

Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies at UCLA

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ADMISSIONS & OMISSIONS: HOW "THE NUMBERS" ARE USED TO EXCLUDE DESERVING STUDENTS 2005 - 2006 CAPAA FINDINGS

The admission of African American students to the University of California (UC) is once again the cause for grave concern. Over the last decade, a precipitous decline in African American admits has occurred in UC undergraduate admissions. The recent announcements for Fall 2006 show that the crisis continues as African Americans made minimal gains system-wide, representing only 3.4% of California freshman admit offers (UCOP, 2006a). This crisis worsens at the system's three most selective campuses, UC Berkeley, UCLA, and UC San Diego, where Fall 2006 African American freshman admit offers were a woeful 3.3%, 2.0%, and 1.9%, respectively. At UCLA and UC San Diego, the number of California African American offers for 2006 actually dropped from the previous academic year, with UCLA holding the dubious distinction of admitting the lowest number of California African American freshmen in the entire UC system - just 210 of the campus' 10,487 admitted California freshmen¹.

The paucity of African American admit offers becomes even more troubling when one considers that African American UC-eligible students more than doubled over the last decade. Between 1996 and 2003, the percentage of UC-eligible African American students rose from 2.8% to 6.2% (California Postsecondary Education Commission, May 2004). Furthermore, African American UC applicants increased 24% system-wide between 1995 and 2004. UCLA - which in recent years has consistently ranked near the bottom among the nine undergraduate UC campuses² when it comes to admitting California African American freshmen - also consistently received the greatest number of African American California freshmen student applications over the last decade (UCOP, 2004). In 2005, for example, the campus received 1,665 undergraduate applications from California African Americans, but admitted only 270 of the applicants (2.4% of its admitted class) (UCOP, 2005a). The concurrent rise in both of these factors, African American UC-eligible students and the number of African American applicants, suggests that the low African American admission rate at a campus like UCLA is hardly due to a limited applicant pool.

The magnitude of the crisis in African American admissions is further illustrated by the declining yield rate, or enrollment of students admitted, particularly at the most selective UC campuses. System-wide the yield rate for California African Americans has been a little less than 50% over the last several years (UCOP, 2004). For example, in Fall 2005 only 943 African American freshmen signed intents to register at UC campuses out of the 1,984 that were offered admission (47.5%)³. Even the system's most prestigious campuses have had difficulty in enrolling California African American students. Both UC Berkeley and UCLA post yield rates that ranged from 42% to 47% in recent years (see Chart 1). Meanwhile, UC San Diego's yield rate has ranged from a bleak 12% to 20% in the last five years (see Chart 1). In line with these lackluster trends in yield rates, only 1,117 African American freshman admits out of 37,168 freshmen systemwide intend to register for Fall 2006 (UCOP, 2006b). At the most selective campuses – UC Berkeley, UCLA, and UC San Diego – only 140, 96, and 52 African American freshman admits, respectively, intend to register for Fall 2006 (UCOP, 2006b).



Supported by a grant from the Ford Foundation, UCLA's Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies established The College Access Project for African Americans (CAPAA) in 2002 to examine the crisis of severe underrepresentation confronting African Americans in California's institutions of higher education. CAPAA stemmed from discussions at the Bunche Center that were concerned with the repeal of Affirmative Action in California's public institutions via the passage of SP 1 in 1995 and Proposition 209 in 1996, and the subsequent decline in African American admissions and enrollment in the UC system. Currently, CAPAA is conducting research to examine differences in the admissions review processes at each of the nine undergraduate, UC campuses. In response to the recent UC admissions announcement for Fall 2006, this report outlines the current status of African American access to the UC system. In addition, this report presents selected findings from an ongoing study of UC admissions practices. The goal of the larger study is to advance our knowledge about the specific practices that disadvantage African American students in the UC admissions process. On the basis of this knowledge, we aim to recommend viable strategies for remedying the persistent problems surrounding African American access to higher education in California and beyond.

UC Access and Educational Inequities for African Americans

Undoubtedly, two factors have contributed to the chronic underrepresentation of African Americans on UC campuses: 1) the inequities inherent in California's K-12 educational system, and 2) the demise of affirmative action through the implementation of policies SP-1 and SP-2 in 1995 and California Proposition 209 passed by voters in 1996. The impact of these factors on African Americans' access to higher education is described briefly below (for further detail, see Bunche Research Report, 2004).

