Interview with **Charles Epps**
Date: April 30, 1989
Interviewer: Sam Pollard
Camera Rolls: 2120-2124
Sound Rolls: 256-258
Team: C

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**Note:** These transcripts contain material that did not appear in the final program. Only text appearing in ***bold italics*** was used in the final version of *Eyes on the Prize II*.

[camera roll #2120]
[sound roll #256]

Camera Crew Member #1:

[inaudible]. Hit it.

[slate]

00:00:25:00

Interviewer:

Dean Epps, yo—tell me about when you first came to Howard and sort of establish the school for me as an institution of excellence.

Dr. Charles Epps:

Well, it was referred to, as you know, as the—

Interviewer:

You need to say, "When I first came to Howard…"

Dr. Charles Epps:

Oh, yes. When I first came to Howard, as you may know, it was referred to as the…

Interviewer:

You can't say, “As I may know,” because no one will know I’m here.

Dr. Charles Epps:

Oh, all right. OK.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

00:00:45:00

Dr. Charles Epps:

When I came to Howard in 1947, it was considered the capstone of Negro education. There were many outstanding people there. To name just a few, there was Charles Drew in medicine, Alan Locke in philosophy, Frank Snowden in classics, Sterling Brown in English, and many other people like that. John Hope Franklin in history. So, it was a campus rich with tradition and a very keen academic atmosphere.

00:01:19:00

Interviewer:

How did you feel? I mean, how did you feel being on the, on a campus like this?

00:01:23:00

Dr. Charles Epps:

Well, I, I, I, I felt very happy being on the campus in that time. It was a, it was a happy time. It was before the Korean War. And it was very pleasant. It was a very warm, caring atmosphere.

00:01:39:00

Interviewer:

Let’s cut a second.

00:01:40:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

I need to [inaudible]

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #2:

This is take two. [truck passes]

Interviewer:

[unintelligible]

Dr. Charles Epps:

Oh.

00:01:53:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK.

[slate]

00:01:55:00

Interviewer:

Dean Epps, tell me again about when you first came to Howard and about the school as an institution of excellence [car horn] and some of the leaders. Who were people who were the well-respected teachers?

00:02:06:00

Dr. Charles Epps:

Well, when I came to Howard in 1947, there were many outstanding people there on the faculty. And to name just a few, in medicine, there was Charles Drew. In the school of law, there was James Nabrit, who had been one of the leaders who'd helped draft the famous very important civil rights legislation. And in the undergraduate school, there was Frank Snowden, who was in classics. John Hope Franklin in history. Sterling Brown in English. Lloyd Ferguson in chemistry. Herman Branson in physics. These were all people who had national reputations and were eminently qualified in their own fields.

00:02:48:00

Interviewer:

How did you feel about being in this kinda, kinda atmosphere?

00:02:51:00

Dr. Charles Epps:

Well, I felt very happy to be apart of it, and I, I felt that I would be able to get a first-class education there. And I did.

00:03:00:00

Interviewer:

Let's cut a second. I need to ask you one question.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Rolling.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Rolling.

Camera Crew Member #2:

I want you to hold it for ten seconds. This is take three.

00:03:14:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK.

[slate]

00:03:16:00

Interviewer:

So, Dean Epps, tell me about Howard, you know, as the capstone of, of Black education, about the prominent leaders and what they had done in this country for Black people, and how it made you feel when you first got there.

00:03:32:00

Dr. Charles Epps:

Well, when I came to Howard University in 1947, it was regarded by people all over the country as the capstone of Negro education. There had been many people who had graduated from Howard since it was started in 1867. And these people had contributed significantly to the life of the country and of course to the Negro race. There was still many outstanding people on the faculty then, in that time. And to name just a few, there was, in medicine, there was Charles Drew. In physics, Herman Branson. In chemistry, there was Lloyd Ferguson, and Percy Julian had been a member of the faculty there. In English, there was Sterling Brown. In history, Rayford Logan and John Hope Franklin. In law, there was James Nabrit, who later became president. Of course at that time, Mordecai Johnson was president. But these were all people who had sig—played a significant role in the life of the university but in the life of the country as well. And so it made me feel very proud to be a, a member of that academic community, and it afforded me an opportunity to get a first-class education from teachers who were revered not only by their students but who were recognized as authorities by the nation at large.

00:04:52:00

Interviewer:

Wonderful. [laughs] Good. Let's cut. Very good. Very good.

[beep]

[cut]

[wild sound]

Interviewer:

[unintelligible]

Dr. Charles Epps:

I was visiting Professor there over at [unintelligible] fifteen years ago.

