"Our Schools Must Be Open"

To All Classes of Citizens"
The Desegregation of the University of Kansas School of Medicine, 1938

by Nancy J. Hulston

During the late 1930s, while the Great Depression gripped the United States, and World War II loomed on the horizon, the many problems associated with racial segregation in this country persevered. Along with profound economic and political distress, cultural divisions within the United States fostered persistent racial and ethnic tensions, which served to undermine educational attainment for minority students.

These concerns publicly surfaced for the University of Kansas (KU) School of Medicine in 1938 when Edward Vernon Williams, after receiving a bachelor of arts degree in zoology, completing the first two years of medical school, and achieving the honor of Phi Beta Kappa at the University of Kansas at Lawrence, was refused admission to the last two clinical years of KU’s medical school in Kansas City, Kansas, because he was black. The school advised Williams, as all previous Kansas medical students of African descent, to apply for completion of his training at Howard University, an all black medical school in Washington, D.C. The reason given was that white patients would not want a black medical student to attend them.

Prior to Williams’s attempt to enroll, two other black students unsuccessfully applied for admission to the University of Kansas School of Medicine. Donald S. Ferguson, an Atchison resident and KU graduate, applied a number of times, first in 1934, and was repeatedly denied admission because of his race. Geraldine Mowbray, another Kansas native and a graduate of Howard University, also was refused entrance to clinical training at the medical school. In the refusal letter to Mowbray, Dr. Harry Roswell Wahl, dean of the School of Medicine, stated:

It has been understood that members of your race enter the medical school for the first and second years and cannot be admitted to the clinical years. We want you to know that if you enter the school, it is only for the first two years after which you would have to transfer to another school.

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2. H.R. Wahl to E.M. Harris, August 4, 1939, ibid. This lengthy report recalled the past history of the Ferguson and Williams cases.

"OUR SCHOOLS MUST BE OPEN TO ALL CLASSES OF CITIZENS"
With her first two years of medical school already completed, Mowbray chose not to fight the decision and returned to Howard to finish her medical education. In 1938, however, Williams's attempt to enroll for completion of medical school at the University of Kansas School of Medicine began to elicit public notice.

Edward Vernon Williams was born on May 13, 1912, and raised in Ellsworth, Kansas. His paternal grandparents, Fannie and Blue Williams, migrated to Kansas from Great Crossing, Kentucky, and in 1877 settled in Graham County, near the site of Nicodemus. They later moved to Trego County and in 1889 finally settled in Ellsworth, where they raised their ten children. Fannie and Blue's oldest son, Edward H. Williams, eventually married Lillian Ellis. Employed by the nearby Wellington Ranch, Edward and Lillian became popular and respected community members in Ellsworth. They raised their four children—Gladys, Claude, Jack, and Edward—in a solid family atmosphere of love, discipline, and refinement, encouraging them to take education seriously. As Dr. Williams later recalled, "I had the best parents one could have." Williams's life in Ellsworth revolved around school; he "enjoyed going to school, enjoyed studying." While attending Ellsworth High School, he took college preparatory classes including pre-medical courses, which convinced him that he ultimately wanted a career as a physician. Graduating as valedictorian of his high school class in 1930, Williams stayed in Ellsworth working part-time jobs to save enough money for tuition to the University of Kansas. He spent a year "doing yard work, raking leaves, pulling weeds, digging dandelions," and helping his father. Finally, in 1931, Williams left for Lawrence.

4. Edward V. Williams, interview by Melvin Williams, December 12, 1992, University of Kansas Medical Center Archives.
5. Ibid., 2; Williams family genealogy, private collection of Clara McCoy, Ellsworth, Kans.
6. Williams interview, 1, 2.
7. Ibid., 3–5.
I was distressed by it, but not to the point that it was my occupation. I was more interested in getting my work done in college."

Graduating from KU in 1935, Williams returned to Ellsworth even more determined to matriculate at medical school. Once again he worked with his father, labored at a variety of odd jobs, and saved his money. In 1936 Williams applied and was accepted to KU for the first two years of medical classes, which were then taught at the main campus in Lawrence. Going in he knew that he would have to transfer to another medical school out of state to complete the second two clinical years. Williams, aspiring to his medical degree, was undaunted by this. He later recalled: "It was unfortunate. I felt it was unfortunate. But I didn't gripe about it. I knew I was going to have to go somewhere else, so I just accepted it."[10]

During the two years of medical school in Lawrence, Williams, unknown to him, gathered a following of black civic leaders who, impressed by his quiet studious nature and excited by his superb scholarship, gathered in the wings, watching and waiting. When the time came in 1938 for Williams to apply to the medical school for the third and fourth clinical years, only to be advised to apply elsewhere, his admirers were ready.

