“Stretched from End to End”
Challenging Notions of Racial Integration in American Higher Education During the 1960s
José Galvan Mora ‘19
“Stretched from End to End”

Challenging Notions of Racial Integration in American Higher Education During the 1960s

José Galvan Mora ‘19
North Central College Undergraduate Archives Publication Board

Dr. Rebecca Skirvin, Archivist

Dr. Ann Durkin Keating, Dr. C. Frederick Toenniges Professor of History

Dr. Kristin Geraty, Associate Dean for Engaged Learning and Director, College Scholars Honors Program

John Small, Clare and Lucy Oesterle Director of Library Services

Cover photo and photo of Dr. Renate Wolff courtesy of Spelman College Archives.
During the 1959-1960 academic year, Spelman College, a private, Historically Black College in the Atlanta University complex, launched a semester-long exchange program with three colleges across the Midwest: Bethel College in Kansas; Illinois Wesleyan University, and North Central College. Beyond being an exchange program between institutions across the country, the program served by design as a cross-cultural experiment in racial integration and cohabitation during a time when racial politics and tensions were quite high across the country. The decade was marked with both student-and-organization-led demonstrations facing off against Jim Crow segregation and racial inequality in the American South. Throughout this decade, the domestic exchange partnership between Spelman College and a growing number of Northern colleges continued in the shadow of a changing nation, mirroring broader integration efforts occurring across the country.¹

While the entirety of this partnership included a large number of institutions and individuals, this paper will focus primarily on the exchange between North Central (NCC) and Spelman. Carried out as a reform effort promoting racial integration and cohabitation, the NCC and Spelman exchange history reveals practices, beliefs, and experiences connected to the political atmosphere of the times. The experiences and lessons learned from this program survive in personal letters and documents composed by participants and reports written by administrators and officials, as well as a number of newspaper accounts in institutional and local presses. The unique opportunity afforded by these primary sources is their often-brutal honesty and their analytic insights in assessing social environments through the reactions of individuals and the communities around them.

¹ Spelman College continued to add participating institutions to this project with every passing year at the request of program leadership domestically and expressed interest externally from other colleges and universities.
Broadly, this academic work will contextualize the experiences of female exchange students during Civil Rights-era America across a white-Midwestern and black-Southern institution. This paper will challenge the notion that racial cohabitation/integration in academia across the “progressive” north was easier for black students. The experiences shared by North Central and Spelman College exchange participants provides insight into the existence of de-facto segregation and the effects it had on ethnic minority students in two separate college communities, both on campus and in the surrounding metropolitan area.

This academic work follows in the footsteps laid out by Colorado State University Professor Dafina-Lazarus Stewart, and zir work on the desegregation efforts across the Great Lakes Colleges Association (GLCA). While Stewart’s research affirms the notion that racial integration in northern predominantly white colleges has “not been sufficiently challenged,”² ze does this by analyzing the institutional footprint caused by black student presence across this set of institutions, analyzing a span of two decades, from the mid-1940s to the mid-1960s. The work completed by Stewart puts much more emphasis on the “material effects” of desegregation occurring in the GLCA institutions in response to black student body population growth, participation, and exchange.³ Apart from the obvious geographical differences, my work focuses directly on the collaboration between Spelman College and NCC; giving particular importance to

---

³ Ibid, in zir research Stewart covers over a dozen separate institutions, giving more material on some than on others, contextualizing separate efforts and experiences tied to the presence of black students in a white campus, including exchanges, but also focusing on growing black student enrollment and campus presence. Furthermore, zir focus expands to campus activism and institutional action, including student recruitment and funding efforts. Stewart’s narrative is much broader and regionally oriented. While it doesn’t directly deal with NCC’s participation in exchange programs, Stewart’s work is composed of many comparable institutions regarding student body size, location, and institutional demographics.
individual participant experience and analysis on the surrounding community. This in turn allocates primary source accounts into the larger notion challenging the misconception that racial integration was easier in Northern academic institutions and the communities that surround them. Stewart and I share roughly the same conclusions, despite our different research plans.

A Brief Program History

Spelman’s exchange program began with the well-known, respected and always controversial historian, Dr. Howard Zinn. Dr. Zinn served as the head of the history department at Spelman College from 1956-1963. Zinn put forward a plan for an exchange program at Spelman College with the acting president of the institution, Albert E. Manley. The program’s development began early in 1958 at Spelman with potentially interested institutions. It’s important to note that although it was innovative, the tradition of an exchange program amongst colleges with diverse ethnic and regional student-body presences and backgrounds was already established in American academic institutions, particularly Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Zinn’s design for the program drew on one already established by the Hampton Institute in 1946. Zinn’s efforts created the backbone of the program that operated in terms of partnering institutions, recruitment, and student interest and selection. Dr. Zinn under the direction of President Manley reached out to over 80 institutions across the country in his initial effort to get the program under way.