00:05:02:00
Camera Crew Member #2:

Five, four, three, two, one.

Camera Crew Member #1:

[inaudible]

[picture resumes]

Camera Crew Member #2:

[Inaudible] for ten. This is take four.

[slate]

Interviewer:

You ready?

00:05:19:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Ready.

00:05:21:00

Interviewer:

Dean Epps, what was your reaction to some of the students who wanted to abolish the ROTC program at Howard University in ’67, ’68?

00:05:21:00

Dr. Charles Epps:

Well, when the students wanted to abolish the ROTC program in, in the late '60s, that is around ’67, ’68, I felt it was an unfortunate action on their part for several reasons. First of all, ROTC traditionally had been the best means by which Blacks had been able to enter the officers’ corps in the army and in the air force, to some extent in the navy. Whether it was schools that had naval programs. As a child, I remember very well in World War Two, Blacks were allowed only to be in the quarter master corps in the army. They were stewards in the navy. And there, as far as I recall, there were none in the marines. And there were no, no pilots in the, in the air force except for those that were in the 99th and those divisions that trained in, in Tuskegee. But Blacks who obtained the second lieutenants commission through the ROTC units in the Black colleges had an entre into the officers’ corps in the military.

And in fact in my own class, which was the class of '51, I can think of at least two men immediately who became generals, and they went into service in '51 and continued, oh, for twenty years or more. But they rose through the ranks to the, to become generals. Now, this would have been possible only through Annapolis or West Point where of course the, the opportunities were limited. But many men were able to achieve officer rank through the colleges where there were ROTC programs. So, I, I think at the, that was a very short-sighted effort on their part. And, but it's un-understandable in view of the tenor the times.

00:07:17:00

Interviewer:

OK, thank you. Great.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Cut?

Interviewer:

Yeah.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK, rolling. [pause] OK.

[slate]

00:07:33:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

This is take five.

00:07:35:00

Interviewer:

In '68 when the students took over the A building, what one of their demands was that the, they want Howard to become a Black university. And how did you react to that? Wasn't Howard already a Black university? What was your reaction to what they were saying?

Dr. Charles Epps:

When the students wanted to, when the students took over the building in 1968, '69, and wanted to—

Interviewer:

Oh, it was '68 we're dealing with.

00:07:56:00

Dr. Charles Epps:

Yeah, yeah. When the students…OK. When the undergraduate students took over the administration building in 1968 and voiced as one of their concerns that Howard become a Black university, I found something incongruous about that. In fact, paradoxical because Howard had always been a Black university. We say predominantly Black, but the fact of the matter was that it was Black. In my class of 1,500 students, there was one White student. So, there was no fact, there was no question about it being Black. But it had a long tradition of training Black leaders in this country. ***And it was for all practical purposes a Black university. Now, I don't know how it could have been more Black, and I'm not sure what they were trying to say. But Howard provided a mainstream education, which prepared people to be competitive in every field. I don't recognize, and I don't think the world recognizes that there is any Black physics. There is no Black engineering. There is no Black medicine. So, that the, the, the mission of the university was to train students to be competitive and competent in whatever field.*** And, and I'm not sure what they were trying to say. But there was no such thing as Howard becoming more Black than it was. It was a, a Black, predominantly Black university.

00:09:12:00

Interviewer:

What about the students' charges that the curriculum wasn't focused, you know, on sort of giving them an understanding of their ancestry and their history? There was only one Black his—one Black course, you know, in the school. What was your, what was your, what, what, was your reaction to that?

00:09:24:00

Dr. Charles Epps:

Well, you know, I learned about, I learned about Black history as a, as a student in my high school. It was unfortunate that we had to do it that way, but they always had Negro history week in, in, in high school when the whole school system literally stopped everything else and concentrated on Black history. And so I learned about Paul Laurence Dunbar, and Marian Anderson, and Roland Hayes, [car horn] Paul Robeson, and people like that when I was in, in, in high school and junior high school. I don't know…and so I felt comfortable

about my heritage when I came to college. I did take a course, by the way, from Professor Leo Hansberry about Africa, which I found very interesting. But my mission there was to do, become a, a [truck passes] doctor. And I, I needed the, the, the sciences and the… to prepare myself for medicine. I, I, I, I think that the, there's an opportunity for those who wish to take courses about Black history could do that. But I think the major mission of the university is to prepare you for your life's work. And if there's an opportunity to take these other courses as an elective, I think that's sufficient. There was a great interest in this kind of activity for a number of years, as you may know. And what happened, of course, was that many universities sort of geared up and produced courses in Black, in Black history. But there was no real market for people who majored in Black history. I'm not sure what they're doing now. But that was a fad that passed. I think it's important to, to know our history and to understand it, but I don't think we need to, to subvert or amend the basic themes of our programs to the point that, that—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Dr. Charles Epps:

—they're compromised.