California has the third largest black population among the states (about 2.4 million), with Los Angeles containing the second largest African American population (876,304) of all the nation's counties (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). Recently, nearly 6.3 million pupils attended California's K-12 educational system during the 2003-2004 school year, with enrollments consisting of approximately 8% African American, 46% Latino/a, 33% White, 11% Asian, and 1% American Indian (California Department of Education, 2005). More than 65% of California's public schools have student bodies where students of color are the majority of pupils. Indeed, 37% of African American students in California attend public schools where the enrollment is over 90% students of color (Rogers, J., Terriquez, V., Valladares, S., & Oakes, J., 2006).

The continuation of segregated schooling in California is coupled, particularly in innercity schools, with a lack of educational resources that help prepare students for college (Bunche Research Report, 2004, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Orfield, 2004; Orfield and Lee, 2006; Teranishi, Allen, & Solorzano, 2004). For example, the recent California Educational Opportunity Report (2006) found that almost all California high schools offer students less access to teachers and counselors than other high schools across the nation. And less than half of California high schools offer enough college preparatory classes for all students to complete a college eligible curriculum. For students attending severely segregated schools, conditions worsen. These schools are far more likely to experience overcrowding, receive less funding, and have a shortage of qualified teachers, counselors, and college preparatory classes (Rogers J. et al., 2006; Oakes, J., Rogers, J., Siler, D., Horng, E., & Goode, J., 2004; Solorzano & Ornelas, 2004). As a result, 43% of California's African American students do not graduate with a high school diploma (The Civil Rights Project, 2005), and just 6.2% of those who do graduate are UC eligible (California Postsecondary Commission, 2004).

While K-12 schooling inequities are clearly an important factor in blocking college access for African American students, the demise of affirmative action policies is also pivotal. The termination of affirmative action in admissions began with the UC Regents passing of SP-1 and SP-2 in 1995. Then in 1996, California Proposition 209 was implemented. SP-1/SP-2 and Proposition 209 prohibit both the use of racial preferences in admissions and discrimination against individuals on the basis of protected attributes like race or ethnicity. Since the implementation of Proposition 209, the admission of underrepresented minorities⁴ has declined dramatically in the UC system. African American students experienced the largest drop at the UC's most selective schools - UC Berkeley and UCLA - where African American admissions have plummeted 46% and 57%, respectively, since the demise of affirmation action polices a decade ago.

Adequately addressing California's K-12 inequities and repealing Proposition 209 would each greatly increase African American access to higher education. Eliminating either of these roadblocks, however, would undoubtedly require a long-term commitment of substantial financial resources and considerable political will. While it is essential that these recuperative efforts occur, the current crisis of African American admissions in the state also calls for an immediate, proactive movement *within* the University of California.

A rethinking of admissions policies and practices is essential if the UC system is to serve the citizens of California fairly and equally. As California's elite public educational institution, earning a degree from a UC campus positively impacts one's educational attainment and financial earning opportunities (Martin, Karabel, & Jaquez, 2003). The social mobility provided by this public good is integral to the mission of a tax-payer supported institution like the UC. Unfortunately, exclusionary admissions practices at many UC campuses have created cultural climates that prompt many of the most talented African American UC applicants to leave California and attend prestigious colleges elsewhere (top choices include Harvard, Princeton, and Yale). Moreover, the most competitive UC campuses regularly reject strong African American Students who are admitted to and enroll in more selective institutions elsewhere in the country. System wide, present admissions outcomes reflect negatively on the future of racial and ethnic equality in the state. Making changes in UC admissions policies would ensure that a decade of progress in diversifying campus learning environments and the state's pool of future leaders is not forsaken.

UC Admissions Project: Demystifying the Review Process

In an effort to identify viable correctives to the admissions policies and practices in effect throughout the UC system, we have begun to investigate the admissions review schemes at each of the nine undergraduate campuses. CAPAA is generally interested in determining how the different campuses implement UC guidelines for admission when reviewing student applications. Specifically, we examine how UC campuses operationalize their admissions philosophies, paying special attention to how each school defines "merit" and how readers identify it in any given applicant's profile. We are particularly interested in how these merit factors are considered by each campus in light of California applicants' vastly different (and unequal) K-12 schooling opportunities.

