

Ruth Harris: Does Higher Education Practice What They Teach?

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Abstract

Sixty-five years prior to Ruth Harris' appointment as president of Harris-Stowe State University it was illegal to educate African Americans in Missouri. Yet, in 1940 she became the first African American female to lead the College. This paper reports findings from a historical analysis of Harris' tenure from 1940 to 1954. The analysis of Harris' seven guiding principles revealed that traces of her work, such as community-based learning, exist in education today.

Introduction

In Ruth Harris' book, *Stowe Teachers College and Her Predecessors*, she chronicled her tenure at the college from 1924 to 1954 by shining light on the four stages of the evolution of the College from a one-year normal department to a four-year college. In this paper we focus on the fourth stage as she takes the reins as president and practices seven educational principles to lead the continued development of Stowe Teachers College. However, as we attempted to make meaning of her narrative we also discussed key events from the first three stages of the development of the College because we believed they shaped her leadership skills and grounded her core beliefs.

Making Stowe Teachers College, formerly Normal Department, competitive with universities and not just normal schools is a reoccurring theme that emerged from Harris' narrative. Additionally, she yearned to make not

only the College competitive but she wanted to develop capable undergraduates who would graduate and either teach or further their education at any university in the country. Since Harris received her doctorate from Teachers College, Columbia University perhaps her experience influenced her thinking. According to Fultz (2012, 17) historians have difficulty in categorizing normal schools and the general tendency has been to consider these institutions as mere extensions of common schooling—at best, high school “plus”. However, Harris' aspirations for the College revealed through her recollections appears to provide fodder for historians to ruminate as they consider Fultz's question, “Should normal schools be considered by their aspirations, and sometimes by their practice, as fundamentally outside the realm of common schooling, given the “professional training” and “higher” education that characterized the normal school ideal?” (Fultz 2012, 17).

Two critical moments in Harris' tenure as president frame this study. Perhaps they were the catalyst for the book. Delgado and Stefancic (2013, 24) espouse the challenge of discerning critical moments during the time we are living through them. It is easier to respond to them in retrospect. Two critical moments in Harris' tenure we presumed are one, her appointment as president of the College in 1940 and two, her departure from the College in 1954. First, her appointment is a critical moment because during the 1940s few women, notably African Americans, were heads of colleges. In particular,

the male principals of Sumner High School and Simmons Elementary School assumed responsibility for the College after the St. Louis Public Schools Board of Education located the College first at the high school and second at the elementary school. Additionally, the male president of Harris Teachers College shouldered the responsibility of president for Stowe Teachers College and Harris Teachers College during the Depression era. Second, the end of her tenure was also a critical moment because the date of her departure coincided with the date of the decision of *Brown v. Board of Education* which signaled the end of segregation of schools in America.

We frame this study with the two critical moments and use a historical analysis method as a way to determine how the seven principles Harris spoke about in her narrative aided her during her presidency in the development of the College and we pondered if her intent was to reveal the utility of each for future use. According to Ladson-Billings (2013, 42), stories reflect a point of view and underscore what the teller, audience, society, and/or those in power believe to be important and significant. Although the discussion about the seven principles was expansive in Harris' narrative, we attempted to make meaning of the principles and think about them in today's context. We relied mostly on her narrative and dissertation as well as historical events during the time of her tenure to aid us in our sense-making of her narrative.

Using resources available to us we sought answers to the following two questions. What were key developments at Stowe Teachers College during Harris' tenure as president? How did they relate, if at all, to her core beliefs? In order to address the first question we discussed salient ideas from the first three stages of the development of the College during Harris' tenure and we identified the ideals and experiences we

believed shaped her core beliefs and leadership skills that ultimately influenced her leadership during her presidency. Next, to determine significant developments of the College during her presidency we examined key events (i.e., Harris' speech at the dedication services for the new building) during the fourth and final stage of her tenure along with her application of the seven educational principles. To answer the second question—How did the developments relate, if at all, to her core beliefs?—we examined our findings from her narrative along with her dissertation to determine if the key developments were rooted in her beliefs.

Background—First Three of Four Stages in the Development of the College

Two parts comprise the overview of the first three of four stages of the evolution of the College during Harris' tenure which include salient events that influenced the development of the College and her experience that shaped her leadership skills and core beliefs. The latter is critical because we believe Harris' leadership grew out of her experiences as a teacher and administrator at the College prior to her assuming the role of president. Events that signaled advancement of the College during the first three stages include 1) changes in location and name, 2) social contexts of education for African Americans in Missouri, 3) expansion of curriculum, and 4) development of partnerships.