00:11:14:00

Interviewer:

Let's cut.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Run out.

[beep]

Interviewer:

Thank you. That was good, that was good.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Roll out.

[cut]

[camera roll #2121]

Interviewer:

The request was for a Black studies program—

Dr. Charles Epps:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer:

—and how important did you think the so called—

Camera Crew Member #2:

Five, four, three [inaudible]

Interviewer:

—Black [unintelligible] was. This is—

Dr. Charles Epps:

Mm-hmm.

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK.

[slate]

Camera Crew Member #2:

This is take six. Roll camera.

Interviewer:

You ready?

00:11:45:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Yeah.

00:11:47:00

Interviewer:

Dean Epps, in the students' demands, they were talking about having a Black studies program. What did you think of this idea of a so-called Black curriculum [car horn] at Howard?

00:11:57:00

Dr. Charles Epps:

Well, with regard to their request for a Black curriculum, I really don't think very much about that because I, I don't see the, the, the practical application of that. The curriculum should be, I think, standard depending upon your occ—your vocational aspirations. To give a good example, there was a movement afoot at one time where the students were demanding Swahili in the high schools, for example. They wanted to be taught Swahili to speak. And that, that seemed to me to be a rather useless ambition because they needed to learn English. I had an a—when I was in practice, I used to hire high school students from Washington to, to work in my office. And their skills and, with English and in mathematics were, were poor. And some of them, I couldn't use because they [car passes] could not handle the English properly, and they, their mathematical skills were very poor. So, you know, be, before we learn Swahili, we should learn English, and mathematics, and history. The basic skills. I think that would be fine as an extra course for those who have the time and the ability, but as a, as one of the main courses, I think, I think not. I think the same would apply to, to students in college. I think the…you're there with a mission, and the mission is to prepare yourself. And I think the Black, the Black studies would be good as, as a, as an elective but not for your main course of study. There is, you can't market yourself with just Black studies. You need to study engineering, architecture, history, English, math, you know, something that leads to a, a vocation and an ability to earn a living.

00:13:54:00

Interviewer:

So, there's, many of the students were saying there was only—

Camera Crew Member #2:

Sorry, we have this truck, I—

Interviewer:

Let's cut a second.

[beep]

[cut]

00:14:01:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Hold. [pause]

[slate]

00:14:14:00

Interviewer:

Dean Epps, I'm gonna ask you again. The students, one of their demands was a request for Black studies. I mean, how important did you think a so-called Black curriculum was?

00:14:24:00

Dr. Charles Epps:

Well, the students did in-incorporate as part of their demands Black studies. I think that Black studies would be important for, for Black students as an elective so they could learn more about themselves and about their heritage. I think one of the tragedies of the, of, of slavery was that we were completely cut off from our, our heritage and roots in that regard. But I think that you have to be more pragmatic in today's world and realize that while that information is good to know, and I have personally enjoyed reading about Black heritage, I think it's more important to focus on why you're there in college. And that is to prepare yourself to earn a living. You're focusing toward a, a professional school or a degree in the undergraduate school. So, I think that the, the, the basic curriculum is the much more important thing and that the Black studies would [car horn] be something that you would take as an elective but not the major focus of one's study.

00:15:21:00

Interviewer:

What about this example, I mean the analogy you used of Swahili…

00:15:25:00

Dr. Charles Epps:

Well, there was at one time a demand by the, the high school students in Washington, there was a great interest in Swahili. They wanted to incorporate it in, in the curriculum. And there was some students at Howard who wanted it also, but I had difficulty finding summer students, stu-students to work in my office during the summer who could use English

properly and who could count accurately. So, the English and mathematics, you see, would be in my estimation much more useful than Swahili so that I wouldn't want to see Swahili become a second language until they had mastered English first. That's the language that they need. When you go out to hire a secretary, you want a secretary to be able to handle English properly. And that's a problem in getting a good secretary. And anybody who has tried to hire one today knows that. And if you want an accountant, you want someone who can handle the figures properly, not someone who can speak, speak Swahili. So, so, I think that would be a, a low priority and only after you had mastered the, the essentials. In other words, the reading, writing, and arithmetic. Let's have that first, and then the other things can come.

00:16:34:00

Interviewer:

OK, cut. Thank you. Thank you, very—

[beep]

[cut]

[wild sound]

Interviewer:

—too concerned with the classics. You know, too concerned with Greek history, [truck passes] Greek literature, you know, to, to be able to be in sync with, you know, with the, some of the students on the campus. I mean, what was your reaction to, to the charges against President Nabrit and Dean Snowden? You can say each one separately.

