoniously.

The following year, he reiterated this point: 'No wonder the European is astonished that so vast a number of students, belonging to every creed and race and station in life, can meet on terms of perfect equality in the same educational institution.'

Some students objected to rooming or eating with African-American students. When African Americans were requested to eat at a separate table that they wrote, outraged, to campus authorities:

"We expect to endure some slight here, to meet some prejudice, but when it comes to a separate table at the Ladies Boarding Hall in Franklin Street, Olierie, it is more than we are ever called upon to suffer."

Racial discrimination at Oberlin also resulted in heated disputes and demonstrations. By 1913, even a discussion of limiting the number of African-American students at Oberlin was entertained.

The issue of housing was the primary concern for African-Americans on virtually every campus. In 1920, white students at Oberlin protested the assignment of two African-American women to a previously all-white cottage, and some students moved into a separate cottage. The tension between black and white students continued throughout the 1920s, and in various extension courses.

Unlike the elite private white students' colleges, where family background, wealth, religious affiliation, and race were important variables, Hunter was largely a poor woman's college where the students overwhelmingly sought degrees vocational purposes. For them, college was not merely a cultural experience. Katherine Graunfeld's study of Hunter College's history shows that Hunter students were bright but poor. Graunfeld also notes that for many students in the 1920s and 1930s, Hunter was both a 'golden opportunity and a last resort.'

For some it was the path out of poverty and racial conflict for others, it was a place of refuge when all other doors were closed. From 1922 through the World War II, Hunter students were united by their ethnicity, their poverty, their immigrant status, by their anger, and by the desire to escape from the life they were forced to endure. The rigorous academics at the College helped Murray develop into a first-rate writer. One professor of English, Catherine Reigart, marked her papers C- and D for poor grammar, but she also invited Murray and another African-American student to her apartment for tea one weekend. The gesture had a profound impact. "Miss Reigart had communicated to me my worth as a person apart from my poor academic performance. I tried

Paul Murray, author, lawyer, diplomat, poet, civil rights activist, human rights activist, Martin Luther King protégé. He moved from the segregated south to New York in order to continue his education, and later found a welcome in Hunter College.
harder, and my papers improved slowly but steadily. On her last paper for the semester, Murray earned the grade of A-. She later developed the paper, a story about her granddaughter, into her first book, Proul Shes.

Hunter had a strong effect on Murray, not only academically, but also in reshaping her views on race and humanity. A product of the segregated South where African-Americans were denied the most basic of human dignities, she was treated at Hunter with respect and equality. Outside of Hunter, however, she found that racism existed. The restaurant where she worked to support herself did not serve African-Americans. The white staff (executives, cashiers and hostesses) were served from the regular menu in the dining room, the much larger African-American staff 'ate on bare tables in the basement and were given leftovers so tasteless we invariably threw them into the garbage can. The job was a good one, however, despite the racial humiliation, because the restaurant was popular and she received good tips.

At the beginning of the depression Murray lost her job and her financial situation became desperate. In view of the rare opportunities given African-American student, Louise E. Jefferson, Department. In view of the rare opportunities given African-American students at Hunter College.

Murray was elected to Sigma Tau Delta, the literary society, and in 1933 she was elected to the Dean of Women, responsible for overseeing the women's dormitories and for ensuring that they were comfortable and safe. She was also a member of the International Student Organization, which sought to create an inclusive environment for all students.

Murray had no desire to become a teacher and was articulate in her arguments against the practice of assigning students to separate classes based on race. She was a strong proponent of integrating Hunter College and believed that students of all races should be treated equally.

Murray had a strong voice and was not afraid to use it. She was a member of the Hunter College faculty and was involved in many of the college's activities. She was a strong advocate for the rights of African-American students and was a vocal critic of the segregated educational system.
and was active in a plethora of organizations; she was a member in the Varsity and Make-up Box drama clubs, vice-president of the Journalism Club, secretary/treasurer of the Writer's Club, editor of the Classical Club Paper, and a member of the English Club.42 In

the 1930s, Dorothy Williams, an African-American, was an editor of the Bulletin for two years, she was also on the staff of the Witanior, Hunter's yearbook. Other African-Americans were members of various varsity teams, including swimming, from which African-Americans were generally excluded at other campuses.43

In the mid-1940s, Hunter employed its first African-American faculty member. Adelaide W. Diggs, a Smith College graduate with a M.S.W. from Bryn Mawr and a Ph.D. from Radcliffe College, was appointed in 1945 to a part-time position. In 1946, Mary Huff Diggs, a Phi Beta Kappa graduate with degrees from Bryn Mawr College, the University of Minnesota, Fisk University, and the University of Pennsylvania, was hired as the first full-time tenure-track African-American faculty member. Diggs' field was social work and she brought to Hunter considerable experience as a case worker and supervisor, in addition to her background as a college teacher.

After a semester at Hunter, Diggs wrote to Charles S. Johnson, the recently appointed first African-American president of Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee:

Aside from the complete surprise that your presence stirred in one or two of my fellow teachers, and a few awkward efforts at adjustment on the part of one or two students, my stay here has not been different from that of any other faculty member. Since I teach courses in the regular Sociology and pre-Social Work curriculum, I have girls from freshmen to seniors, with the majority being upper-classmen. One of my students is a Negro girl. A still larger number are of foreign birth, and who are yet in the process of mastering the use of the English language. There are one or two from south of the border. I've had the stimulus by this very alert student body in general. I've enjoyed the extent and degree to which all members of the faculty participate in the over-all planning for them — the objective being the education of the whole person. I've been amazed at times with the total questioning on the part of some of the foreign born girls, — questioning that could be and sometimes is expressed in 'I didn't know that Negroes teach in non-Negro colleges in the USA.' I had to face the fact with myself that I do not have an appropriate reply to this questioning, since any reply that I might give would be neither wholly true nor wholly false. So I met it with a smile that encourages the particular student to talk more and more, and in the end the question either has been forgotten, or else a satisfactory answer is arrived at by the student through the conference process.44

Diggs noted the pride, excitement and ownership that the African-American students felt with her appointment.

The Negro students are very glad to have me here, and in the beginning started out with a bang to make me their number one exhibit. It took a good bit of strategy for me to keep their very good hopes, but at the same time have them understand that functionally I "belonged" equally to every student on the campus. I had not anticipated that such a situation would arise, and that it could be so tedious. From the other side of the line, I've had to use diplomacy in relating all problems of Negro students to whatever other departments to be loaded on to us. But this trend to be the easier of the two situations... I've been extremely happy for the entire teaching experience here.45

To summarize, although African-American women had access to Hunter from as early as 1873, their numbers through 1945 were always small. The experience of African-American women students on the predominantly white campuses of American higher education, from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries, has been a story primarily of exclusion and discrimination. While not a utopia, Hunter College served as a testament to the ideals expressed by Thomas Hunter and as an example of the best in American democracy. The inclusion of African-American women within the College doors without mishap or fanfare distinguished the institution from those that admitted women. While Hunter College is unique in many aspects, its diversity and openness to students without regard to religious, racial or socioeconomic background from the earliest years of its history, make it one of the most significant institutions in the history of the higher education of African-American women. For them, admission to the College was indeed a "golden opportunity."