

The Scholarship Program of the General Education Board from 1950 to 1954

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From the 1820s onwards, wealthy individuals, enterprises, and religious congregations across the United States provided funding for scholarship and student loan funds entrusted to colleges and universities. These funds often relied on an endowment to produce the funds necessary to support students in need of financial support. Furthermore, while most donors entrusted a university of their choice with their scholarship fund, there were also some scholarship funds such as the La Verne Noyes Scholarship Endowment Fund and the General Board of Education (GEB) that were created outside of the university. Prior to 1945, such funds were extremely rare, but they did exist. The La Verne Noyes Scholarship Endowment Fund, created as a trust in Chicago in 1919, was one of the earliest examples.

Noyes had made a fortune developing, producing, and marketing steel windmills that provided the power to pump water on farms across the Midwest. Noyes' Aermotor Windmill Company became one of the leading producers and innovators in the production of windmills at the end of the nineteenth century. He was a man who valued not only wealth but also education. He had received his bachelor degree from Iowa State College in Ames in 1872. After the passing of his wife in December 1912, Noyes donated half a million dollars to the University of Chicago in honor of his wife's lifelong accomplishments. The money was used to construct the Ida Noyes Hall "as a social center and gymnasium for the women of the University."¹ In his last will and testament, Noyes donated the rest of his wealth (\$3.5 million) to a trust that provided

scholarships for undergraduate students across the United States who had served in World War I or to those who were descendants of soldiers in the war. The financial structure of this trust was unique in that it included more than half a million dollars in securities and about three million dollars in shares of the Aermotor Windmill Company. The trust, in fact, owned the company. It held 2,660 shares of the 2,933 shares issued on behalf of the company. The remaining two hundred seventy-three shares were owned by family members.²

In addition to having served in the war, Noyes also stipulated that the trustees were to select scholarship recipients based on need and merit. His last will and testament specified:

This is to be done without regard to difference of sex, race, religion or political party, but only for those who shall be citizens of the United States of America and either First, shall themselves have served in the army or navy of the United States of America in the war into which our country entered on the 6th day of April, 1917, and were honorably discharged from such service, or Second, shall be descended by blood from someone who has served in the army or navy of the United States in said war, and who either is still in said service or whose said service in the army or navy was terminated by death or an honorable discharge.³

Students from fifty universities and colleges from across the country received scholarships from this trust fund throughout the 1920s and 1930s.⁴

Another non-governmental scholarship program independent of specific universities and established for university students from several universities of various states included the scholarship program of the GEB inaugurated in 1950. In contrast to the Noyes program, the GEB program specifically targeted senior undergraduate students from Southern universities and colleges who intended to pursue an academic career in the South. This scholarship was part and parcel of the GEB's commitment to raise the standard of academic instruction particularly at Southern colleges and universities. Since its founding by John D. Rockefeller in 1902, the GEB had developed various strategies that included the provision of funds for the creation of university endowments, the allocation of financial support for the increase of the salaries of

teachers, and the creation of fellowship and scholarship programs for scholars and students from the south.⁵

The GEB scholarship program created in 1950 offered “persons of exceptional intellect, imagination, training, curiosity, personality, and other qualifications necessary for distinguished academic careers” financial support in form of a living stipend of \$1125, travel expenses, and tuition payments for the first year of graduate education at a Northern university of the student’s choice.⁶ The selection of potential scholarship holders was in the hands of professors who were encouraged to nominate promising students for this award. A circular letter dated January 17, 1950, described the selection process, “which has been tried for several years at Princeton,” for the Woodrow Wilson Fellowships as follows:

“The scholarship will be extended solely by invitation to nominees whose names are submitted not by the candidates themselves, but by faculty committees within institutions. Nominees will generally be considered without their knowledge and no personal applications will be received. Each successful candidate will be informed of his appointment as a recognition of his superior ability and promise for a career of high distinction in the academic profession.”⁷

It was envisioned to award between twenty-five to thirty scholarships each year to students who decided to pursue an education in “fields of study of importance to the economic, social, and educational development of the South.” Most awards were to go to students in the fields of natural and applied sciences, agriculture, social sciences, humanities, and education. Students who pursued the study of law, medicine, engineering or architecture were ineligible.⁸ There were no provisions made for specifically targeting African-American students. In an internal letter dated February 20, 1950, Robert W. July, assistant director of the GEB from 1950 to 1955, wrote: “I am a bit concerned about the Negroes. They are worried (and so am I) about the competition of the top grade white colleges. I have insisted that quality is the absolute standard and that we will engage in no quota techniques, geographical or otherwise. We may find that we

will have to hedge on this in practice,”⁹ and as far as female applicants were concerned, July made it very clear that “we could not encourage [female] nominees except in the rare instances where future availability to academic work was reasonably assured.”¹⁰