It is our hope that through this investigation we can determine which review factors most impact African American admissions to and enrollment in the UC system. Upon the completion of the project, CAPAA will issue a public policy report that documents the array of differences found in the admissions schemes at the various UC campuses. The report will include grades for how well each campus incorporates practices that support the enrollment of a diverse student body, given the unfortunate constraints imposed by Proposition 209.

Comprehensive Review

In Fall 2002, the University of California implemented a new admissions plan in which applicants would be evaluated by both academic and nonacademic criteria. This plan, named "comprehensive review," was designed for a selection process in which certain campuses received far more qualified undergraduate applicants than available freshman slots⁵. Comprehensive review permits each of these more selective campuses to draw upon 14 criteria for the admissions review. These factors include high school grade point average (GPA), standardized test scores, personal achievements, and life challenges (for a complete list of all criteria, see UCOP, Comprehensive Review). Although there is considerable variation among the UC campuses in how the different factors comprising comprehensive review are weighed, each campus aims to view its selection process, to some degree, within the context of applicants' opportunities and the challenges they have faced. Academic performance, it should be noted, greatly outweighs the other comprehensive review factors in each campus' admissions review process.

Eligibility vs. Selectivity

The distinction between eligibility and selectivity within the UC admissions process is often misunderstood. UC eligibility occurs when one meets the minimum requirements for admission into the University of California. There are three pathways that one can take to be considered UC eligible. The first, and most common, is via the statewide context plan. This pathway requires that students meet certain minimum requirements for coursework, grade point average, and test scores. The second possible pathway is through the eligibility in local context (ELC) plan. ELC allows students who rank in the top 4% of participating California high schools to become eligible to attend a UC school. The third pathway is through examination alone. Here, students who do not meet the requirements in the two previous eligibility pathways, may be considered if they achieve high enough test scores on the ACT or SAT reasoning tests and SAT subject tests. Meeting the eligibility requirements in any of these three pathways guarantees admission into the UC system. It does not, however, guarantee admission to the seven UC campuses - UC Berkeley, UC Davis, UC Irvine, UCLA, UC San Diego, UC Santa Barbara, and UC Santa Cruz – that employ a *selectivity* measure in their admissions process.

Selectivity refers to an additional set of criteria that competitive campuses employ to choose students for admission amongst all applicants who meet minimum UC eligibility requirements. As discussed above, these additional criteria are outlined in each campus's comprehensive review process. Although there is great transparency in how the university measures UC eligibility, it is far from transparent how each campus implements comprehensive review in order to set its selectivity standards. And the most selective UC campuses – UC Berkeley and UCLA – employ the admissions schemes most shrouded in mystery.

What is most mysterious about the admissions policies at UC Berkeley and UCLA is the process by which each campus weighs and balances the different factors comprising comprehensive review. As UC represents the elite tier of higher education in California, it is no surprise that academic achievement would constitute the main factor in all admissions system-wide. The specific selection mechanisms in place at each campus, however, must be questioned when we consider that the number of African American students who are UC eligible has more than doubled in recent years, while their admission to the campuses has plummeted. That is, we must question the "objectivity" or "neutrality" of admissions schemes that disproportionately reject so many of these talented students – particularly

when they *are* being admitted to selective universities across the nation.

Method

In order to flesh out the mechanisms comprising the comprehensive review process, we conducted both formal and informal interviews with various entities associated with the admissions process at each campus. These entities included admissions directors, admissions staff members, readers, and faculty representatives. Interview questions included (but were not limited to) the degree to which the campus in question considers academic achievement and supplemental factors within an applicant's schooling context, how formal weights or values are assigned to each factor in determining an applicant's read score or ranking, whether the selection process includes the full range of the eligibility pool, and what steps are taken to recruit admitted students. We also compiled and analyzed admissions documents from each campus, which gave us further insight into the nature of how comprehensive review was implemented by each school. For the purposes of this report, we limit our preliminary findings to the most selective UC campuses-UC San Diego, UCLA, and UC Berkeley.