---

5 Now known as Hampton University, a private Historically Black University in Hampton, Virginia.
Letters forwarded to President Manley from Zinn show that the exchange committee at Hampton shared an outline package with essentials of the program’s operation including sample letters, actual student reflection letters, and general documents such as campus publicity sheets and application blanks.
6 Howard Zinn, List of Presidents to Write to on Student Exchange Program, A.E. Manley Presidential Collection, Spelman College Archives, 1-6.
The beginning of NCC’s partnership with Spelman is for the most part, undocumented. A small notecard forwarded to President Manley from Zinn indicates that NCC’s sixth president, C. Harve Geiger, had contacted Zinn with a proposal for a student exchange in the early summer of 1959. Geiger suggested that “we work it out for the spring semester next year.” Although the records show that Geiger initiated participation in the program, it would be NCC’s next president Arlo Schilling who would lead the partnership after 1960. The only other documentation is in a small index card dated November 6, 1959, confirming participation in the spring, noting acknowledgement and eagerness for the program’s commencement by President Schilling. Unfortunately, Dr. Zinn wouldn’t be present to see his program efforts come to full fruition beyond its inaugural start in the 1959-60 academic year. Placed on administrative leave prior to the beginning of the 1960-61 academic year, Zinn was ultimately terminated from Spelman in 1963, bringing his efforts and involvement with the program to a close.

This departure led to the appointment of Dr. Renate Wolff as the director of the program for Spelman College for the continuing years. Wolff was the most prominent leader for the program, responsible for its growth in the coming years, as she expanded it to include more institutions and varying levels of participation. While most participating institutions

---

7 Howard Zinn, Notecard forwarded to President Manley, Jun. 6, 1959, A.E. Manley Presidential Collection, Spelman College Archives.
8 Howard Zinn, Notecard forwarded to President Manley, Nov. 6, 1959, A.E. Manley Presidential Collection, Spelman College Archives.
10 Howard Zinn, Letter Addressed to Whom It May Concern, Aug. 31, 1963, A.E. Manley Presidential Collection, Spelman College Archives, Page 1. Although unclear as to why he was terminated at the time of writing this letter, years later through interviews and publications, it became apparent Zinn’s termination was directly tied to his connection with the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee and the student movement. Forces against Zinn’s activism claimed on several occasions that he was “radicalizing” students.
11 There are various spellings on Renate Wolff’s last name in sources. For the sake of uniformity, anything within the text will refer to her with a spelling of Wolff, but sources may differ in spelling to maintain accuracy in location.
sponsored semester-length exchanges, she arranged for year-long exchanges and week-long short exchanges with partner universities as well. During her tenure, Wolff thoroughly expanded the program, more than quadrupling its institutional participation from three institutions to 14 by the end of the academic year of 1964 when she departed her position as the program’s director; she had established a selection and oversight committee for the program’s operation.

Comparatively, the leadership of the program on North Central’s campus fell under the direction of the campus chaplain Rev. George St. Angelo and the student-body led CCC (Campus Christian Community). Exchanges with Spelman College were the primary participation North Central had with this growing movement in academia until 1966, when a men’s exchange program was initiated with Morris Brown College, also from same Atlanta University Complex that housed Spelman. Nonetheless, participation with Spelman in exchange was during the 1960s except for during the 1960-61 school year.

The year 1964 marked a transformation for the collaboration with changes in leadership at both institutions. Dr. Wolff left her position as an instructor at Spelman to teach at North Central as a member of the English department. By doing so, she took over the program

---

13 Ibid.
14 Letter from Arlo L. Schilling to Dr. A.E. Manley, October 26, 1964, A.E. Manley Presidential Collection, Spelman College Archives.
16 Renate Wolff, Exchange Program Final Report, June 1964, Figure A, 1. No exact reason for NCC’s lack of participation is known. Wolff’s reports allude to two possibilities, one being caution of the growing dangers reported in Atlanta due to the increasing violence in the area, and a desire to establish a year-long exchange instead of a semester’s program. That never manifested, and as far as I know, all exchanges with NCC where done on a semester basis, save for one exception for a Spelman student who spent an entire year at NCC.
responsibilities from St. Angelo.\textsuperscript{17} Dr. Nellie Randall took over the program, and continued in that position until the partnership between both institutions dissolved in 1968.\textsuperscript{18}

Program participation was largely straightforward for both institutions. Prior to the commencement of the spring semester, each institution selected two women to participate and represent the college for the coming term. Arrangements were made between institutions to cover tuition, room, and board, through institutional agreements and scholarship. No direct guidance for program selection exists from either institution, but documents show that NCC placed heavy consideration on above-standard academic standing and potential for its participants. While academic prowess was a factor in the selection process from Spelman, we know from the writings of Dr. Wolff that candidate assessment also looked for “personal qualifications; her stability, her maturity, her willingness to meet new people and experiences… to stand up for her rights, to articulate her observations, and to take some hard knocks.”\textsuperscript{19} As the representative for the host institution, Dr. Wolff was probably conscious of the fact that the Spelman students were going to be an ethnic minority at the college they were visiting, and thus probably felt they had more at stake in the selection of their candidates than reciprocating institutions.\textsuperscript{20} This process carried through for the duration of the program save for the missed