The GEB allocated \$75,000 annually to this program, which ran for a total of four years from 1950 to 1954. Sixty-seven universities and colleges—including seventeen African-American colleges—from fourteen Southern states and the District of Columbia, were invited to nominate promising students for a scholarship. In the first year of its existence in 1950, a total of one hundred seventy-two students were nominated by fifty-nine participating institutions of higher learning. Thirty-five nominees were awarded a scholarship to attend a university in the North.¹¹ While the GEB limited its scholarship program to students of specific academic fields, July was quite surprised about the high number of applicants from the humanities. Ten of the thirty-one candidates he had interviewed (six men and four women) pursued work in English literature. July was also quite concerned with the unexpected high number of female students nominated for this program. He wrote:

“We are getting too many women candidates. Of thirty-one nominees, ten were women. This development can be explained partly by the fact that the selection committees are finding strong candidates among their co-eds, (on the whole, the girls I interviewed were better than the men) and partly by our failure to point out more explicitly our feelings about the limitations of women nominees as long-range investments.”¹²

The fundamental assumption underlying this scholarship program was that graduate work of prospective academic teachers and researchers should be conducted at Northeastern and Northern universities, which appeared to the GEB as superior to any institution in the South. The *Review and Final Report* of the GEB painted a rather dire picture of graduate education in the South.

As late as 1949 only five universities in the South offered Ph.D.’s and in most cases, they could compete with outstanding Northern institutions in only a few departments. A

number of Southern universities offered graduate work to the point of the M.A. and some conferred an occasional doctorate in one or two fields; but except in a few instances, such as Peabody in education, their standards were low, and the quality of the teaching in Southern colleges and high schools suffered for lack of adequately trained M.A.'s and Ph.D.'s.¹³

Such an assumption was not met with unanimous approval among the Southern universities and colleges. Some institutions simply seemed to have ignored the calls for nominations by the GEB. During his scouting travels in the South, July attempted to meet with as many administrators and faculty members as possible to introduce the new scholarship program and to interview prospective candidates. Within his letters, he appears quite frustrated with the progress of advertising the program and with the rather reluctant response of Southern universities. "The big universities," July wrote, "with Duke the notable exception, have let the thing bog down on some dean's desk, leaving the mass of faculty totally uninformed."¹⁴ The greatest disappointment seems to have been his visit to Chapel Hill. "Only two or three people knew anything about our scholarship program and I had to light a fire under them to get the word spread about."¹⁵

Outright resistance faced July only in New Orleans when he attended a meeting at Tulane University. The university had not advertised the program before July arrived for an informational meeting with potential candidates and faculty members in March 1950. Faculty at Tulane appeared to be offended by the suggestion that a good graduate education could not be obtained at a Southern institution of higher learning. July's presentation was met with hostility and the department heads attending the meeting were only "concerned with the question of whether the Board would discriminate against nominees who chose to do their graduate work at Southern institutions. The discussion soon degenerated into a justification of Southern graduate work." July made it very clear to the people attending that he had no sympathy for such reasoning.¹⁶

The first class of thirty-five GEB scholarship holders attended fifteen different graduate institutions. Of these fifteen graduate institutions only three were located in the South and Southwest, but seven on the East Coast, four in the Midwest, and one on the West Coast. The universities most often chosen by the scholarship holders included Harvard, Princeton, Yale, MIT, Cornell, the University of Wisconsin, the University of Chicago, and Duke University.¹⁷

The GEB staff was not only concerned with the quality of undergraduate and graduate training at Southern universities, they were also quite disappointed with the quality of the students who applied for the scholarship program. July found, as he wrote in a March 1950 report about his travels to Georgia, Florida, Alabama, and Louisiana, “very few impressive candidates” and only a handful of applicants showed, in his eyes, any real promise of future academic success. He seemed, however, to be unsure about the reasons for the low quality of the first round of applicants for the newly established scholarship program. “If the late start of the program is responsible,” July wrote, “for the small number of converts this year, the relative mediocrity of candidates interviewed may strengthen the thesis that there is a critical need for a strong recruitment program which will then tap the supply of outstanding people.” Uncertain that the late start of the program was the only reason for the low quality of the few applicants, July continued to write that another possible explanation might well be “that undergraduate standards in the South are too low to provide the necessary quality we are seeking.”¹⁸