In July 1938 Walter A. Huxman, governor of Kansas, wrote to Ernest Hiram Lindley, chancellor of the University of Kansas:

I have had a delegation of colored citizens wait upon me who have registered a complaint against the operation of the Medical School, and they have made the charge that during the history of this institution no colored student has ever been permitted to graduate from the Medical School. They seem of the opinion that there is discrimination

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8. Ibid.; Application for Admission, May 11, 1936; Edward Vernon Williams file; Student Records.
10. H.R. Wahl to Edward V. Williams, July 7, 1936; Edward Vernon Williams file; Student Records.
This is a problem of long standing in most medical schools in the North. We regret that negroes do not have equal opportunities with whites in this respect. The chief difficulty lies in the fact that white patients do not wish to have negro interns to serve them. Inasmuch as our Hospital is about seventy-five percent self-supporting, we have to consider particularly the wishes of our patients in that regard.13

Lindley assured the governor that a modern, fire-proof "Negro Ward" was scheduled for construction, which would assuredly provide "some opportunity for negro students," although the quality and variety of clinical cases would not equal those of the main hospital.

The following day, Huxman replied pointedly:

Of course, I realize the difficulties that confront us in this matter, yet it seems to me to be a very poor policy for the state of Kansas to say to those colored citizens that they cannot graduate from the state medical institution. I am wondering if we are not overemphasizing the private help that we get for the medical school. It seems to me that under no circumstances does such help justify us in dividing and segregating our students among racial lines and close the doors of a state institution to a certain class of students. I do not want to be contentious about this matter, and I don’t want to be unreasonable, but it just does seem to me that we should do something about this matter. . . . I do not know what we could do that would create more confidence in our state government and in the fact that it is a government for all the people than to make it possible for at least one negro student to become a graduate of our medical school. It seems to me it isn’t a very good advertisement for our state university and for the medical school when it is being said and broadcast about that qualified colored students are forced to leave the state to complete their medical education.14

Chancellor Lindley immediately contacted Dean Harry Wahl at the medical school asking him to

Dr. Harry R. Wahl, dean of the University of Kansas School of Medicine, spoke out as an advocate of segregated clinical facilities for African American students and patients, but his arguments did not succeed in convincing Governor Walter Huxman that separate facilities were justified.

Huxman continued: "I am not writing this letter on the assumption that this charge is true, but I do think it is entitled to a thorough investigation because our schools must be and remain open to all classes of citizens."12 Governor Huxman concluded by imploring Lindley to investigate the matter thoroughly, and if discrimination against black medical students did exist, to correct the situation immediately.

Chancellor Lindley quickly responded:


please try to meet with the governor to effectively present "our point of view.""

In response to the chancellor’s request, Wahl drew up a questionnaire that he sent to nearly every major medical school from Washington, D.C., to Colorado. The questionnaire began: "The racial problem is being agitated in our community because of the way we have been handling the colored students in our medical school." Specifically asked questions were: did the other schools admit "colored students"; were their facilities segregated; did evidence of racism exist in their communities; and how much public versus private funding did they receive? Within one week thirty-one responses were received, some with opposing answers from schools within the same states.17

Of the returned questionnaires, twelve affirmed that they allowed black medical students to study in an unsegregated environment. These responses came from medical schools in Pennsylvania, Ohio, New York, Minnesota, Michigan, Maryland, Iowa, Indiana, and Illinois. Of the remaining nineteen replies, most answered unequivocally no, they did not admit black medical students. From the University of Colorado School of Medicine came the response from its dean, "In so far as I know, the University of Colorado has never admitted a colored student. Undoubtedly we would have to admit such a student if pressure were brought to bear upon us."18 The dean of Northwestern University Medical School in Chicago replied that they did not admit black students, "although we do not advertise the fact." In response to the question, "Is there much evidence of racial prejudice in your community?" he replied, "heaps.""19 To that same question the dean of the University of Texas School of Medicine countered strangely:

17. Ibid. The questionnaire returns came from the following schools that did not admit black students: Northwestern University Medical School, Chicago; University of Rochester School of Medicine, Rochester, N.Y.; Cornell University Medical College, Ithaca, N.Y.; University of Nebraska School of Medicine, Omaha; Creighton University Medical School, Omaha; University of Virginia, Charlottesville Medical College of Virginia, Richmond; State University Medical Center, New Orleans; Tulane University, New Orleans; University of Maryland School of Medicine, Baltimore; Barnes Hospital, St. Louis; St. Louis University School of Medicine; University of Oklahoma School of Medicine, Oklahoma City; University of Tennessee School of Medicine, Memphis; Baylor University College of Medicine, Dallas; University of Texas School of Medicine, Galveston; University of Louisville School of Medicine, Louisville, Ky.; University of Colorado School of Medicine, Denver; and George Washington University School of Medicine, Washington, D.C.