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{17} Schilling to Manley, October 26, 1964.
\textsuperscript{18} No real reason has been found yet as to why the partnership ended. Mention of it is absent in NCC’s archival collections after 1966, but documents from Spelman College pin 1968 as the final year of collaboration. Reports and letters from both sides mention decline in interest, and this period is notoriously well known in NCC history as the college faced deep financial troubles, forcing it to curtail on a lot of programs to keep the doors open. The conclusion of the program will be discussed in more detail later on in this paper.
\textsuperscript{19} Wolff, Exchange Program Final Report, 5.
\textsuperscript{20} It can be safely be inferred that NCC probably also considered personal characteristics and limitations of the candidates in its selection process. Some sources ask for a written essay explaining the reason for interest in participation and why the candidate would be a good fit.
\end{flushleft}
participation year previously mentioned and the case of a single participant during the 1963-64 academic year where only one Spelman student, Jane Smith, participated.  

While only a brief exploration into the specific history of the exchange program, its inclusion here is important for background. The larger narrative is revealed by the internal correspondences and the letters and reflections published in student newspapers narrating the often life-altering experience of the participants, the specifics of which will be discussed in greater detail below.

**Regional and Institutional Differences**

Beyond being in different regions of the country, Spelman and NCC’s had location differences. Census data for the 1960s places the population of NCC’s Naperville, IL, just shy of 13,000 residents, the majority of which were white. Comparatively, Spelman’s home city of Atlanta was a Southern metropolis, with census data for the same decade placing counts at 487,455 residents, more than 35 times the population of Naperville. Of the utmost importance was Atlanta’s position at the time as a “black mecca” hosting an African American majority population. Spelman was and continues to be an all-women’s college, and 90% of its student body is black, while North Central was during the 1960s a co-educational college attended by about 900-1200 students, predominantly white. It is also worth noting that Spelman and NCC are

---

21 Wolf, Exchange Program Final Report, Figure A, 2.
24 Ibid.
both affiliated with Christian faith denominations.\textsuperscript{25} Throughout the duration of the decade, Atlanta, and more importantly the colleges in the AUC complex, were directly tied to the Civil Rights movement and the efforts against segregation led by prominent leaders in the movement such as Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.\textsuperscript{26} Naperville is 30 miles west from Chicago, in the historically Republican stronghold of DuPage county, where few African Americans lived during the 1950s and 1960s. Racial demographics and intricacies play a huge role when contextualizing the experiences of Southern students on NCC’s campus, inferred by Gwen Ponder when she wrote, “About ninety percent of the students at North Central College have not met or associated with Negroes before.”\textsuperscript{27}

**Black Student Experiences at North Central College**

Analyzing the experiences of Spelman students who attended North Central through the exchange program offers unique insights into the experiences of black collegians in northern institutions. Notably, until 1966, the only domestic exchange students present at the college were black females.\textsuperscript{28} Although North Central was a co-ed institution, the importance of the participants all being female from an ethnic minority has implications that must be considered when interpreting their experiences. Progressive and revolutionary as the 1960s might have been, women were the minority on college campuses across the country, even with the national

\textsuperscript{25} Spelman College has been affiliated with the Baptist denomination since its founding as a female seminary. Comparatively, NCC has been associated with the United Methodist Church.

\textsuperscript{26} The Atlanta University Center Complex is a campus of several colleges and universities loosely affiliated with one another. Included in this coalition are Spelman College, Morehouse, Clark-Atlanta, and an interfaith seminary.

\textsuperscript{27} Gwendolyn Ponder, Letter to President A.E. Manley, March 25, 1960, A.E. Manley Presidential Collection, Spelman College Archives, 1.

\textsuperscript{28} Refer to footnote 17.
increase in college enrollment during the decade. It’s therefore important to look at their narratives with importance, given they represented two of the largest underrepresented groups in American higher education.

Second, it’s important to note that these women were not the only black individuals on North Central’s campus. Although small, black student attendance at North Central through traditional enrollment was present, eliminating some of the mystique the students encountered. More importantly, the black students already enrolled at North Central consistently become parts in the narrative told by the Spelman participants, further contextualizing their experiences as individual minorities on campus often automatically aggregated to an ethnic minority grouping based on their skin color, even if they were from completely different geographic areas and social groups.

During the spring of 1960, Margie Durrah and Gwen Ponder attended North Central in the exchange. Both girls were black southerners, and their experience at NCC was their first exposure to the North. Being the first participants, their experiences document a lot of the issues black individuals faced in the North, despite its perception as a welcoming and progressive region. In a letter addressed to Spelman president A.E. Manley, Gwen addressed her observations as someone from the inside looking out. On integration outside of the college she wrote, “Naperville is theoretically integrated. There is not a single Negro family living in Naperville; the realtors will not sell them houses. Since there are no Negroes residing here, Margie and I

are sometimes referred to as “pioneers.” This first point brought up by Ponder brings an ugly truth present in many northern states; de facto segregation was alive and well in the housing market. This state of affairs was often masked in more affluent suburban areas such as Naperville where scrutiny about racial integration and equality wasn’t as prevalent, unlike neighboring metropolises such as Chicago. Naperville’s relatively small but wealthy population during this period consisted almost entirely of white Anglo-American residents, and the city had a reputation of using this influence to maintain exclusionist practices in the city from housing to public places like parks and beaches.31