The notion that undergraduate education at Southern universities and colleges was below the standards of undergraduate education at Northern institutions of higher learning can be found in many documents produced by the GEB in the early 1950s. In May 1951, after evaluating the success of the first-year scholarship holders at Princeton University, July wrote that the impression he received about the three GEB scholarship holders who had attended Princeton in

1950/1951 ranked “somewhat below the average of Princeton first-year graduate students, that in each case our man was suffering severely from inadequate undergraduate training, that each would ultimately make the grade, but would require an additional year of graduate study to make up academic deficiencies incurred in college.”¹⁹ The experience with GEB students at Princeton was very similar to the situation of GEB scholars at other Ivy League schools, such as Harvard. Scholarship holders struggled with the expectations of their graduate school due to their insufficient preparation for graduate work at undergraduate institutions in the South.²⁰

In July’s evaluation, insufficient undergraduate training put African-American students, who were awarded scholarships by the GEB, at an even greater disadvantage. Of the six African-American students among the thirty-five scholarship holders in the 1950-1951 school year, two were judged by faculty members as simply being “incapable of M. A. work.”²¹ However, other students were not necessarily of higher quality either. Among the thirty-five scholarship holders, not a single student “was marked as a singularly brilliant person.”²² Summarizing his impressions and concerns about the academic quality of the first cohort of scholarship holders, July wrote: “It appears that the South’s best is not equal to the best in other areas and consequently our Scholarship Program must be concerned primarily with improvement of teaching and research by southern rather than national standards.”²³

Based upon his interviews with students and faculty members, July suggested reconsidering the standards of nomination for an admission to the GEB scholarship program, especially with regards to African-American students. Insisting on one “standard of academic excellence for both white and Negroes” seemed to contradict the goals of the scholarship program and the activities of the GEB in the South in general. July suggested that African-American students “as a group . . . were a poor lot ranging from adequate to impossible. In all

cases the difficulty appears to be rooted in the extreme poverty of their collegiate (and probably elementary and secondary) training.” July argued that if the existing admission standards were kept unchanged, only few African-American students would qualify for a GEB scholarship. “If we plan to help the Negroes,” July wrote, “(and the condition of their colleges indicates that they need help desperately) we must operate on a double standard or run a separate program for Negro scholars involving more modest objectives.”²⁴

Table: The Characteristics of the GEB Scholarship Holders

Academic Year	Total Number of Nominations	Total Number of Scholarships	Share of Africa-American Awardees	Gender		Academic Fields		
				Male	Female	Natural Sciences	Social Sciences	Humanities
1950/51	172	35	6	?	?	14	6	15
1951/52	?	36	5	32	4	19	6	11
1952/53	123	39	8	30	9	9	10	20
1953/54	131	36	8	25	11	8	9	19

As this table clearly indicates, the share of African-American students among the GEB scholarship holders was roughly twenty percent lower. In its *Report* about the 1951/1952 cohort of the GEB scholarship program the authors voiced disappointment with the academic performance of the five African-American students. “On the whole,” the report reads, “these five performed in adequate though not distinguished fashion.” The reasons were seen in the utterly inadequate undergraduate training at Southern institutions. The report concluded: “We have great difficulty in unearthing promising candidates and our choices are usually undistinguished students, particularly in the sciences. This emphasizes the suggestion of Dean Nabrit of Atlanta University, that we should consider sending some of our Negro scholars to a Negro graduate school for a two-year master’s program, before they attempt Ph.D. work in a strong northern university.”²⁵

The scholarship program was ended after only four years. During those years a total of one hundred forty-six students benefited from these scholarships that enabled them to enter a graduate program at Ivy League universities. Since the program offered scholarships for the first year of graduate education only, scholarship holders needed to find funding for their education beyond that first year. Fortunately, many GEB scholars did succeed in obtaining assistantships and institutional scholarships to continue their graduate education.

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The ideas and opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and are not intended to represent the Rockefeller Archive Center.