Those replying in the affirmative were: Indiana University Medical School, Indianapolis; University of Illinois College of Medicine, Chicago; University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, Philadelphia; University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine; Ohio State University College of Medicine, Columbus; Western Reserve University College of Medicine, Cleveland; University of Cincinnati College of Medicine, Cincinnati, Ohio; Syracuse University College of Medicine, Syracuse, N.Y.; University of Minnesota School of Medicine, Minneapolis; University of Michigan Medical School, Ann Arbor; University of Iowa School of Medicine, Iowa City; and Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, Baltimore.

I would not say there is prejudice. Separate schools, railroad cars, places in theaters, etc. are provided for colored people so they are not allowed to mix with whites. In buses and street cars they are required to occupy seats in the rear of those occupied by whites.  

Apparently to him, segregation and prejudice represented two entirely different issues.

The head of the State University Medical Center in New Orleans replied regarding black medical student admissions, “No—there would be a riot if we did.” 21 Other negative responses were registered from medical schools in Pennsylvania; Virginia; Washington, D.C.; Kentucky; Tennessee; Oklahoma; New York; Nebraska; Missouri; and Maryland. Most responding schools also acknowledged having segregated facilities with the black wards overseen by white nurses and interns. All institutions that returned the questionnaire received some form of public funding. 22

Meanwhile, as the replies continued to come in, Dr. Wahl requested a meeting of the Hospital Committee of the University of Kansas Hospitals. Wahl informed the committee, chaired by Dr. Thomas G. Orr, of the recent correspondence with Governor Huxman regarding the medical school’s policy of not admitting black students to the third and fourth year clinical studies. The committee discussed various aspects of the problem and unanimously decided that the present teaching and hospital facilities were inadequate for the proper training of black medical students. They then authorized a subcommittee consisting of Wahl, Dr. James B. Weaver, and Dr. Ralph H. Major to confront the governor and inform him that no black students would be accepted at the medical school until separate facilities were built to accommodate them. 23

Armed with the responses to the questionnaire, on July 19, 1938, Wahl, Weaver, and Major headed to Topeka, but their visit with Huxman met with little success. 24 While no official record of the meeting with

22. Ibid.
23. Minutes, Hospital Committee of the University of Kansas Hospitals, July 18, 1938, University of Kansas Medical Center Archives.
the governor remains, in an ensuing newspaper account Huxman announced that “The University of Kansas and the medical school are supported by the state of Kansas as public institutions. I think the Negroes are entitled to admittance the same as any other person, and that no public institution has the right to set any bars against them.” The article continued with a statement from Huxman at an earlier church meeting: “I hate intolerance. We are all of one blood and neither democracy nor the true American spirit is in the heart of any man who seeks to array class against class, race against race, or the people of one religious belief against the people of another.”

Governor Huxman received immediate acclaim from black community leaders for his stand against the Jim Crow practices of the University of Kansas. As an immediate result of Huxman’s position against racial segregation in state institutions of higher learning, on August 6, 1938, a resolution was adopted, and on August 8, unanimously passed by the University of Kansas Board of Regents. This resolution not only established that black students with the requisite academic standing must be admitted to the Medical School of the University of Kansas at Kansas City, but it also noted that the regents had been informed that “a negro medical student has met the scholastic requirements and will be promoted to the third year, recognizing the equal education opportunity in Kansas.” On that same day, the University of Kansas Committee on Promotion, Advanced Standing and Graduation officially admitted Edward Vernon Williams to the junior class of the University of Kansas School of Medicine.

Shortly thereafter, Governor Huxman received a letter from the Colored Division of the Young Democrats Club of Sedgwick County, Kansas, thanking him for his “humanitarian undertaking”: “We . . . wish to express our sincere thanks to you for the effort you are making to give our group, the colored people of the state of Kansas, the advantages that have heretofore been denied us.” Proud that a “step in the right direction” was taken by a Democratic governor, the letter concluded with assurances that Huxman would be well supported by their group in the coming election.