Preliminary Findings

The common theme that runs through the admissions policies and practices at UC San Diego, UCLA, and UC Berkeley is the notion of selectivity. Each campus attempts to develop selection criteria that reflect a commitment to evaluating and admitting talented students throughout the full spectrum of the eligibility pool. Moreover, each campus acknowledges that academic merit can be demonstrated in a variety of ways and recognized in a range of different educational contexts. The campuses employ admissions schemes that operationalize these principles in strikingly different ways.

UC San Diego's scheme is the most formulaic. Campus officials rely upon an additive scale, which establishes a total of 11,100 possible admissions points, to rank each applicant on the basis of several comprehensive review factors (Table 1).

Meanwhile, UCLA employs an assemblyline-like scheme in which comprehensive review factors are scored independently, yet viewed together for the final admissions decision – what campus officials refer to as a "balancing approach to selection." That is, two admissions staff members read a given applicant's academic achievement profile, while another reader – typically a high school counselor, retired faculty member, or academic outreach member — reviews the applicant's personal achievement and life challenges profiles. The applicant is then assigned ranks for each of the three factors, which places him or her in a specific cell, along with other identically ranked applicants, in a three-dimensional admissions matrix. Decisions are then made regarding which *cells* or groups of applicants (as opposed to *individual applicants*) to admit.

UC Berkeley, by contrast, employs a more holistic admissions scheme. For a given applicant's file, a single reader is assigned to evaluate each of the comprehensive review factors, all within the context of one another. A second reader is typically

assigned to review files that are considered borderline.

Below, we take a closer look at how each campus evaluates the specific factors comprising comprehensive review.

Academic Achieve-Despite each ment. campus's consideration of other factors in comprehensive review, traditional academic achievement indicators - standardized test scores and GPA-remain the primary considerations that drive admissions at these highly selective campuses. For example, the maximum points allotted to academic achievement at UC San Diego (as measured

ing opportunities or other local context issues could ever level the "academic achievement" playing field within these admissions schemes. This concern is particularly salient for campuses like UCLA and UC San Diego, where academic achievement is determined independent of the other comprehensive review factors.

<u>Life Challenges.</u> UC San Diego's formula awards 300 points for students from disadvantaged

Academic Review	<u>Maximum Points</u>
Uncapped GPA	4500
Standardized Test Scores	3200
Beyond Minimum A-G Requirements	500
Additional Academic Factors	
Eligibility in the Local Context	300
Graduate of the 4th or 5thQuintile Sch∞l*	300
Socioeconomic Factors	
Low income	300
First-generation ∞ llege student	300
Personal Characteristics & Achievement F	Factors
Demonstrated leadership	300
Special talents/achievements	300
Community/volunteer services	300
Participation in academic prep programs	300
Personal challenges ^	500
N	

Table 1. Fall 2006 UC San Diego Freshman Selection Point Matrix

N= 11,100

*Disadvantaged schools that consist of students who have low high school completion rates, low college prep and AP enrollment, and low percentage admitted to CSU/UC

^ Include personal or family situations, work status, disabilities, veteran status, personal growth, and life altering event(s)

Data Source: University of California, San Diego, 2006

by "uncapped GPA"⁶, test scores, and "a-g" beyond the minimum specified by UC-eligibility) account for 74% of the 11,100 points possible in the campus's selection matrix (Table 1).

Similarly, UCLA establishes GPA and SAT cutoff points in order to define standard profiles for a series of achievement ranks to which applicants are assigned. While officials do not set the weights in advance, these numbers-driven achievement rankings clearly overwhelm the other comprehensive review factors considered in the admissions decision.

UC Berkeley also emphasizes GPA and SAT, but looks more closely at how applicants performed within the context of their high school, relying during the review upon a "read sheet" that summarizes key statistics about how the student compares to other students in his/her high school and how the high school compares to other high schools.

While we know that underserved students who lack access to AP courses are not afforded the extra GPA points that more privileged applicants amass (Solorzano, D. & Ornelas, A., 2002), it is unclear whether the consideration of limited schoolschooling environments (4th or 5th quintile), and 300 points for those who qualify for Eligibility in the Local Context (ELC). Taken together, the campus awards a maximum of 600 out of 11,100 possible points (5.4%) for schooling inequalities (Table 1).