First, the Board of Education of the St. Louis Public Schools District governed the College during Harris' tenure and was responsible for twice renaming the College and twice relocating it. In the first stage from 1890 to 1924, the College, named Normal Department, resided at Sumner High School, the first high school for African Americans west of the Mississippi River. In the second stage from 1924

to 1929 the Normal School remained at Sumner High School but its name changed to Sumner Teachers College. In the third stage from 1929 to 1940, according to Harris (1967), the College cut all ties with Sumner High School with a name change to Harriet Beecher Stowe Teachers College (abbreviated to Stowe Teachers College) and a move to Simmons Elementary School. The move provided the College with much needed space as well as a laboratory school to use for the development of their teachers. The second move occurred during the start of the fourth stage of the College's evolution and at the beginning of Harris' tenure as president.

Second, one extenuating circumstance that shaped the context of education for African American children in Missouri and prompted the Board's decision to open the College was the 1875 decree by the General Assembly of the State of Missouri. In fact, prior to March 17, 1875, schooling for African Americans did not exist; however, in 1875 the General Assembly of the State of Missouri mandated an education for all children living in Missouri. In 1890 the Board responded to the decree by opening the College as a normal school. Like the first normal school in the United States which opened in 1839 in Massachusetts, its purpose was to train teachers (Wright 1930); however, the purpose of the College or Normal Department (as it was called) was to train African American teachers to teach African American children attending St. Louis Public Schools in grades kindergarten through eighth.

Third, another event during the first three stages of the development of the College was the expansion of the curriculum from a one-year program to a four-year college. In 1925, the Board approved the College's program expansion from a two-year program to a four-year program (Harris 1967), thereby making the College

comparable to the all-White teachers' college in St. Louis, Harris Teachers College. We think this is an important event because although there were many barriers that inhibited the growth of the College, throughout Harris' narrative she made references to working to make the College as good as other colleges and universities. As an illustration, according to Wright (1930) normal schools in Massachusetts established a two-year program in 1865 and a four-year program in 1870 conversely it took the Board almost 35 years before expanding Stowe Teachers College's program to four years (Harris 1967). This was not the first time Stowe Teachers College received questionable treatment from the Board. For instance, in 1919 the Board approved the White teachers' college authority to grant degrees to all students who satisfactorily completed the program requirements yet similar authorization for Stowe Teachers College came two years later in 1921 (Harris 1967).

Fourth, during the Depression era in the 1930s, a partnership with a nearby college for African Americans helped the College develop an alternative program to grow its enrollment. In 1933 the superintendent of St. Louis Public Schools created an entrenchment program in response to the Depression. In order to reduce spending the superintendent discontinued the College's two-year program, ordered it not to admit any new students, reduced its staff, and assigned the Harris Teachers College president as president of both Harris Teachers College and Stowe Teachers College. According to Harris (1967) the cuts in the programs put the College in peril. However, with support from the community and the sponsorship by Public Works Administration (PWA) the College was able to partner with Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Missouri to create a two-year junior college program which lasted for five years.

In the first part of the overview we discussed events that influenced the development of the College during the first three stages under Harris' tenure and in the second part of the overview we constructed what we believed to be Harris' leadership style and her core beliefs during the same time. We used her narrative and photographs in her book to aid us in determining her leadership style. For example, throughout the book she wrote a lot about the contributions of others, the need for equality in the treatment of all teachers' colleges, and the desire to create a competitive college. Additionally, she included a limited number of photographs of herself in her book and most of her photographs show her seated among her peers. We interpreted the frequency in which she acknowledged others to mean she put people first. The group pictures bolstered our theory because we interpreted the photographs as representing a team. Additionally, we inferred from her willingness to put others first and her positioning in the group photographs indicated that she was not an attention-seeker but more of a collaborator. Given her rise to the highest position in the College and the clues we distilled from her narrative we believe Harris was a quiet, tenacious, and determined leader whose leadership style was probably democratic—she along with others collaborated in the development of the College.