This de facto segregation often caused tensions and outrage amongst black individuals and families vying for work and investment in the city itself, but as it’s seen it also had implications on North Central’s student body.32 Ponder references in her letter that there were only nine other black students beside her and Margie at North Central during her attendance.33 Taking her estimate of North Central’s student body size during 1960 of “approximately nine hundred students,” the percentage of black students on campus was just over 1%.34 Further deductions from Ponder’s letter suggests that of the other 9 black students, none could have been Naperville residents unless they resided in one of the college dormitories.35 Gwen and Margie were referred to as “pioneers” in race relations because they were black southern women who

30 Ponder to Manley, 1.
33 Ponder to Manley, 1.
34 Ibid, 1.3% of 900 is 11.70, with appropriate rounding, leaving the percentage at a whole of 1%.
35 While asserting with exact proof how many black students were on-campus residents is next to impossible as those records no longer exist, the assumption can be made that a fair number of them commuted from neighboring townships and even neighboring counties, as North Central was and continues to be directly adjacent to a commuter rail line.
came to reside and attend North Central on their own accord and who had the wherewithal to partake in such an experience. But more importantly, they were only given this merit because they were granted the institutional opportunity to do so. While enrollment was possible, Naperville’s segregationist public space and housing practices made it extremely difficult for continued and equal black student integration to occur at the college level during the 1960s.

Historian John Thelin describes the period of 1945-65 as the “golden age” of American colleges and universities due to the significant growth in overall student enrollment, particularly in regard to women and ethnic minority presence across colleges and universities. While it is important to recognize the gains made during this period, it would be misleading to imply that this growth and integration occurred spontaneously and without friction. Friction is often an overlooked social component when looking at American academic institutions due to their perceived status as contained, progressive communities, abundant in wisdom and intellect, and the consistent portrayal of institutional histories as overwhelmingly celebratory, almost utopian. While not always confrontational in nature, friction can manifest as a byproduct of naivete or ignorance towards new social trends and cultural differences. NCC experienced this type of friction through the attitudes and preconceived notions formulated by white students towards their African American peers on campus. Ponder addresses this several times in her letter when narrating her experience as a black woman on a northern college campus. She writes, “Negroes are thought of as being “types.” By this I mean we are looked upon as “types” rather than individuals. For example, we sing alike, dance alike, talk alike, think alike, do the same things, etc.” This homogenization of an entire ethnic group is not unique to this instance. Historically,

37 Ponder to Manley, 2.
African Americans have often found themselves as entire group classified into types, whether it through criticism or self-identification.

Perhaps the most famous instance of this form of classification came from the controversial civil rights activist Malcolm X, in a 1963 speech delivered at Michigan State University, where he made the claim for two types of “negroes,” the “house negro” and the “field negro.” While not as stark as Malcolm’s classifications, the generalization of African American students at North Central brings forward a frustrating sentiment on campus. The collectivization of black student identities by their white counterparts presents another difficulty put in the path of black collegians; a perceived lack of individuality and social autonomy, relegating them to a specific, racially-centered island in a campus-wide social system. Ponder provides a concrete example of this in her letter by writing: “They [white students] think that Negroes flock together. If I go to a dance I am asked, “Why didn’t Margie, Barb, Percy, Ken, Paul, and Byron (other Negroes on campus) come?” Ponder’s experience gives a specific example of the phenomenon that directly impacted racial integration across predominantly white colleges and universities like North Central. It demonstrates that black collegians were often denied the autonomy and individuality that was readily granted to their white counterparts on a college campus.

Stanford academic and psychologist Phillip Zimbardo has explored this social separation in his work. Zimbardo challenges the notion that the “physical integration of races (black & white) will facilitate social integration at a later time of these same groups.” His study of black

---


39 Ponder to Manley, 2.

40 Phillip G. Zimbardo, “Physical Integration and Social Segregation of Northern Negro College Students (1953, 1963 and 1965),” paper presented at Eastern Psychological Association, 1966, https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED025568.pdf. It’s worth noting that the years which Zimbardo conducted the latter portion of his study are with the same as the NCC-Spelman exchange program.
students’ seating preferences in dining halls and cafes, and their extracurricular social habits across several New York colleges and universities concluded that even in progressive and tolerant environments like northern higher learning institutions, prejudice and stereotyping often negatively impacted the social acceptance and involvement of black collegians in white social groups. This negative impact often in turn led to the formation of social groups almost explicitly made up of black and other ethnic minority groups on the studied campus.

While one cannot assume that the student populations and institutional cultures in North Central College and the New York institutions studied by Zimbardo were socio-politically identical, the similarities must be considered. All are northern colleges and universities with a predominantly white student body, and a minority black student presence in enrollment and attendance. And, more importantly, all are in “progressive” areas of the country which were perceived to be much more tolerant of black students and citizens than the openly segregated South. Gwen Ponder was not alone in her experience of being labeled as a “type.” Her case is a concrete example of the many ways black collegians in northern institutions in general were relegated the outer edges of campus social circles.

