

## FACTS ABOUT SELMA UNIVERSITY

It is the only beyond-high-school institution for Negroes, public or private, in all of West-Central Alabama.

- It is not accredited.
- There are only 13 faculty members, none with Ph D's.
- Faculty salaries average \$3,000 a year.
- The total annual budget is \$126,000.
- There are 205 students: tuition and fees are \$40 a semester.
- The library contains 3,600 (thirty-six hundred) volumes, 95 periodicals; Total copy: 30,000?
- Courses are on a junior-high level (e.g. "general math," "biology," "health"); in some courses, instructors have no background in the subject.

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## STUDENT BODY CHARACTERISTICS

The students' outlook reflects their conditions. Many do not read well, and those who can (especially the girls) read mostly love comics, romance magazines, and the trashier sort of paperback sex novels (e.g. the Beacon series). Girls living on campus must be inside the dormitories by 6:30 p.m. 7 nights a week, there are no recreation facilities on campus, and all on-campus residents complain constantly that they are not fed sufficiently. As a result, the main topics of discussion (and action) are the opposite sex, dancing and food. Many of the students who attended Hudson High School in Selma have had some good learning experiences; but the present university atmosphere suffocates intellectual curiosity, and those who once had any have lost it. Boredom and the symptoms of frustration (note-passing, clowning, talking, etc.) are the chief occupations during class periods. Cheating is practically universal and constant and few of the cheaters have any qualms about it. The students have few coherent ideas as to what their university experience is supposed to accomplish; "to get a job," "my mother sent me here," and "I don't know" are typical responses to questions about the purpose of their present course of study. *add facts (i.e. undisciplined etc)*

## ADMINISTRATION ATTITUDES:

The Selma University administration and faculty exhibit all the characteristics of the classic "Uncle Tom" Negro preacher-teacher. Most are old, and many obviously unqualified for their teaching positions. Two of the religion professors are supported by white Baptist congregations, which makes the link to the system even more clear. All cling tenaciously to their positions and the meager status it grants them, and thus are viciously defensive against change.

Faculty treatment of the student body is consistent with the above-noted characteristics. Students are discouraged from participating in activities of the Freedom Movement in Selma, and those who have participated have been penalized. Civil rights workers until recently were ordered off the campus on arrival, and even threatened with arrest by administrative personnel. Discussion of Movement events is infrequent and frowned upon.

Classes operate with an antiquated cut system under which students can be fined and put out of classes for fixed numbers of absences. Several years ago, when attendance at the three required weekly chapel sessions fell off, the cut system was extended to cover chapel also; students accumulating eleven cuts in chapel lose 3 academic credits in some other course, regardless of their grades in the course. The registrar (who is the president's wife) uses the student records as weapons against them <sup>see Doc</sup> and cases of changed grades, misplaced credits and denial of graduation based on personal vendettas or to force re-enrollment and payment of extra tuition are numerous and well-documented. Selma University credits are not accepted at any accredited Negro college, even in Alabama.

What thoughts the faculty members have on education are governed by the conception of education as "Christian training." In practice, this makes education primarily a process of conditioning or fitting a student's mind into the psychological mold of a static, 1954, southern Negro society. This is the only society most of the faculty know. Their view underlies consistently the regimentation inherent in the cut system, the girls' curfew, required chapel and institutional hostility to uninvited and irreverent outsiders.

The library's pitifully small collection reflects the same attitudes. The few fiction books are a mixture of Victorian family stories and minor bestsellers of the forties and fifties. The periodical rack is heavy with the slicker women's fashion magazines and Baptist Sunday-school quarterlies. Few students predictably use the library except when assigned, although it is the most modern and pleasant building on the campus. *add facts*

#### SUMMARY

To the outside observer (especially a northern white observer), Selma University is a depressingly typical example of Negro education in the South. It has all the faults of the old "Uncle Tom" attitude, but not even the Uncle Tom's two consoling virtues, money and status. The students are a frustrated, unhappy group, ready and anxious for change but kept unprepared and ignorant by a faculty administration too compromised with the status quo to examine it.