Second, in addition to Harris' narrative we relied on her dissertation to aid us in interpreting her core beliefs. We believe community involvement was the cornerstone of Harris' core beliefs. For example, she thought the College should serve its community (i.e., the College sponsored programs for students as well as community members) and students of the College should serve the community (i.e., the sociology course of the College had both class lectures and community service components). Moreover,

Harris appeared to strongly believe that teachers should know the community in which they taught in order to better serve their students. The subject, which was the topic of her dissertation, probably got its roots from Paul R. Hanna (author of *Youth Serves the Community*) who was on the faculty of Teachers College, Columbia University where she completed her dissertation (Harris 1941). Today, when students apply what they learned in class to service work we refer to the practice as community-based or blended learning.

The Seven Principles and the Key Developments of the College during Harris' Tenure

Although in our overview we included events from the first three stages we think influenced Harris' leadership skills and beliefs, the next section of the paper is focused on the development of the College during Harris' tenure as president—the fourth and final stage of her narrative. In this section of the paper we share our interpretations of her speech she delivered at the dedication services for the new building and next, discuss the seven educational principles she used to aid in the development of the College.

With the pervasiveness of segregation in the United States during the 1940s it was probably very exciting for the community to hear that Harris was the new president of the College. She essentially “grew-up” with the College so the community and former students knew her and undoubtedly trusted her to improve the College for the benefit of African Americans. We presume Harris' purpose of using the dedication speech to reveal her platform for leading the College was two-fold—give her constituents a glimpse of what was to come and instill confidence in the Board of her ability to lead the College. Harris commenced her speech with the question, “What shall this program be?” and proceeded to answer it with the following

assertions, “the foundation of the success of the College included kindness, integrity, responsibility, diligence, reliability, punctuality, and loyalty” (Harris 1967, 62). These words seemed to define Harris. That is to say we gleaned from her writings that she was steadfast in her loyalty to the College as evidenced by her length of service as well as responsible as attributed to her promotions during her tenure. Furthermore, words like responsibility and diligence appear to describe her commitment to supporting the community and cultivating a top-notch college. She elaborated that the College would be one of scholarship and that learning would far exceed what students learned in elementary or high school. Her assertion about scholarship gave us pause as we connected her aspiration to Fultz’s question about historians rethinking the descriptions of normal schools given their practices and higher education. Likewise, we presume this was also another way she attempted to position the College as a competitive four-year university.

In her dedication speech she foreshadowed how the seven principles would support development; however, in the final chapter of her narrative we learned about the contributions to the College as a result of their application. The seven educational principles are 1) know your pupils first, 2) educate the whole teacher—intellectually, culturally, socially, physically, 3) schools should make use of their communities as learning laboratories, 4) an institution should study itself, 5) an institution should provide for individual differences—especially in curriculum, 6) a teachers’ college should seek better integration and less overlapping of the education courses, and 7) in-service teachers should participate in planning the curriculum. In the final section of her book Harris asked the readers, “Are educational principles practiced in the institutions

where they are taught?” (Harris 1967, 84). We interpreted Harris’ rhetorical question to mean that the College practiced the same concepts that the faculty taught Stowe Teachers College undergraduates. The following discussion provides examples of how the practice benefitted the College.

Principle one, know your pupils first, represented all of the tools the faculty of the College employed to get to know their students. In particular, they focused on recruitment by hosting events that allowed high school seniors in the region to visit their campus and talk to counselors and faculty members about programs at the College. They canvassed potential students to learn about their academic strengths and weaknesses by requiring them to complete questionnaires prior to their campus visits. Counselors organized and distributed the information to the faculty. On the day of the event the counselors placed students in groups according to their interests and assigned faculty with similar interests to talk with the students about their programs. By garnering information from students they were able to consider the kind of remedial programs needed to support students entering the College with academic deficits as well as make adjustments in the program offerings (Harris 1967).

For principle two, educate the whole teacher—intellectually, culturally, socially, physically—the faculty adopted the phrase “whole child” for future teachers (e.g., whole teacher). Harris asserted that teacher-education curriculum should encompass social and cultural activities as well as intellectual because students benefited from exposure to many different kinds of cultural activities. Since the social climate of America at the time severely limited the access of African Americans to cultural events in the larger community outside of the College, Harris

believed it was the College's responsibility to bring events to the community in which they could participate.

Principle three, schools should make use of their communities as learning laboratories, harkens back to Harris' experience at Teachers College, Columbia University. We saw a connection between Harris' dissertation—rooted in helping teachers understand the communities in which they worked—and the third principle. For this reason Harris saw merit in having undergraduate students collaborating with community partners as a way to better understand the students they would one day teach. For instance, during her tenure as president the faculty initiated a cooperative education program between Stowe Teachers College and city agencies. The program consisted of undergraduate students enrolling in the sociology course which was a balance of class lectures and service in their community. Harris saw the program as a way for students to gain experience working with children, learn about community agencies, and provide service. Likewise faculty's involvement bolstered their knowledge about students' work in non-classroom settings which aided them in their process of selecting candidates for the Stowe Teachers College program.