ENDNOTES:

¹ Thomas W. Goodspeed, "Ida Noyes." In D.A. Robertson, editor, *The University Record 5*: 1 Illinois: (Cubberly Library) University of Chicago Press, (October 1919), p. 53.

² The University of Iowa Archives, Record Group (RG) 01.15.05 (Scholarships and Loans), Folder: La Verne Noyes Scholarships, letter addressed to President Hancher dated May 9, 1950; Thomas Wakefield Goodspeed, *The University of Chicago: Biographical Sketches* Volume I, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press 1922, pp. 275-277.

³ The University of Iowa Archives, RG 01.15.05 (Scholarships and Loans), Folder: Scholarships-Prizes, La Verne Noyes Scholarships. See also: United State Navy Department, Bureau of Navigation, *Schools and Colleges Granting Concessions to Sons and Daughters of Offices and Enlisted Personnel U.S. Navy 1940*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Library, 1940, p.20.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC), General Education Board (GEB) Annual Report 1947-1948, pp. 3-63; GEB: Review and Final Report 1902-1964, New York: GEB Board 1964; Raymond B. Fosdick, *Adventure in Giving: The Story of the General Education Board*. New York and Evanston, Illinois: Harper & Row, 1962.

⁶ RAC, GEB, RG 1, Series 2, Box 228, Folder 2187, circular letter "General Board of Education: Scholarship Program," dated January 17, 1950, p. 3.

⁷ RAC, GEB, RG 1, Series 2, Box 228, Folder 2187, circular letter "General Board of Education: Scholarship Program," dated January 17, 1950, p. 1

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- ⁸ RAC, GEB, RG 1, Series 2, Box 228, Folder 2187, circular letter “General Board of Education: Scholarship Program,” dated January 17, 1950, p. 2-3.
- ⁹ RAC, GEB, RG 1, Series 2, Box 228, Folder 2187, letter from Robert W. July, dated February 20, 1950, p. 2.
- ¹⁰ RAC, GEB, RG 1, Series 2, Box 228, Folder 2187, letter from Robert W. July, dated February 23, 1950, p. 1.
- ¹¹ RAC, GEB, RG 1, Series 2, Box 228, Folder 2187, GEB Scholarship Program—White and Negro, dated August 30, 1950.
- ¹² RAC, GEB, RG 1, Series 2, Box 228, Folder 2187, letter from Robert W. July, dated March 29, 1950, p. 1.
- ¹³ *General Education Board: Review and Final Report 1902-1964*, New York: General Education Board 1964, p. 56.
- ¹⁴ RAC, GEB, RG 1, Series 2, Box 228, Folder 2187, letter from Robert W. July, dated February 20, 1950, p. 2.
- ¹⁵ RAC, GEB, RG 1, Series 2, Box 228, Folder 2187, letter from Robert W. July, dated February 20, 1950, p. 3.
- ¹⁶ RAC, GEB, RG 1, Series 2, Box 228, Folder 2187, letter from Robert W. July, dated March 29, 1950, p. 2.
- ¹⁷ RAC, GEB, RG 1, Series 2, Box 228, Folder 2187, General Education Board—Scholarship Program Report on 1950-1951 Scholars, p. 1.
- ¹⁸ RAC, GEB, RG 1, Series 2, Box 228, Folder 2187, letter from Robert W. July, dated March 29, 1950, p. 1.
- ¹⁹ RAC, GEB, RG 1, Series 2, Box 228, Folder 2187, Interviews, dated May 4, 1951, p. 1.
- ²⁰ RAC, GEB, RG 1, Series 2, Box 228, Folder 2187, Interviews, dated May 9-10, 1951, p. 1.
- ²¹ RAC, GEB, RG 1, Series 2, Box 228, Folder 2187, Analysis of Scholarship Program 1950-1951 Scholars, p. 2.
- ²² RAC, GEB, RG 1, Series 2, Box 228, Folder 2187, Analysis of Scholarship Program 1950-1951 Scholars, p. 2.
- ²³ RAC, GEB, RG 1, Series 2, Box 228, Folder 2187, Interviews, dated May 4, 1951, p. 2.
- ²⁴ RAC, GEB, RG 1, Series 2, Box 228, Folder 2187, Analysis of Scholarship Program 1950-1951 Scholars, p. 6.
- ²⁵ RAC, GEB, RG 1, Series 2, Box 228, Folder 2187, Brief Report on 1952-53 GEB Scholars and Analysis of Scholarship Program, 1951-1952, p. 4.