Meanwhile, Williams received the letter from the University of Kansas School of Medicine informing him that he had been accepted to complete his medical training. Astonished and perplexed, he could not imagine just how this came about and later reflected:

27. Ibid., August 12, 1938; Board of Regents Minutes, August 6, 1938, Walter A. Huxman Administration, Records of the Governor’s Office, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society, hereafter referred to as Governor’s Records.
28. Minutes, Promotion, Advanced Standing and Graduation Committee, August 8, 1938, University of Kansas Medical Center Archives.


"Our Schools Must Be Open to All Classes of Citizens"
For five years beginning in 1934, Donald S. Ferguson, an Atchison resident and graduate of the University of Kansas, was reportedly denied admission to the clinical training program at KU because of his race. His lawyer finally threatened to take supreme court action on behalf of his client, and Ferguson was admitted to the school in 1939.

I was happy. I was really very happy, but I didn’t know how it happened. I knew they really didn’t have any reason for excluding me, certainly not because of my grades—of course, they could make up reasons—but anyhow, actually I didn’t know what to think of the letter. I was going—I could make that. This is one thing that I have not really known up to the present time—I don’t know what happened that caused me to be able to get into the last years of medical school at that time.30

In September 1938 Williams began clinical coursework at the University of Kansas School of Medicine. He remembered his training as largely being without incident, saying: "All our patients were welfare, or those types of patients, white or black. So I was very satisfied with the material I was getting. . . . We were divided into groups of maybe six or eight, and when we went into a room to see a patient, regardless of the color, I could go in with them. Nothing was ever said or mentioned or anything indicated that was obnoxious."31

Upon graduation in 1941, Williams traveled to Chicago and interned at Northwestern University under the famous black dermatologist, Dr. T.K. Lawless. He then went into military service for four years during which he spent time at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, and at the Veterans Administration hospital in Tuskegee, Alabama. Once out of the service, and on the advice of a friend, Williams, only intending to stay two years, set up a temporary practice in internal medicine in Muskegon, Michigan, in 1946. This, however, turned into his life’s work, and Williams, retired since 1986, remains in Muskegon fifty years after first arriving there.32

Williams did not learn about Governor Huxman’s role in the desegregation issue until 1991 when he returned to the University of Kansas Medical Center for an exhibit and celebration honoring him on the fiftieth anniversary of his graduation.33 When Williams realized that Huxman’s intervention resulted in his acceptance to complete his medical education at the University of Kansas he disclosed:

30. Williams interview, 22.
31. Ibid., 17.
32. Ibid., 25–27.
33. While Williams always maintained that he was not aware of how he came to be admitted, some newspaper accounts say that he actually visited the governor to plead his case. See Topeka State Journal, July 15, 1938; Plaindealer, July 22, August 12, 1938. A report, however, dated August 4, 1939, from H.B. Wahl to E.M. Harris, chairman of the board of regents, states, "Last summer, the colored students made a concerted effort to get into the medical school, and used Donald Ferguson as their representative." Therefore, it is possible that Ferguson, rather than Williams, actually spoke with Huxman.
The biggest things I have heard has been rumors, and one of them was that my dad and my family physician in Ellsworth, Kansas, and my school superintendent [O.J. Silverwood] in Ellsworth, had been making contacts with the Governor of Kansas to get me admitted to the medical school. They had been talking with him and trying to persuade him. What the extent of that was, I don’t know. . . . And then there were rumors around Kansas City, Kansas, of a political possibility that some political group might have pressured somebody somewhere, but I don’t know anything about that. . . . I never did know and I never asked questions.  

Although the timely actions of Governor Huxman technically broke the established racial barrier during the summer of 1938, many social and cultural obstacles remained to black students seeking admission to the medical school. The dean of the medical school continued to deny Donald Ferguson’s petitions for admittance, insisting that he “would be the type to insist on being taken where white patients are.” Ferguson finally hired a lawyer who visited the state attorney general and threatened to take supreme court action. Eventually, at the insistence of the board of regents, Wahl relented and Ferguson finally was admitted for the 1939 fall semester.

As time passed and attitudes changed, increasing numbers of minority students applied and were accepted to the school of medicine. Since Edward Williams graduated in 1941, nearly one hundred African American physicians and numerous students of other minorities have received their medical degrees from the University of Kansas Medical Center.

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34. Williams interview, 22–23.
35. H.R. Wahl to F.M. Harris, August 4, 1939, Student Records.
36. Ibid.