UGA research explores little-known chapter in college desegregation

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Many of the battles to desegregate Southern colleges and universities were fought in public, but efforts to desegregate the standardized testing that is often a prerequisite to admission have, until now, received little attention. Now, a new University of Georgia study reveals how two men traveled the Deep South, facing hostility and risking violence, to ensure that students received fair and impartial treatment.

"We know a lot of the big stories of the civil rights era, but this is a smaller, virtually unknown one," said study author Jan Bates Wheeler, associate director for accreditation at the UGA Office of Institutional Effectiveness. "It's an example of how a few people put forth a lot of effort at great personal risk to make higher education available to people who were being denied access."

College entrance exams such as the SAT require that students be tested impartially and under the same conditions. In the segregated South of the early 1960s, however, black students were routinely turned away from testing sites, which were almost always at all-white high schools or colleges. Wheeler notes that some colleges and universities required the SAT as prerequisite to admission purely to create a nearly insurmountable hurdle for prospective black students.

When black students were allowed to take the exam, white school administrators often placed them in a separate - and usually inferior - location. One group of black students in Columbia, South Carolina, for example, took the 3-hour SAT in a poorly-lit basement while the proctor

talked loudly to an assistant. Wheeler uncovered evidence that Hamilton Holmes and Charlayne Hunter, the first two black students admitted to UGA, were initially turned away from their SAT testing center.

In response to such abuses, the College Board, the not-for-profit organization that administers the SAT, began an ambitious campaign in 1960 to desegregate the testing centers. The men who designed the plan intentionally kept the effort from the public. "They didn't want publicity because they knew that it would further solidify the massive resistance against school desegregation," Wheeler said. "Even after they were successful, they didn't want a history written because they didn't want the school administrators who had cooperated with them to get into trouble."

Wheeler, who recently received her doctorate from the UGA Institute of Higher Education and conducted the research for her dissertation, examined more than 10,000 pages of letters, memos and reports to create the first comprehensive history of what was called a "campaign of quiet persuasion" to desegregate testing centers in the Deep South. The effort was led by the late Ben Cameron Jr. of Sewanee, Tenn., a Southern liberal who -- in a telling display of the changes that were roiling the South -- was the son and namesake of the judge from the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit who worked to prevent James Meredith from becoming the first black student at the University of Mississippi.

The junior Cameron served with black sailors in World War II but returned to a society where blacks weren't allowed the same freedoms he enjoyed. Wheeler said Cameron's wartime experiences inspired him to work toward a society where skin color is not a barrier to college admission, even if it meant risking his safety and his relationship with his segregationist father.

Between 1960 and 1965, Cameron and staff member Ben Gibson of

Atlanta traveled to nearly every school district in Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi and South Carolina to push for desegregation of testing centers. They met with school principals and other officials who oversaw the centers and presented them with two options: maintain a desegregated testing center with equal treatment for all or lose the prestige and convenience associated with being a testing center.

Racial slurs were often hurled at the men, and one school superintendent tried to intimidate Gibson by taking him to a meeting of the segregationist White Citizens Council and on a tour of neighborhoods that were still smoldering from race riots. In Jackson, Miss., the police and the FBI trailed Cameron -- the latter for his protection and the former for unknown reasons. "They were never in any immediate physical danger," Wheeler said, "but they knew that was always a possibility."

Not all of the schools they visited were hostile. Sister Mary Fidelis, head of St. Vincent's Academy for Girls in Savannah, readily agreed to provide up to 500 seats for students of any color. But dozens of testing sites were steadfast in clinging to segregation and were closed by Cameron and Gibson. In some cases, the closing necessitated the opening of testing locations at military bases, including at Redstone Arsenal, the heart of the Army's rocket and missile programs, in Huntsville, Ala.

By 1965, Cameron and Gibson had succeeded in their "campaign of quiet persuasion." They received input from an advisory committee that included well-known figures such as Ralph McGill, publisher of The Atlanta Constitution, and Stephen Wright, president of Fisk University, but traveled the South on their site visits alone. "They were committed to creating a level playing field for all students," Wheeler said. "They stuck to their principles when it would have been easier not to."

Source: University of Georgia