At UCLA, the review and consideration of life challenges or local context consists of three domains: environmental, family, and personal situations. Included in the environmental situations component are factors related to limited curricular and advising opportunities, among others. According to UCLA admission officials, there is no specific emphasis on any of these factors, but rather a system of "checks and balances" that takes into account the sum of applicants' schooling experiences and their academic achievements in light of them.

By contrast, UC Berkeley's more holistic approach features a consideration of each applicant's entire file within the context of educational circumstances, the opportunities or challenges presented, and how s/he responded to them. But UC Berkeley's model, like UCLA's, does not clearly show whether the consideration given to the contextual factors actually works to adjust for the effects of socioeconomic inequalities on selectivity in any significant way — particularly given the enormous weight given to traditional achievement measures. While UC San Diego's review scheme appears to be more transparent in this regard, the weights the campus assigns to each category (possible points) seem somewhat arbitrary, not to mention insufficient in the case of important contextual factors.

Personal Accomplishments. The review and consideration of personal accomplishments at each campus closely follows the evaluation of life challenges. UC San Diego awards a maximum of 1200 points for leadership skills, special talents or achievements, community and volunteer services, and participation in academic preparation programs (Table 1). Concurrently, applicants receive a maximum of 300 points for the consideration of low income and family size and 300 points for first-generation college attendance, while personal challenges7 are granted a maximum of 500 points. This suggests that personal accomplishments and socioeconomic factors/life challenges account for a maximum of 11% and 10%, respectively, of the selection criteria at UC San Diego.

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In UCLA's selection scheme, personal achievement includes (but is not limited to) awards/ honors, extracurricular activities, employment, and community service. Most of these items are numerically scored in advance of a given applicant's formal review, wherein a volunteer reader consults the applicant's written essays to either add to or detract from the initial scores.

UC Berkeley's review of an applicant's personal achievements, following its more holistic admissions scheme, is conducted within the context of the applicant's entire file. The personal achievement items reviewed by the campus mirror those considered by the other campuses.

It is also worth noting that UC Berkeley and UC San Diego officials reported that they actively recruit readers each year from various backgrounds in an attempt to achieve a diverse pool of readers, while UCLA officials indicated that they have no active recruitment process and actually prefer minimal readership change each year - in order to maintain "consistency." The implications of these choices are significant. UCLA's approach to reader selection results in a recycling of the same readers and their biases, which is particularly troubling given the relatively high concentration of volunteers from private schools in the campus's reader pool. UC Berkeley and San Diego, by contrast, employ a more "open" reader recruitment policy that has the potential to minimize this type of reader bias over time.

In sum, equating academic "merit" primarily with GPA and test scores is the common admissions practice shared by UC San Diego, UCLA, and UC Berkeley. Each campus embraces these numbers as valid, reliable, and unbiased indicators of academic achievement. Accordingly, the numbers are used in each campus's admissions scheme to justify the increasingly fine distinctions made between the UC eligible students who are accepted and those who are rejected. When other factors like personal achievement and life challenges are taken into account, they appear to be weighted insufficiently for leveling the uneven playing field of K-12 inequities and other disparities in local context. This point is particularly true for UC San Diego, which awards so few points for these other factors, and UCLA, which determines academic achievement completely independent of them.

Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

In recent years, UC admissions policies incorporated the idea of comprehensive review for the expressed purpose of evaluating applicants within the context of their personal and educational circumstances. Yet the proportions of disadvantaged students admitted to UC's most selective campuses have continued to spiral downward. While the mission of the UC emphasizes the importance of a diverse student population, we are not convinced that the existing comprehensive review schemes are up to the task. Indeed, we have identified several defects in these admissions schemes that systematically penalize UC-eligible African Americans and other underrepresented minorities who confront K-12 disparities and other challenges and, yet, still manage to achieve.

In the final analysis, the selectivity measures used to admit students to UC's most prestigious campuses comprise expedient schemes for justifying the allocation of admission slots when the demand of deserving students greatly exceeds the supply. Rising standards that have little correlation to actual academic success are continually used to inflate what is meant by "merit" and to make fine distinctions of questionable validity between deserving students. The same numbers game that drives UCLA, for example, to proclaim that the academic records of its admitted freshmen "got stronger8" in 2006 an overall grade point average "increase" of .02 points – continues to motivate these campuses' over-reliance on SAT scores for weeding out applicants. The objectivity and fairness of schemes "based on the numbers" is taken for granted by campus officials, despite studies (e.g., Bowen & Bok, 1998; Lempert, Chambers, & Adams, 2000; Orfield & Miller, 1998; University of Michigan Admissions Lawsuits, 1999, "Claude Steele" section) suggesting

that numerical indicators of "merit" (particularly SAT scores and weighted GPAs) should be interpreted with caution.

