DR. GLENN C. ALTSCHULER
SPECIAL TO THE COURIER

When the Rev. John Brooks arrived at the College of Holy Cross in Worcester, Mass., in the mid-1960s to teach theology, the only Black student on campus was a Bostonian named Bob Credle. By the fall of 1968, thanks in no small measure to Brooks (who would serve the college as dean, vice president and president), 19 Black freshmen and one sophomore were enrolled at Holy Cross.

In "Fraternity," Diane Brady, a reporter for Bloomberg Businessweek, recounts the collegiate experiences of five of them. A basketball recruit, Stan Grayson became deputy mayor of New York City. Eddie Jenkins, Jr. became a running back for the Miami Dolphins. Edward P. Jones would win a Pulitzer Prize for literature. Theodore Wells, a liberal Democrat, is recognized as one of the most influential lawyers in the United States. And Clarence Thomas, a conservative Republican, now sits on the Supreme Court.

With the help of Brooks, Brady indicates, these young men braved "anger, resentment, and miscommunication," taking risks that jeopardized their own education, "to make the messy transition to a better society" during the height of conflict over the Vietnam War and Black Power. Accused of having "ghetto mentality"

Thin in its archival research, "Fraternity" depends heavily on interviews, which can be vague and/or unreliable. In this case, they did not really enable Brady to get inside her subjects' heads – or supply all that many vivid "you are there" details.

Although she provides no new interpretations, Brady does convey the racial tensions and turbulence on college campuses in the 1960s and '70s. Some Holy Cross alumni, she reports, railed against Brooks for risking the institution's reputation by recruiting unqualified Black students. Some faculty claimed that it was unfair to bring young men to a place where they were not likely to succeed.

The Black undergraduates, a sociology professor insisted, "have bred for themselves a ghetto mentality."

Made demands on administrators

Anxious, ambivalent, angry and ambitious, sometimes in combustible combinations, Black students often put President Raymond Swords and Father Brooks between a rock and a hard place.

Expected to feel "nothing but gratitude for their scholarships," they demanded an office, a budget, transportation (so they could socialize with Black women at other colleges), a Black admissions officer, admission of 57 Black students (10 percent of the incoming class) in the fall of 1969, a Black studies curriculum, Black faculty, and a Black corridor in a dormitory.

Following the arrest of four Blacks (and eight Whites) who protested a General Electric Company recruitment visit, leaders of the Black Students Union (including Clarence Thomas) voted to quit the school if the Judicial Board did not grant amnesty.

Beneficiary of affirmative action

Although several of their fellow recruits did not make it to the ceremony on Mount St. James, Brady’s quintet graduated in 1972. Their success, in school and subsequently, certainly is testimony to the capacity of one man, Father Brooks, to make a difference.

And, as Diane Brady implies, it asks us to consider as well whether affirmative action, if intelligently applied, gives talented
men and women from economically disadvantaged families a chance that, through no fault of their own, they would not otherwise have.

A beneficiary of affirmative action, Clarence Thomas has devoted much of his career to denouncing it for delivering a message that minorities cannot succeed without special help. Ted Wells, on the other hand, believes that affirmative action has, at its best, delivered on America's promise to provide opportunities to all its citizens that are more equal. Perhaps it makes sense to allow John Brooks to break the tie.

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