Dr. Charles Epps:

OK. Can I also—let me ask a question.

Interviewer:

[unintelligible]

[slate]

Dr. Charles Epps:

Can I also tie that in with Cheek today? Because they had the same—

Interviewer:

No.

Dr. Charles Epps:

You don’t want to go, you don’t want to go that far. OK.

Interviewer:

No, too far.

Dr. Charles Epps:

OK.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Any time.

Dr. Charles Epps:

Among the students’ demands in 1968—

Camera Crew Member #2:

We’ve got the bus outside. I’m sorry.

Interviewer:

Let’s just cut. Sorry.

Dr. Charles Epps:

Mm-hmm.

[beep]

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #2:

This is take nine. [car horn]

00:17:26:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK.

[slate]

00:17:29:00

Interviewer:

Dean Epps, the students had targeted President Nabrit and Dean Snowden as symbols of people who they felt should resign from the campus. What was your reaction? What was the reaction from faculty to these charges?

00:17:41:00

Dr. Charles Epps:

Yes, I was aware that the, the students in 1968 were demanding that President James Nabrit and Dean Frank Snowden resign. In fact they said immediately. I think I share the views of most of the faculty that, first of all, it is not the business of students to select or appoint faculty, and certainly not to appoint or select the president of the university. And Doctor Nabrit has, has an outstanding record as, as an, as an attorney and a civil rights litigator before he became president. And I think he managed the university well during his tenure. Frank Snowden is…was and is an outstanding scholar of classics. And while they may not have enjoyed classics [car horn] certainly as much as he would have liked, you have to respect him for his accomplishments in the field. He represents a, a school of, of endeavor that has persisted for four thousand years. And if you ever had the chance to talk to him, he exudes enthusiasm about, about classics. [car horn] Now, that would be in sharp conflict with their, for example their request for Black studies. But I think you have to balance that, and they should judge Snowden on his ability to manage the College of Liberal Arts rather than the fact that he was a classicist.

00:19:09:00

Interviewer:

What did Snowden give them that, that they felt wasn't necessary? What, what did you think he gave that was important?

Dr. Charles Epps:

Well, I'm, I'm sure he gave them, that he gave—

Interviewer:

Just say Dean—excuse me—

00:19:19:00

Dr. Charles Epps:

Yeah, yeah. I'm sure that Dean Snowden gave effective management of the, of the college, and that was his primary, primary task. I, I, frankly I never really understood why they were so opposed to him during that era.

00:19:35:00

Interviewer:

Let's cut a second.

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK, could you say, "I'm sure."

Dr. Charles Epps:

I'm sure.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Yeah.

Dr. Charles Epps:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

Just say that, "I'm sure the dean… "

Dr. Charles Epps:

Oh, I'm sure that…

Female:

That's good. I just needed the "sure."

Dr. Charles Epps:

[laughs]

[beep]

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #2

Take nine.

[cut]

[sound roll #257]

Interviewer:

I think it's a little hot.

Dr. Charles Epps:

It's not too bad.

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK.

[slate]

00:19:59:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

This is take ten.

00:20:02:00

Interviewer:

Dean Epps, the students focused on, on Dean Snowden as, with the charge that he was too classically oriented, and he wasn't in sync with what they were sort of desiring, that they needed, what they felt Howard should be symbolic of. I mean, what was your reaction to that? You had been one of Dean Snowden's students. Tell me, tell me about what was your reaction to the students.

00:20:23:00

Dr. Charles Epps:

Yes, I had been a student of Frank Snowden, and I, he was a brilliant man who had an amazing command of classics. He lectured with great enthusiasm and insight. His classes were fascinating. Of course that would be in sharp contrast to what they were [truck passes], what they seemed to have wanted, which was emphasis on Black studies or the immediate concerns of Black people. And while I think the university has a, has a role in trying to further the cause of, of Black people in general and producing Black leaders, we can't model the, the curriculum necessarily in that direction. The university has a mission of preparing people to take their roles in society. Training engineers, physicians, teachers, you see. And I think the students were sort of overboard with the, with the, the Black studies business. That made them in sharp contrast. Now, I think as someone who has reached this age and, and maturity, it makes it possible to understand what the students' problem was. First of all, they're 20, 21, maybe 22 year old. And if you know, young people at that age are supremely confident of their own knowledge. They, while they have no doubts about their own abilities and knowledge, they question everybody else. Particularly individuals over thirty. So, that would make them have questions about their, their own parents sometimes and of course the faculty, and the deans, and the president. I think as a, as a, a mature individual I can look back and understand that because they are not only overconfident about their own abilities, but they want change immediately. They, they don't have patience. They don't have tolerance about these things. Very typically. You see, when they issued their demands, they wanted all these things to take place within three weeks. That was part of their, their demands. And when one gets older, you know things don't happen like that. There's this whole story about the son who was amazed that his father had learned so much between the time when he was twenty and when he became—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Dr. Charles Epps:

—forty-five. He could understand his father a lot better. It's that same sort of thing.