Ironically enough, this exclusion from mainstream social capital often resulted in the creation of an entirely separate, more diverse, social circle. In the closing pages of her letter, Ponder writes: “I have found that my closer friends are the misfits of the white race. By misfits I mean people who are not socially accepted because they are ugly, fat, rich, or because they associate with Negroes and foreigners, etc.” While blunt, Ponder’s breakdown of her social sphere provides invaluable insight into the diverse relationships that comprised the exchange

---

41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
43 Ponder to Manley, 2.
student experience, and by extension the black collegian experience in the North, giving light to the restrictive social spectrum under which black collegians often operated.

The apparent separations between the white student majority and the ethnic and racial minorities on campus paints an all-too-familiar picture of separatist white hegemony. Deviance from the norm, even if one was from the same ethnic group, was punishable by social exclusion. Ponder’s closest acquaintances during her exchange term at North Central were those furthest removed from the norm for one reason or the other; but they all seem to share a common characteristic of acceptance and inclusion of minorities and foreigners like herself. The “misfits” of the white race could be the more progressive members of the campus community due to their experience being relegated to the outer edges of social circles. Comparatively, they could also participate in the most intimate relationships developed with outsiders like black collegians because they had very little to lose in a system that has already labeled them as outsiders.

This goes back to Zimbardo’s work, again challenging the notion that social integration of races always follows physical integration. Even though Ponder acknowledged that North Central’s campus afforded her more personal liberties as a black woman in the North, she and the rest of the black students on campus traded their senses of identity and social acceptance for liberties such as freedom of movement that should otherwise have always be theirs.\textsuperscript{44}

True social integration between races in American higher education was one of the ultimate goals planned for the program, but this goal was very difficult to achieve due to prejudice and social bias, especially when the largest difference, skin color, was impossible to alter or conceal. Physical segregation didn’t exist at northern institutions like North Central, and neither did discriminatory policies at the college against black student enrollment and civil

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.
liberties. However, in social circles and specific campus communities, the dividing lines were very clearly drawn.

**Direct Analysis of Racial Integration in the Exchange Program by an Instructor**

Dr. Renate Wolff was a native of Berlin born in 1920 to a family of German Jews. Wolff’s family immigrated to the United States when she was a child fleeing Adolf Hitler’s Nazi regime prior to the start of the second World War. Renate began her education at Goucher College in Maryland, studying English language and literature. She earned her master’s degree in education from Smith College in Massachusetts, and ultimately earned a Ph.D. from Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania. She taught at several colleges and worked as an assistant editor for the Merriam-Webster dictionary before she moved to Atlanta in 1956 to teach as part of the English department at Spelman College. She would remain at Spelman until end of the 1963-1964 academic school year, after accepting a position as an Assistant Professor of English at North Central College. She taught at NCC until 1967, when she married and moved to Maryland with her husband who taught at Frostburg State University. Wolff (now Goepp) passed away on February 5, 2013 in her home in Greenfield, Massachusetts.

During her tenure as the director of the exchange program at North Central, Dr. Renate Wolff was responsible for its evaluation. She carried out this responsibility through such on-campus-events at Spelman College as panels and plenary sessions, as well as in-depth personal

---

46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid. Even though her last name at the time of her passing was Goepp, this paper will use Wolff as it was the name present across the documents used.
reports and analysis of the program’s high points and pitfalls. In its most simple form, Dr. Wolff believed the program’s purpose was to “furnish young people of all races with the experience of integrated living.” Beyond this, her personal analysis contextualizes the experiences of black collegians in the North as exchange students, by looking more broadly at national race relations in the context of the civil rights movement and the relationships between Spelman College and other participating institutions.

Dr. Wolff referred to the program as “an experiment in integration with other incidental advantages” during her final analysis of the program. Her analysis confirms the conclusions presented in the previous section: “some students had discovered that the North, too, has its prejudices, often in subtler and perhaps more insidious form than the open discrimination of the south.” The “insidious” prejudice of the North and the recognition of its existence isn’t the only insight from this program. But recognizing it is important in analyzing the larger substance behind Dr. Wolff’s evaluative writing, because Wolff herself acknowledged the Spelman exchange program was a case study in broader racial relations in the country, occurring as it did in the shadow of the national Civil Rights movement.

From her writing, it was clear that Dr. Wolff was thoroughly conscious of this. Inside NCC’s campus and across Naperville, black exchange students were ostracized by the white majority on campus. This also played out inside Spelman’s campus with the white exchange students. Wolff wrote about a student from Carleton College who “felt branded by the use of the

---

49 Renate Wolff, draft of untitled student exchange program report, Manley Presidential Collection, Spelman College Archives, 1-6.
52 Ibid
The term “exchange student” carried with it a much heavier connotation than the student realized. Wolff wrote: “It is not the name which brands her; it is the color of her skin. For many of the exchange students this is probably the first time they have been in a minority; for practically all of them it is the first time that they have been in a minority which is immediately spotted by a physical trait which it is impossible to hide.” The externalization of an individual’s differences based on skin color is important to look at when trying to understand the experiences that black collegians encountered throughout their academic career. “Exchange student” in this case stood for more than a program participant. Here it was a skin color, an ethnicity, and maybe an entire way of life, and participants throughout the program had to face the often-uncomfortable truth in its recognition: That the inescapability of something so visible as skin color can sometimes define the whole experience and opportunities offered to individuals or entire groups. Wolff explained, “[E]xchange students are now experiencing what the Negro has experienced for generations. I should consider this perhaps the most important educational experience to emerge from the program.”

