

**Kenneth W. GOINGS and Eugene O'CONNOR<**  
**The "Golden Age" of Classical Education at Historically Black Colleges**

The past two decades have witnessed a controversy over the origins of classical culture (Bernal, *Black Athena* [1987]; Lefkowitz, *Not Out of Africa, Black Athena Revisited* [1996]). This controversy, while fascinating and ongoing, has deflected attention from a much-needed examination of the connection between African Americans and the classics.

Such a connection can be divided into three main phases: 1) from the founding of the Republic to the Civil War; 2) from Reconstruction to World War II; 3) from World War II to the rise of the Civil Rights movement. In the first phase African American scholars (northerners outside of slavery) sought to document the achievements of Africans in Greco-Roman culture in order to show that their ancestors had been part of a civilization-building process, and therefore that African Americans should be granted full citizen status.

The second phase (the main focus of our paper) shows the rise of colleges and universities for African Americans. Built and often funded by northern philanthropists, these colleges were modeled after New England liberal-arts academies, which stressed the classics. An examination of course catalogs at black colleges from the 1870s to the 1920s reveals a plethora of Greek and Latin courses. This truly was the "golden age" of classical education at historically black colleges in the United States. At the same time, however, a number of prominent educators, black and white, including Booker T. Washington, stressed manual training over the liberal arts to better prepare African Americans for productive work in the "new South." In addition, northern philanthropic organizations entered into an unholy alliance with the white power structure. In exchange for being allowed to operate, black colleges began to turn from liberal arts curricula, including classics, to courses in domestic science, mechanics, and agriculture.

During the third phase, with the growth of Afrocentrism, there has been increasing attention paid to the African origins of the classical past, but nothing to rival the "golden age."