00:22:47:00

Interviewer:

OK.

00:22:50:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Roll is out.

[beep]

[cut]

[camera roll #2022]

[slate]

00:23:04:00

Interviewer:

Students had a very strong reaction to Dean Snowden. They said he was too classically oriented. And, I mean, if I was one of those students, I would wonder what did studying the classics have to do with me being a better physician or being a better accountant. I mean, why was it less…not as important? Why wasn't Black studies just as important?

00:23:22:00

Dr. Charles Epps:

Well, there was a great objection to Doctor Snowden because of his emphasis on classics. But you must realize that he was, a classical scholar. But that's just one aspect of a, of a broad education, which is what one is supposed to get in a college of liberal arts. You should get classics, the humanities. [bus passes] You should get the social, social sciences. But you also get biological sciences. And it seems that they were asking for emphasis on the Black studies beyond what its proper role should be. You know, there is no Black economics. It's economics. There is no Black history. [car horn] Except that the history of Black people would be a part of history. There is no Black mathematics. There is no Black medicine. There is medicine. And the mission of the university is to train people to function in that area for which they are…in which they're studying. And I think that the, the, the students in that respect were overzealous in their efforts to institute what they thought were appropriate changes in the curriculum. At least from the, the point of view of the emphasis that they wanted put on these things. But that is the, really the key of a liberal arts education. That you learn a lot about a lot of different things. And classics are certainly apart of that. You know, history repeats itself. And if you, when you think that you've discovered a new thought, if you go back far enough you'll find that somebody else has had it before. And there are lots of lessons to be learned from classics that will reflect on what's happening with us today.

00:24:53:00

Interviewer:

When you were watching the, the, the student take over on television, I mean, what was your sense? What did you feel? Did you think that for any, for one moment that the school could fall apart, [car horn] and things could fall apart at Howard University? That the polarization would be so great that the school would never be able to continue?

00:25:10:00

Dr. Charles Epps:

No. When I watched the, the student take over, I thought it was unfortunate that they were wasting a lot of time that would have been better spent in the study halls, in the library, or in the classroom. And I realized also that in three years, [car horn] none of those students who were, who were the instigators of that strike would, would be there. That…and, you know, in, in four years the student population turns over. And the leaders of that strike would pass on to other things. The university has to persist. It's been there now 122 years. And no matter what happens in any one particular year, the institution has to, has to survive and, and goes on. And it did. And the university survived that, that '68 period very well, intact. And as a matter of fact, I think it came out even stronger than it was before because there was good out of the, out of this. It wasn't all bad. It was good. The students and the faculty did develop better communication, and administration, too. So that those three entities had a better means of communication after this, after the strike than they did before.

00:26:16:00

Interviewer:

I'm gonna ask you that question again. Let's cut. But I, I can't have you go past after the—

[beep]

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Go ahead. This is take twelve.

00:26:31:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:26:34:00

Interviewer:

Dean Epps, watching the, the takeover on television. I mean for, at any time, at any time did you think that the school was gonna be so polarized that it would just, everything would just

fall apart at Howard, that there would be no Howard no more? I mean, what was your reaction?

00:26:50:00

Dr. Charles Epps:

Well, as I watched the, the strike on television, I, I was very concerned about it in the sense that I thought there was a lot of energy and time being wasted. I think the students would have been much better served if they had put their energy into the classroom, into the study hall, into their books. But in either case, I believe that as a result of that, there was better communication among the students, the faculty, and the administration so that there was something positive that, that evolved. [buzzer sounds]

00:27:25:00

Interviewer:

Let's cut.

[cut]

00:27:25:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

This is gonna be take thirteen. Came—sound is still rolling.

[slate]

00:27:36:00

Interviewer:

Di-did—was there a concern that the student takeover might affect [truck passes] you know, federal appropriations that were crucial [car horn] to, to Howard's survival?

Dr. Charles Epps:

Well, the, I think that there may have been some concern that they would, that, that the student takeover would adversely affect it. But—

Interviewer:

Would you include the federal appropriations in your answer.