Meanwhile, other comprehensive review factors (i.e., personal achievements and life challenges) are accorded marginal roles in selecting the "well-rounded" students the campuses claim to seek. While hardly virtuous, these allocation schemes would be much less objectionable if they did not have such a disproportionate and disastrous impact on deserving underrepresented minorities. Indeed, a lottery scheme that randomly selects students within some reasonable achievement range might be fairer, as well as more intellectually honest.

Our core challenge, of course, is identifying a fairer process by which to determine academic "merit" when the environment is highly competitive and the playing field is far from level. Defining merit primarily in terms of GPA and standardized test scores neglects a host of other factors that contribute to academic achievement (Chang, M., Witt, D., Jones, J., & Hakuta, K., 2003). We must define "merit" more broadly. We must devise and employ admissions schemes based on this more comprehensive definition - schemes equal to the task of ensuring real opportunity for all students, not just the privileged. Such a scheme, like UC Berkeley's holistic approach, would consider a given applicant's academic and other achievements within the con*text* of his or her array of personal challenges. But it would improve upon Berkeley's scheme by considering a broader range of academic indicators that are not applied with misplaced precision. It would be complemented by more inclusive reader selection practices, as well as vigorous student outreach and recruitment efforts.

At critical junctures, the basic principles of fairness and equity have been omitted from UC admissions schemes. Researchers and admissions officials must collaborate in an urgent, honest effort to identify and validate new admissions models that restore the centrality of these important principles. The University of California's chance to make good on its promise hangs in the balance. Authors Eddie Comeaux and Tara Watford Research Coordinator Ana-Christina Ramon Editor Darnell Hunt

Notes

¹ In comparison, UC Berkeley admitted 288 African Americans out of 8,637 California freshmen and UC San Diego admitted 335 African Americans out of 18,079 California freshmen.

² There are a total of 10 UC campuses. However, UC San Francisco (UCSF) does not enroll undergraduates. Thus, we will only discuss the undergraduate admissions process at the other nine UC campuses (UC Berkeley, UC Davis, UC Irvine, UCLA, UC Merced, UC Riverside, UC San Diego, and UC Santa Barbara) throughout this report.

³The latest data from UCOP (2005a) shows that UC system-wide yield rates for African Americans are somewhat similar to other racial/ ethnic groups. As such, 45.4% of American Indian, 52% of Latina/o, 64.9% of Asian, and 47.1% of White students who were admitted in the Fall of 2005 stated they intended to enroll. However, such a low yield rate is particularly a problem for the representation of African Americans on UC campuses because their admitted numbers are so low.

⁴ Underrepresented minority students include African Americans, Latinas/os, and Native Americans. Although, many Asian groups are overrepresented in college admissions in California, it is important to note that not all Asian nationalities/ethnicities are well-represented. For more information on the representation of different Asian nationalities in the UC system, see UCOP, 2005b.

⁵ All UC campuses, with the exception of UC Riverside and UC Merced, utilize the comprehensive review to aid in the selection of admits from their UC-eligible applicant pool. UC Riverside and UC Merced admit all students who meet UC eligible requirements. UC Berkeley and UCLA have the most stringent admission criteria among the UC campuses.

⁶ By "uncapped GPA," UC San Diego means grade point averages that include extra points earned for honors and advanced placement courses (maximum of 8), which may result in GPAs that greatly exceed 4.0. ⁷ Includes personal or family situations, single parent household, per-

⁸ University of California, Los Angeles (April 19, 2006). Press Release:

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About the Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies

Established in 1969 as an organized research unit (ORU) of the University of California, Los Angeles, the Ralph J. Bunche Center is one of the oldest centers in the nation devoted to the study of African American life, history, and culture. For more information, please visit www.bunchecenter.ucla.edu.

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