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## News

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### Threat to Black Colleges

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Mississippi Gov. Haley Barbour on Monday **proposed combining the state's three public black colleges** into one of the institutions, Jackson State University. While Barbour said that campuses would continue to exist at what are now Alcorn State University and Mississippi Valley State University, the proposal marks the most dramatic state challenge in recent years to the continuation of some public black colleges -- and the move comes in the state whose higher education system was the subject of the U.S. Supreme Court ruling that governs college desegregation.

Governor Barbour also proposed a merger of the Mississippi University for Women (which is no longer just for women, its name notwithstanding) into Mississippi State University. While his plan stressed that the various merged institutions would survive in some form, he also said that this major reorganization should result in the elimination of many programs, which supporters of black colleges fear will come largely from their institutions. The governor's budget statement said that all of the state's public colleges would see "a rationalization of class offerings.... Every university would be expected to reduce costs by consolidating or eliminating programs not pulling their financial weight." (The plan in total would turn eight universities in the state system into five.)

Officials of the black colleges could not be reached for comment and some advocates for black higher education said that these officials would have a tough time speaking out against the governor's plan. But supporters of black colleges who aren't employed by the State of Mississippi expressed outrage over the idea of merging black colleges.

"This is obviously a slap at black colleges. I think this would be another act of discriminating against black colleges," said Julius L. Chambers, a leading civil rights lawyer who is president emeritus of a historically black institution, North Carolina Central University.

Chambers noted that mergers of black educational institutions in the South have not historically gone well for black students and educators. "What happens to the faculty at black colleges" when programs are consolidated? he asked. And if the consolidations result in smaller branch campuses where Alcorn State

and Mississippi Valley are now full institutions, "how do you ensure that the same number of minority students end up in college? Why aren't they asking questions about minority enrollments?"

Merger of black colleges has long been a fear of advocates for black students in many Southern states. Periodically, legislators propose such mergers, but in recent years, before this one, these proposals have not had much momentum.

This year, [a legislator in Georgia prompted considerable debate](#) with such a proposal, but it never gained widespread political support. In Mississippi, not only is the governor making the proposal, but some powerful legislators have also [been talking up the merger idea, not restricting it to black colleges](#) (although other lawmakers are likely to oppose any mergers). Many advocates for black colleges fear that the shortages in state budgets could lead to an increase in such proposals.

Any merger of black colleges in Mississippi would have particular political significance because of [United States v. Fordice](#), a 1992 Supreme Court decision that found Mississippi had failed to desegregate its higher education system. The decision specifically encouraged the state to consider mergers and to cut down on duplication of academic programs as a means of desegregating -- but the decision did not order mergers.

The theory behind these suggestions is that duplication of academic programs at historically black and predominantly white institutions encourages white students to enroll at one set of institutions and black students at another -- and that the elimination of these choices will lead to a situation where black and white students enroll at the same institutions.

But supporters of black colleges have another theory about mergers: that they have consistently resulted in the elimination of options at institutions with a history of serving black students. Justice Clarence Thomas, while concurring with the *Fordice* decision, [warned in a separate opinion](#) that there was a danger of interpreting the ruling in ways that could hurt black colleges.

Writing that "I think it undisputable that these institutions have succeeded in part because of their distinctive histories and traditions," he argued that states should not assume that the path to desegregation would be found with fewer historically black institutions. "It would be ironic, to say the least, if the institutions that sustained blacks during segregation were themselves destroyed in an effort to combat its vestiges," he wrote.

Mississippi eventually settled the case not with mergers, but with a pledge to spend much more money on improving programs at black colleges so that they would be better able to serve all students. But not all of the promises made in that settlement have been carried out. Just this month, [The Clarion-Ledger](#) of Jackson, Miss., reported on how the state's pledge to create a \$35 million private endowment to support black colleges never gained more than the initial \$1 million that was used to start the endowment seven years ago, and that many in the state assume the promised funds will never be provided.

In light of the state's pledge to desegregate by building up black colleges, it's "truly shocking" that the governor would propose merging the three black institutions into one, said Marybeth Gasman, an associate professor of education at the University of Pennsylvania who has written extensively on the history of black colleges.

"I don't think you can take the *Fordice* settlement out of the equation," she said. "They settled the case by saying that they were going to bolster the HBCUs. They didn't provide the money and now they are going to merge them?.... This is money that has been long, long owed to black colleges, and now they are going

to take so much away from them."

Because black colleges never got all the money they were owed, Gasman said, they will be at a disadvantage in programs reviews of duplicative programs. "This raises all kinds of suspicions in light of the state's history with its black colleges," she said.

Further, she questioned the idea that it makes educational sense to merge Alcorn and Mississippi Valley into Jackson State. While they are all historically black, she noted that they aren't right next door to one another (Alcorn is 80 miles southwest of Jackson and Valley is 100 miles north of Jackson) and they differ in campus environment, with Jackson State focused on an urban mission and the other two located in rural areas.

"These institutions are very different, and they are 80 or more miles apart," Gasman said. "Why are they being asked to consolidate? One can assume that they are similar because they are historically black, but that neglects the diversity of these institutions."

In his budget proposal, Governor Barbour did not focus on desegregation issues, but on the need to save money. "At a time when the focus must be on efficiencies and excellence, we must recognize the unsustainability of dividing our limited [higher education] funding among eight public universities," he said. A combined institution would build on the strengths of each, he added. He cited similar reasons for proposing that the Mississippi University for Women be merged into Mississippi State. (While that proposal doesn't face the same scrutiny over issues of race and history as the plan to combine the black colleges, alumni of "the W," as the institution is widely called, [are already organizing opposition.](#))

### Proposals for Community Colleges

The governor also made some potentially controversial proposals about community colleges, again citing the need to cut costs. "Despite record enrollment at our community and junior colleges, it is imperative that these institutions find ways to save," he said. Among the proposals:

- Combining payroll, insurance, purchasing and other functions for the 15 community colleges in a single central operation.
- Shifting governing board authority from campus boards to a single statewide board.
- Eliminating some campuses. The proposal says that these may be branch campuses but that a reduction in the total number of institutions "can't be ruled out."
- Downsizing athletics programs. The plan said that community colleges "reportedly spent almost \$20 million" on athletics in 2007 and that they should "prioritize what is necessary to achieve their educational goals."

— **Scott Jaschik**

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