00:27:59:00

Dr. Charles Epps:

Yes. There was some concern that the student strike might adversely affect the federal appropriate, as well as contribution from alumni and friends. I think time has shown that that was not the case. But while we were very concerned about it, I think that the federal government could see that these things happened. As a matter of fact, as the same time there were takeovers going on at almost all of the schools in the country or at least in many of the schools in the country. So, it was a, almost a universal problem with, with student bodies. It wasn't just our own problem alone. But…in, in fact in some schools, there was violence and great damage to property. At Howard, there was no serious damage to property. Students were very circumspect in that, in that regard. They, when they occupied the building, they only occupied the, the public areas. [car horn] They did not go into any of the private offices. And while the university was not operative because the switch board couldn't function, and no one could get into the business offices, the administration building survived that takeover intact.

00:29:09:00

Interviewer:

OK, let's cut. Just give me one second.

Dr. Charles Epps:

Mm-hmm.

[beep]

[cut]

00:29:12:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

This is take fourteen.

[slate]

00:29:24:00

Interviewer:

Dean Epps, [car horn] tell me about how Howard University is the, is the school of excellence. And if you could talk about some of the, those you know, you know, important

professors who had ben to the school, come out of the school, what they had contributed to society, and how you felt about going there.

00:29:40:00

Dr. Charles Epps:

Yeah. Well, when I went to Howard in 1947, there were a number of men on the campus and women who were very outstanding in their own fields and revered on the, on the campus and recognized nationally as significant contributors to their fields. For example, there was Sterling Brown, who was a professor of English and a, a poet whose works were very highly regarded. [car horn] John Hope Franklin in the department of history was considered to be preeminent in his field. Very highly regarded as well. In, in medicine, there was Charles Drew, [car passes] who had been instrumental in the discovery of blood plasma in World War Two and had returned as a professor of, of, of surgery and head of the Freedman's Hospital as surgeon and chief. Then there was also James Nabrit, who was one of the outstanding law professors. Doctor Nabrit had been very instrumental in preparing the, the briefs that led to [car horn] the major civil rights battle. A lot of that work was done by the law faculty and even the law students assisted in that effort. But Doctor Nabrit was extremely important in that entire effort. Well, people like that gave the university an image of importance and significance to, to Black Americans and to the whole country. And it gave one a feeling of, of comfort and pride to be a part of a campus that had people like that working there every day.

00:31:24:00

Interviewer:

That's very good. Thank you. Let's cut. It was very good. Very good.

[beep]

[cut]

[wild sound]

Dr. Charles Epps:

It was a dry run. [laughs]

Interviewer:

[laughs]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Five, four, three, two, one. Go ahead.

[picture resumes]

Camera Crew Member #2:

[car horn] This is take fifteen. [car horn]

00:31:45:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Go.

[slate]

00:31:48:00

Interviewer:

Dean Epps, I mean, students were saying there was only one Negro history course, and they wanted more. I mean, if I was a student, and I said, you know, I felt [car horn] it was important to know about my heritage, much like an Italian American or a Greek American, and that's why I felt I needed more than one course to understand it, what would you see—say? What would your reaction be?

Dr. Charles Epps:

Well, what, what I would say to them is that they—

Interviewer:

[unintelligible]

Dr. Charles Epps:

What, what I would say to the student who was asking for—

Female:

Sorry. Could you start over?

00:32:14:00

Dr. Charles Epps:

Yes. Yeah. I, I think what I would say to the student who is asking for more Black studies in the context of, of what happened in 1968 is this, that they should not lose sight on their primary objective, which is to get an education to prepare themselves to take their role in life. Whether they're an engineer, a physician, a dentist, or whatever. And that they, one or two introductory courses should be sufficient. Because in a university, what one does is stimulate the, the individual. There's a library there with countless books, and he can explore that to his own satisfaction and as deeply as he wishes to. But we should not have an overbalance there so that you would lose sight on your basic objective. In other words, if you're there as an engineer then you need to master the, the curriculum so that when you're finished in four years, you become an engineer with marketable skills and abilities so that you can go out and get a job for General Electric or anyone. The, the Black studies would be a good elective so that you could enrich your college experience through that. And if you are stimulated to learn more about it then having learned the basic skills of self-study in the university, you could go on and explore that to your own satisfaction. But I…what I interpret the students as—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Dr. Charles Epps:

—asking for was a greater emphasis, one that was inappropriately heavy in Black studies as opposed to [siren] something that would be a basic introduction.

[Siren]

00:33:49:00

Interviewer:

We ran out.

Camera Crew Member #1:

I ran out, yeah.

Dr. Charles Epps:

Oh.