Principle four, an institution should study itself, was part of Harris' desire for the College to be competitive with institutions across the nation. Adhering to the North Central Manual of Accrediting Procedures Harris involved the College in a couple of national studies as a way to investigate problems of the College and develop solutions. The first was a Carnegie Foundation grant awarded to the University of Missouri in which Stowe Teachers College participated for the purpose of improving instruction of its faculty. The participation of the College in the

study included the administration canvassing students about the faculty's teaching, sending faculty members to seminars, and having the seminar attendees report their findings.

The second study conducted during Harris' tenure was with the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. According to Harris its purpose was an attempt to improve the living standards of the community by improving methods and content of instruction in schools, developing teachers' instructional skills, making the curriculum relevant to the needs of students, and using current resources in different ways to reinforce teaching. In the first phase of the study Harris and a few faculty members visited several school districts and in the second phase undergraduate students of the College worked with adults and children in the community to focus on a community problem and generate solutions. For example, with the residents' permission, the students studied their homes and redesigned interiors; next, they had students create posters on the theme of eradicating rats in the neighborhood. Last, one of the faculty members developed a textbook on rat control. The Sloan project was one of the vehicles Harris used to gain access to the community and put theory into action.

Providing for individual differences—especially in curriculum, was at the core of the fifth principle. Harris cites the English workshop as one of the ways the College differentiated learning oral and written language. The faculty assessed students to determine their skill levels in the English language and customized the curriculum to address their language deficiencies. Harris stated that differentiation (individualizing instruction to meet the needs of all learners) occurred at Stowe Teachers College long before tracking (grouping students by their abilities and placing them in similar classes) in the St. Louis Public Schools. The workshop was unique

because it was in addition to students' regular English classes and students' could progress at their own rate (Harris 1967). We presume this idea germinated from the data provided by incoming freshmen questionnaires that revealed many of them had underdeveloped reading skills. Differentiation in schools today looks similar to the ways Stowe Teachers College used it over sixty years ago.

Seeking better integration and less overlap of education courses was the sixth principle. This occurred when the faculty combined courses to remove duplication in the programs. Harris asserted the catalyst for the change was due to criticisms launched by students against the lack of sequence of education courses. The impetus for the change was to integrate courses where it made sense in order to make the learning experience meaningful and practical. In other words they combined courses like philosophy of education with the practice of teaching to bring the theory and practice closer together.

Principle seven, in-service teachers should participate in planning the curriculum, was Harris' desire to foster a democratic culture at the College. This principle reinforced our belief that Harris' leadership style was democratic. Our most compelling evidence is when the faculty uses in-service teachers' input to develop courses offered during the summer. Specifically, according to Harris (1967, p 156) teachers working in African American schools in St. Louis Public Schools were unable to attend the two local universities. In 1941 the Board approved the College's summer program which afforded the teachers the opportunity to enroll in courses needed to develop their pedagogical skills. Principle seven is important because the faculty of Stowe Teachers College developed a summer program based on the needs of teachers. Subsequently the program

paved the way for additional summer sessions at the College.

Harris' Core Beliefs through the Lens of her Dissertation

Although there is limited information available to us about Ruth Harris we found her dissertation, *Teachers' Social Knowledge and its Relation to Pupils' Responses*, quite revealing of what we presume were her core beliefs about educating teachers. For example, in the first chapter of her dissertation Harris (1941) addressed the importance of teachers broadening their programs beyond the four walls of the classroom so they may become knowledgeable about the immediate community and the larger world community. She asserted the importance of getting teachers to understand the complex problems of the modern world in order to help students learn how to become world citizens. With Harris mentioning Paul R. Hanna in her dissertation we also presumed Hanna, a faculty member at Teachers College, Columbia University during her post-graduate work at Teachers College, influenced her beliefs. Additionally, Harris' (1941) quote, "the teacher is the crucial factor in any conscious effort to bring school and community together" led us to believe that community or service learning is one of Harris' core beliefs.

The statement of problem in Harris' dissertation is as follows:

The understanding that teachers have of the communities in which they do their teaching is an important factor in the integration of their pupils' lives in their communities and the pupils' whole social adjustment. Consequently the development of this understanding should be a major concern of teacher training in institutions (Harris 1941, p 56).