The role reversal experienced by white students on Spelman’s campus also mirrored another pressure encountered by black collegians in the North: being the representatives for an entire minority group, often in the face of unwelcome judgment. On this experience Wolff wrote, “individual behavior will be attributed to the group, individual actions or comments will be generalized, perhaps even distorted, certainly magnified.” Very rarely has the behavior of the white majority been held to such thorough scrutiny, but in this context it seems plausible given

---

53 Wolff, Exchange Program Final Report, 15. Carleton College was another participating predominantly white institution.
54 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
56 Wolff, Exchange Program Final Report, 16.
the political atmosphere of the time and the vast gulf between black female collegians at Spelman and their northern white exchange counterparts. These exchange students had to face the adversity and branding that black collegians faced across American higher education, particularly in the northern, white institutions that they called home. Their discontent however, was slight and temporary compared to the adversity their black counterparts faced as minorities in the larger system.

Dr. Wolff spared no detail in her analysis of the exchange program. Her perspective as the leader of the program and as a socially-conscious educator provides far more insight than can be discussed here. Ultimately, her focus on the holistic experience rather than emphasizing traditional academics offers insight pertaining to the social experience of both black students in the North and white students in the South. Wolff did more than conduct the operations of the program. She developed the foundational analysis for it.

**Developing a Sense of Self for Black Collegians Through Participation in the Exchange Program**

Focusing only on the adversity encountered by the exchange participants would ignore other important components in this program. The exchange experience in many ways for both
black and white participants was an experience beyond education, and more a thorough
development and understanding of the self through social experiences. Personal reflection from
the participants of the program further expands on this.

Going back to Gwen Ponder’s letter, her first primary observation presents a deep
progression of the self directly tied to her participation in the program. She wrote, “Never before
have I been more cognizant of the fact that I am a Negro who has been deprived of the rights
which are inherently mine as a member of the human race and as a citizen of these United
States.” As a southern black woman, Ponder’s acknowledgement of the deprivation she faced
in her daily life in the South prior to the exchange program speaks to the larger oppression and
its geographic focus faced by black citizens and communities in America. Even in the face of de
facto segregation and social isolation inside NCC’s campus, the presence of liberty, even if only
temporary and conditional, was still enough to recognize the injustices she constantly faced in
the South. She expanded on this, “I feel much more human in this situation because I am not
deprived of so things simply because I am a Negro. I know what it feels like to live without
being segregated or isolated.” Ponder’s experiences relate to the broader purpose of the
exchange program, what Dr. Wolff called the “sense of a wider, fuller life [to any] Spelman
student who participated in the exchange.” This broader understanding of the political
atmosphere and racial relations at a very deep and personal level is what the exchange program
was all about. The direct placement of black female students across northern institutions not only
exposed them to the adversities in racial relations across the country’s political climate, it also

57 Ponder to Manley, 2.
58 Ibid.
allowed them to really experience a reality beyond open segregation through the hopes of one day achieving honest racial integration and social equality.

While black and white students undoubtedly shared cultural and ethnic differences, the manifestation of these differences through social friction and discussion is ultimately one of the successes of the exchange program. Black participants in the North garnered from it an unobstructed view of the difficulties present even without open segregation. A participant’s recognition of this cultural and ethnic friction ultimately led to a more complete understanding of the self. Margie Durrah, Ponder’s companion from Spelman to North Central, explained it best in her reflection of the entire program when she returned home. To a crowd of her peers and instructors in an exchange program panel, she proclaimed, “I feel I’ve been stretched from end to end.”

This metaphorical “stretching” across two extremes is reiterated and, in many ways, mirrored by Judith Brown, North Central’s candidate for the 1968 exchange.

Judith Brown was North Central’s last recorded participant in the exchange program, participating in the exchange during the spring of 1968. Brown, apart from being the final participant through this branch of the program was also North Central’s first, last, and only black participant to be exchanged in the entirety of the program from NCC. Her input as a “black northerner” in a program designed for a “white northerner” is particularly important. Brown’s narrative as a northern black woman is in many ways similar to that of Ponder and Durrah, sharing that same social marginalization; but her experience in being the part of a majority for the first time in her college career brings forward new points for discussion.