Female:

Hear an alarm at the end of it.

[beep]

[cut]

[camera roll #2023]

Female:

OK, roll. This is take sixteen. Camera roll twenty-one, twenty-three.

00:34:02:00

Camera Crew Member #1

Mark it.

[slate]

00:34:08:00

Interviewer:

Dean Epps, some of the students were saying there was only one Negro history course at the school. Do you think more, more courses were necessary, you know, given the traditional mission of the university?

Dr. Charles Epps:

Well, I, I, the students' request for more courses is an interesting one because I'm not sure that the number of courses is what's important. I think that if you realize what the—

Camera Crew Member #2:

If you could just say "More Black history courses…"

00:34:32:00

Dr. Charles Epps:

Oh, Black history courses. OK. The request by the students for more Black history courses is an interesting one because I think we have to realize what the basic mission of the university is. Of course you…its mission is to prepare people in their chosen field. And at the same time, you wanna stimulate curiosity, make them inquisitive, stimulate their, their, their desire to seek knowledge. Now, the, there, when I was a student there, there were two, at least two courses, both taught by Leo Hansberry, who was a very outstanding professor. I took one of his courses. They were electives, by the way. If I understand what the students were asking for it was that they wanted a greater emphasis or perhaps even more courses. Now, I believe that the, that the primary mission of Howard University is to prepare people to take their

roles in life. And so that, for example, if you were an engineering student, when you finished that four-year course, you should have the skills of an engineer that would make you competitive with a graduate from MIT, or, or Drexel, or any other of the, of the foremost institutions. If you're a physician, you ought to be able to compete with a doctor produced by Yale, or Harvard, or Stanford, or, or Johns Hopkins. Now, in order to achieve that, there is a requisite course of material that yo—one has to master. Now, to the extent that one has opportunities for elective courses, I think that's fine. And, and, and…but there has to be a limit on that. There is no Black medicine. There is medicine. And there are only so many courses that one would need. Now, in a university setting, as you stimulate the intellectual mind, and you teach people how to study, then the library is there. They are able to pursue any subject to a greater depth if they wish. And I think that that's the function of the university. So, it isn't so important to provide a great number of courses but having properly stimulated the student to learn about himself, and, and Black people then he should be able to go on and study to greater depth, to his own satisfaction. So, I, I, I…that's how I, I reacted to that particular request on their part.

00:36:46:00

Interviewer:

OK, let's cut.

[beep]

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Take seventeen.

00:36:57:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

[slate]

00:37:00:00

Interviewer:

Dean Epps, what was your reaction to the kind of notoriety the students were getting from the press and the media? And, and how was that a disadvantage to the, the administration and board of trustees?

00:37:10:00

Dr. Charles Epps:

Well, as, as one viewed this entire process dispassionately and stepped back and, and watched how it evolved, you become impressed that this is a, an exercise that really serves the university very poorly. The, the students, as I said earlier, at that age are absolutely confident about their own knowledge and understanding about things, and they question their elders in the faculty, and administration. And they, [knocking] when the press—

00:37:41:00

Interviewer:

Cut. Sorry.

[beep]

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK, this is take eighteen.

00:37:51:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

[slate]

00:37:55:00

Interviewer:

Dean Epps, during this, the takeover, the students were getting a lot of notoriety, a lot of press. I mean, and, and the, and the administration and the faculty wasn't looked at too well. What, what was your reaction to what was going on?

Dr. Charles Epps:

Well, I…as one viewed the entire process of the, the strike as a, as a process, it, it becomes rather disconcerting to a faculty member because of what's happening. The, the press, as you know, seems to enjoy the—

Interviewer:

No, you can't say "you know."

Dr. Charles Epps:

OK. Yeah. I'll go back.

Interviewer:

I'm sorry.

00:38:25:00

Dr. Charles Epps:

When one looks at the, the strike as a process, it becomes rather disconcerting for a faculty member or for a member of the administration because the press, it seems, enjoy the confrontation and have no interest in seeing it resolved. The, the students of course are, are there, they are absolutely confident about their own positions. They, they want immediate solutions. They, they are not amenable to a, a resolution over a period of time. They want it done immediately. And if you take someone who is twenty years old, who has the television camera on him every evening at six o'clock, and has a microphone in front of his mouth, and has a reporter standing there writing down every word, they become very difficult to, to negotiate with. And therefore you have these nonnegotiable demands emerging. And I'm sure they got a great deal of satisfaction out of seeing themselves on, on the press. The faculty and administration have to be restrained under those same, same circumstances. And in fact they have difficulty getting their message over to the media because the media is interested in what the students have to say. So, I, I think that on balance, the, the faculty and the administration are at a disadvantage always in these kinds of situations because the press regards the student as the, as the hot item of news. And that was true in this, in 1968 in this situation, too.