Harris explored how much the teachers in four St. Louis African American elementary schools knew about the social condition in their communities and how the experience helped them relate to students. To answer her research question Harris developed two surveys and administered one to teachers and the other to fifth and sixth grade students. In some of the questions she queried teachers about heavily congested areas in neighborhoods, type of houses in neighborhoods, location of playgrounds, and African American population. She found that teachers' social information scores were low in the study. For example, less than 50% of the teachers knew about the most congested areas in the neighborhood or the types of houses found in them. Additionally many of them knew little about the African American population in St. Louis (Harris 1941).

Additionally, Harris compared students' utilization of certain social facilities to teachers' knowledge of the locations of the facilities. Her findings revealed the following: 15% of the students selected the library as one of the places they liked to go while only 30% of the teachers knew the locations of the libraries in the communities. Thirty-five percent of the students knew the locations of healthcare centers compared to 45% of the teachers. The playground was the third place students liked to go and 78% of the teachers knew the locations of the playgrounds; however, Harris stated that the majority of the playgrounds were on the school grounds (Harris 1941, 31).

Harris appeared to grapple with the lack of knowledge teachers had of the communities in which they worked. She believed if teachers knew about the economic conditions of the communities surrounding the schools they would be more empathetic towards students. For instance, Harris supposed if students stole lunches

she assumed it was because the students' parents probably were unable to buy them lunches. However, teachers with limited knowledge of the community might assume students stole lunches because of poor behavior.

We found a correlation between Harris' core beliefs in three of the seven educational principles—principle one (know your students), principle two (educate the total teacher), and principle three (schools should make use of their communities as learning laboratories). We found evidence of Harris' core belief, know your students, embedded in the College's recruiting practices. Next, we found evidence of what we presumed to be her second core belief, educate the total teacher, engrained in the cultural offerings at the College. For example, because of prevailing Jim Crow laws African Americans were unable to attend cultural events in the larger community, therefore, Harris exposed students and community members to cultural activities through the College. Last, we found proof of Harris' third core belief, schools should make use of their communities as learning laboratories, in the College's community education program (i.e., sociology course with lecture and service components).

Conclusion

At the beginning of her book Harris stated that May 17, 1954 was a date everyone would remember. Not so much so because Stowe Teachers College was closing its doors but because the landmark decision of *Brown v. Board of Education* was going to open more doors for African Americans. Throughout Harris' narrative she never limited the stature of Stowe Teachers College by comparing it to only African American schools instead she compared it to all universities and colleges. Like *Brown* she wanted African American students to get a solid education; therefore upon leaving Stowe Teachers

College they could enter the teaching profession or continue their education at colleges and universities of their choice.

Although there is little, if any, information written about her after her departure from the College, the intellectual capital she invested in Stowe Teachers College during the years of her tenure left an indelible mark not only on the College as we know it today, Harris-Stowe State University, but also St. Louis. We presume that her most significant contributions included the bridging of community learning to higher education as well as elevating the education of African Americans.

First, we conclude that bridging the teachers' program from the university to the community and back was a significant contribution by Harris. It enabled undergraduate students to gain experience working with agencies within the community and increased their understanding of the needs of their future students. Markedly, the practice exists today; however, we know it as community-based or service learning. Like Harris, supporters of service learning see the value of putting theory into practice in our communities.

Second, we conclude that Harris' aspirations to make Stowe Teachers College equal to or better than all colleges and universities is not only a significant contribution by Harris but it also begins to answer Fultz' question, "Should normal schools be considered by their aspirations, and sometimes by their practice, as fundamentally outside the realm of common schooling, given the "professional training" and "higher" education that characterized the normal school ideal?" (Fulton 2012, 17). We respond positively to Fultz's question given Harris' aspirations for Stowe Teachers College to be the best in its class and the structures (seven principles) her faculty

practiced in order to achieve it. Her accomplishments while leading a college for African Americans were hopeful given the fact that higher education institutions along with like K-12 schools, were separate and unequal.

We recommend the continuation of the study of historical black colleges and universities (HBCUs) as a way to define practices that worked and are germane to teaching and learning today. For example, we found that differentiation and blended learning practiced by the faculty of Stowe Teachers College currently exists in our schools today. We suggest future studies of former presidents of HBCUs in order to provide a lens for historians to glean meaning from their aspirations and practices that inform the narrative of HBCUs and their role in the education of African Americans.

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