### WINDS OF CHANGE

The prognosis, however, is not entirely unfavorable. The reverberations of the civil rights activities in Selma, after echoing around the world, have finally been heard faintly on the campus. In response, slowly and painfully, Selma University is coming out of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The changes began on Monday, March 8, the day after 600 Negroes were beaten by the Alabama state troopers when they tried to march to Montgomery. A persistent civil rights worker was ordered off the campus four times that morning; the fourth time, after a dramatic confrontation with the president, several dozen students left with him. The rebels picketed the campus that afternoon, and took their case to the Movement's mass meeting that night. Several of the school's trustees were in the audience; their reaction was swift. Rumors have it that the president is on the verge of losing his job; In any case, civil rights workers have had the run of the campus since then.

Since the march on Montgomery was concluded, and the pace of activity in Selma has slowed, civil rights workers have returned to the campus and begun holding "seminars" to find out what changes the students would like to see in their campus environment. As this report is written, the seminars are continuing, but already certain outlines of the students' thought are emerging:

1.) Teaching: Perhaps the fundamental failing of the present faculty is that there is no real communication between professor and student, only a boring friction of fear and deception-based roles. Moreover, the students emphasized in the seminars (as part of the reason for cheating) that the faculty members, in addition to being "Uncle Toms" toward society, were very easily persuaded to change grades, remove absences, and otherwise be swayed by the cruder sort of pretty-girl student wiles. This, combined with the professors' shrill timidity in dealing with the outside world, results in an almost complete lack of student respect for them. It is largely impossible for the students to learn much from someone they cannot respect.

2.) Course Content: A related hindrance to learning is the monumental irrelevance of much of the course content and presentation. One girl, when asked why the study of art appreciation would be valuable, seriously replied that it would enable one to find one's way around museums without difficulty. Where the professors do not, the students cannot, relate their course-work to life outside the classroom. When asked to name the kind of new teachers they most wanted to see added to the faculty, the girls' first reply was a girls' P.E. teacher to whom they could go with questions and problems concerning sex. This response indicates a strong but undeveloped need in the students minds



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for a real understanding of the elements of their existence. This need is, by definition, unsatisfied in the present campus atmosphere.

3.) Campus Atmosphere: Student comments about Selma University are full of complaints that life there is "dull," "dead," "nothing to do, nowhere to go," etc. and it is undeniably true that life on the campus is almost unrelievedly barren: there are no recreation facilities, no cultural activities, and few opportunities for creative student self-expression. On-campus girls are out of circulation at 6:30 in the evening, and were they even available, there are only a couple of rundown Negro joints where the boys could take them. The same is true for off-campus students except that the town girls are available. A Negro youth, growing up in the Alabama Black Belt, has a background rich in expressive and creative possibilities. The writer's opinion is, moreover, that self-expression is a necessary part of self understanding, and that the lack of it on the Selma University campus contributes much to the general discontent and feeling of frustration. The students' conversations and observation of the few student activities, seems to bear this idea out.

The key to changing the situation at Selma University is people, more than constructing new buildings or crowding library shelves. Yet it would not be sufficient to replace the present faculty with a dozen bright-eyed spawn of northern teacher's colleges, armed with remedial reading labs and a determination to produce a Black Belt multiversity. A Negro youth who has grown up around Selma, Alabama has, regardless of his formal academic training, an education fully as existentially relevant, substantive and practical as that of any Ivy League graduate, however festooned he be with sheepskins and BK keys. The present national obligation/process of white/black cultural encounter, dialogue and integration must put down its roots in our educational system if it is truly to bear fruit. Thus what is needed at Selma University is not teachers, but professional learners, people with enough humility to deal with the students honestly and as equals. Any other approach is basically paternalistic, mirrors precisely (although perhaps more subtly) the present system, and will lead ultimately to the same lack of student interest that the present conditions produce. Student frustration and loss of respect for an institution is not confined (as anyone at Berkeley can testify) to the Black Belt of Alabama. Selma University, in other words, forms a microcosm of the problems of the existential encounter between races in America. It thus also contains the potential for a successful, though microcosmic, solution to the problem.