00:40:01:00

Interviewer:

Cut. Cut.

[beep]

[cut]

[sound roll #258]

00:40:12:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

[slate]

00:40:17:00

Interviewer:

Dean Epps, I mean, the students have this request for a Black studies program. What do you think of this so-called Black curriculum that they wanted? I mean, and sort of incorporate that story about the two high school students and Swahili.

00:40:33:00

Dr. Charles Epps:

During the same timeframe, one of the things that the students were requesting and especially high school students in the Washington area were requesting Swahili. They wanted to learn to speak Swahili. Now, what I regard is unfortunate about that is that they had not yet mastered English, which is our official language in this country and, and the, the language that they needed to market their skills. [car horn] I don't, I don't know of any business where they could have gotten a job because of their knowledge to speak or read Swahili. Now, [car horn] I had an experience during that same time. I was hiring high school students to work in my private medical office as clerks during the summer. And I found them lacking in, in English skills. And so it was paradoxical that they would be wanting to learn Swahili when they had not yet mastered English. I, I think there was a misplacement of, of values there. And I think basically when they're asking for African studies, I think they need to put it in proper context. That [bus passes] they, they, they want to know these things so that they can learn more about their heritage and understand their roots. But that should not be confused with learning the basic skills to become a productive member of society with marketable skills.

00:41:50:00

Interviewer:

Let me ask you this next question. I mean, what did, I mean, as a Black American, as a, as a Negro coming up, I mean, what were you told by your parents, how were you gonna be able to make it in this society? I mean, what did you have, I mean, my parents told me you always have to have grades that was twice as good. You know, I mean, was that the attitude that you thought these students at Howard should have?

00:42:07:00

Dr. Charles Epps:

Well, my parents told me that, Son, this is the way life is. But you're gonna have to work twice as hard as the White man to get to the same point. And what they were telling me, of course, and preparing me for was that a society that is segregated and where there is gross discrimination. And I accepted what they told me at face value. And in fact, I found it to be true. So, I realized that my [truck passes] card to get out of the ghetto was education, and I worked very hard at it. And I was successful in getting out by, by education. And I think that still applies today. And I think it's the same message that the students needed to hear in 1968. That education is still the best way to earn one's place in this, in, in this society.

00:42:59:00

Interviewer:

OK.

Camera Crew Member #2:

[inaudible]

[beep]

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #2:

This is take twenty.

00:43:14:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:43:17:00

Interviewer:

Dean Epps, this question is about, I mean, my parents told me I had to work twice as hard to, to make it, to get, get an [car horn] education and all that. I mean, what was your reaction to, what did your parents tell you? And what was your reaction to what the students were doing in '68?

Dr. Charles Epps:

Yes, I had, I have very vivid memories of, of my—

Camera Crew Member #1:

Excuse me Dean. Tilt your glasses forward a little bit.

Dr. Charles Epps:

Oh, yeah. I had to put 'em…yes, I have very vivid memories of my parents telling me that for a, a Black person in the United States, the best way out of the ghetto was through education. And they in—

00:43:51:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

I'm, I'm sorry.

00:43:53:00

Interviewer:

There's a plane.

Camera Crew Member #1:

We're gonna have to—

[beep]

Camera Crew Member #3:

No, that's a vacuum cleaner up there.

[cut]

[camera roll #2124]

Camera Crew Member #2:

This is take twenty-one and camera roll twenty-one, twenty-four.

00:44:05:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

[slate]

00:44:10:00

Interviewer:

Dean Epps, what did your parents tell you about how you were gonna make it as a, at the time as a Negro in America? And what was your reaction to what the students were doing in '68?

00:44:19:00

Dr. Charles Epps:

Well, I have very vivid memories of my parents telling me that life was not always fair. And because of segregation and discrimination that I would face, I have to work twice as hard as the White man to get to the same point. And I accepted that. And in fact, I found it to be true in life. Education was my ticket out of the ghetto, and I believe it applies equally to the students in 1968. And I think that their most important mission while they were in college was to get the best possible education to prepare themselves. And I think to some extent that strike, of course, was wasting their time when they could have used their time and energy to more useful pursuits. I understand the problem that they were facing, but I think their impatience is what drove them to take the strike action. Whereas negotiation and a more peaceful discussion of those matters would have produced the same result, I'm sure, in time.

00:45:15:00

Interviewer:

OK, cut. Thank you.

Dr. Charles Epps:

OK.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:45:20:00