---

60 Wolff, Untitled Report to Department Head, 1.
61 Judith Brown, Letter to Dr. Nellie Randall, June 6, 1968, A.E. Manley Presidential Collection, Spelman College Archives, 1
Although not as detailed in her letter about her social experiences in her host institution, Brown makes similar remarks to Ponder on the topic of social engagement. She writes, “For the first time in my college career, I really felt a part of the social activities.”\(^{62}\) This recurring topic of inclusion contrasts the difficulty black collegians faced in the North not with assimilation, but with acceptance. Even as a black northerner, her experience very closely aligns with that of the southern participants, in being relegated to the outer circles of inclusion with no more basis for this than just a darker skin color. She expresses this frustration by writing, “It is a shame that the mere color of skin is such a determining factor of one’s social life.”\(^{63}\) Judith’s struggle is one that continued to be relevant to the times, as the broader Civil Rights movement reached a peak in American culture, and the passage of the Civil Rights Act in April of 1968 was manifesting its results across the country through fair housing, bringing racial integration on a much broader scale, but still facing pushback in many non-black parts of the country.\(^{64}\)

More than just the narrative of a black northerner in the South, Brown’s experience also contributed to her sense of self, and the broadening or her understanding in what still needed to be accomplished for racial relations in this country. On this she wrote, “I realized how deprived white and black Americans have been concerning history, which has excluded Afro-American’s

---

\(^{62}\) Ibid.  
\(^{63}\) Brown to Randall, 2.  
achievements for the most part. The most important part of my experience was that I learned to accept myself for what I am, which is an important step for all human beings.” The exclusion of black Americans from history is a struggle that education systems across America continue to wrestle with, especially across higher education where now more than ever black collegian presence grows across colleges and universities. But ultimately, Judith’s acceptance of herself marked the success of the program as more than physical integration. Spelman’s exchange program was built on the premise to better racial relations amongst the next generation of American citizens. That was achieved, if even in a small scale through the eye-opening experiences that both sets of participants had across the program. White students experienced, if only for a semester, what being a minority and have the larger group brand you as an outsider. Contrastingly, black students were able to experience life in the North and really see firsthand that black students weren’t so readily welcomed in white institutions and cities. Further, it demonstrated that their experience as the minority was just as difficult as the openly segregated south, discrediting the notion that it was in some way easier for black students to build a life in the North.

The End of the Exchange Program

The partnership between NCC and Spelman College came to a close during the spring term of 1968. Archival research across both institutions has been inconclusive in determining why this collaboration ended, but several possibilities can be identified. During the late 1960s NCC was desperately struggling financially to keep the doors open, and deep financial cuts were made across campus to keep the campus accredited and open for enrollment. Given the external

---

65 Brown to Randall, 3.
costs associated with the program like transportation and on-campus living accommodations, a possible connection may exist with NCC’s financial cutbacks and the program’s termination.

Furthermore, the late 1960s saw a northward expansion of the Civil Rights movement under Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. During this period, social efforts were brought out of the South and into northern metropolitan areas, especially Chicago, up until King’s assassination in 1968. This expansion saw NCC’s involvement become more directly engaged, regularly sending students into the city for research and coordinating participation with social rights advocacy groups and organizations. This northern mobilization of students towards the inner city could have also contributed to the exchange program becoming a secondary focus in the efforts for racial integration and Civil Rights in the North. NCC students had direct access into the city through the Metra commuter rail line, thus making it a more convenient and affordable option for the college to continue its mission for racial equality beyond campus lines.

Beyond NCC and the Chicago metropolitan area, the exchange program continued to develop on Spelman’s campus under the direction of Dr. Nellie Randall after Wolff’s departure. Instead of constantly increasing the number of participating institutions, the program instead began to focus on enlarging the participation of the institutions that were already involved. At this point in time many of the colleges that had first participated had been replaced by other institutions, and in many cases these same institutions often traded more than a single pair of students, often for an entire academic year, unlike the single spring semester that was arranged with NCC. The closing of this partnership between the two institutions in many ways marked the end of an era for NCC, but more research needs to be done on how long the partnership with Morris Brown College endured, as it began after the Spelman exchange and possibly lasted through NCC’s financial hardships in the 1960s. Spelman College continues to host an exchange
program with over 30 institutions across the country, and the focus has shifted outside of racial integration, focusing more on broader academic experiences for the participating students.\textsuperscript{66}

Conclusion

The experience of black women from Spelman College involved in the exchange with NCC suggest much more can surely be learned and analyzed by looking at the other participating institutions. Spelman’s effort in racial integration and cohabitation was far more than an academic exchange. It was a precursor of developments in the American educational system in the following decades. After the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1968, black Americans could no longer be denied housing in any part of the country, and this of course drew many new faces and ideals to the northern college campuses in the shape of black scholars both as students and instructors. The experiences of Spelman and NCC participants ultimately paved the way for the next generation of black scholars. The North wasn’t always welcoming and approachable, and deep sense of self and understanding would be crucial to understanding one’s place in an adverse and difficult system. Even though they legally couldn’t be turned down, they could not assume that they wouldn’t face hardships or quiet and insidious opposition from the white hegemony.

Spelman’s program left a trailblazing legacy that continues today for Historically Black Colleges and Universities, much like the legacy the exchanges and experiences analyzed by Dafina-Lazarus Stewart left behind for black collegians in the Midwest. Even though HBCU enrollment across the country has been rising throughout the past decade, it has been doing so at

a much slower rate when compared to predominantly white institutions. In turn, domestic exchange programs over the past few decades have been retooled as recruitment assets for institutions like Spelman, with a focus on academic advancement and variety over a focus on cohabitational experiences between two races. Domestic exchanges in 21st century HBCUs provide opportunities for black undergraduates to attend elite and unique institutions that may have been for one reason or another, out of reach. Some of the participating institutions in Spelman’s current exchange program include but are not limited to, Stanford University, Duke University, Dartmouth College, several institutions in the University of California family, and many others across the country. The domestic exchange programs at institutions like Spelman can trace their roots to this exchange focused around the bettering of racial relations across the country in an era where they had reached a boiling point.

Looking at the history of racial integration efforts in academia across the US has perhaps never been more important. The current political climate across the country is the most divisive it has been in decades, and the division between left and right has permeated communities and campuses across the country as topics like racial inequality, affordable housing, and institutional racism are at the forefront of political discussion. As these issues are discussed in the legislative system, higher learning institutions across the country have been tasked with interpreting much of the unrest present on both ends of the spectrum. Although the entire country has been theoretically integrated and segregation, both institutional and de facto, has been put to rest,

---

racial tensions and socioeconomic disparity amongst different races in America is at an all-time high.

Looking back at integration efforts from over half a century ago can offer insight into the progress made and the problems that persist for black and other minority collegians across college campuses. The myth that integration would be easier at northern institutions was laid to rest by the participants of the Spelman-NCC exchange program. Nearly six decades later, Margie Durrah’s description that she had been “stretched from end to end” in her experience both in college and in the broader American racial culture remains relevant. Non-white collegians and their institutions are wrestling with trying to make sense of their place and identity in today’s constantly changing sociocultural environment, where race, gender, and social identities are changing at an extremely rapid pace.69

---

69 Wolff, Untitled Report to Department Head, 1.
### Student Exchanges Between Spelman College and North Central College, 1960-1968

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Student/College</th>
<th>Student/College</th>
<th>Student/College</th>
<th>Student/College</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>Margie Durrah, Spelman College, Sophomore</td>
<td>Gwendolyn Ponder, Spelman College, Junior</td>
<td>Mary Miller, North Central, Sophomore</td>
<td>Sharon Passow, North Central, Sophomore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>No participants between NCC and Spelman were exchanged this year.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td>Georgianne Thomas, Spelman College, Sophomore</td>
<td>Jeanne Terry, Spelman College, Sophomore</td>
<td>Joyce Carnecross, North Central, Sophomore</td>
<td>Susan Gates, North Central, Sophomore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1963</td>
<td>Faye Powell, Spelman College, Sophomore</td>
<td>Roslily Howard, Spelman College, Sophomore</td>
<td>Miriam Wilson, North Central College, Junior</td>
<td>Carol Vieth, North Central, Sophomore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>Jane Smith, Spelman College, Junior</td>
<td>Only one participant from Spelman attended this academic year.</td>
<td>Beverly Zick, North Central, Sophomore</td>
<td>Ronda Orwig, North Central, Sophomore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>Faye Glover, Spelman College, Sophomore</td>
<td>Only one participant from Spelman attended this academic year.</td>
<td>Patricia Walker, North Central, Junior</td>
<td>Dianne Brause, North Central, Sophomore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>Elaine Smith, Spelman College, Sophomore</td>
<td>Barbara Bell, Spelman College, Sophomore</td>
<td>Ruth Miller, North Central, Junior</td>
<td>Jan Schmidt, North Central, Sophomore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>Evander McDowell, Spelman College, Sophomore</td>
<td>Michele Smith, Spelman College, Sophomore</td>
<td>Sandra Kell, North Central, Junior</td>
<td>Patricia Myers, North Central, Junior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td></td>
<td>Judith Brown, North Central, Junior</td>
<td>Only one participant from NCC attended this academic year.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The information in this table was compiled through research and cross reference in North Central College’s *Spectrum* yearbook, (digitized and available on the North Central College Archives website) Spelman’s *Reflections* yearbook, (digitized and available through the Atlanta University Center Robert W. Woodruff library website) NCC’s student newspaper, *The Chronicle*, (digitized and available through the North Central College Archives website) and Spelman’s *Spelman Spotlight* student newspaper, currently housed in the archival collections at Spelman College. Digitization is soon expected.
Bibliography

Primary Sources


Brown, Judith. Letter addressed to Dr. Nellie Randall, June 6, 1968. Albert E. Manley
Presidential Collection, Box 83, Folder Titled: Randall. Spelman College Archives.


Ponder, Gwendolyn. Letter addressed to Dr. Albert E. Manley, March 35, 1960. Albert E.

Schilling, Arlo L. Letter addressed to Dr. Albert E. Manley, October 26, 1964. Albert E. Manley


Wolff, Renate, Untitled report to department head, October 17, 1960. Albert E. Manley Presidential Collection, Box 13, Folder Titled: Dr. Renate Wolfe. Spelman College Archives.


Wolff, Renate. Draft of untitled student exchange program report. Albert E. Manley Presidential Collection, Box 99, Folder Titled: Exchange Program. Spelman College Archives


Secondary Sources


