The Impact of Students From Higher Education Institutions In Nashville, Tennessee During the Civil Rights Movement

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Overview

Note to teacher: Unfortunately, in many high school classrooms throughout the United States, teachers and students spend only a few days discussing the Civil Rights Movement rather than weeks or even months. This unit is designed to be used in high school U.S. History classes. Teachers are encouraged to spend at least a week covering this topic. Also, due to my having grown up in Nashville, Tennessee, a particular emphasis has been placed on the role higher education institutions (and their students) in that city played in the Civil Rights Movement.

Key Concepts: Segregation, Nonviolence, Spirituality, Sit-ins, Freedom Rides
Key People: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Rev. James Lawson, Diane Nash, John Lewis

More likely than not, when asked about the Civil Rights Movement, most people will think first and foremost of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and his famous “I have a Dream” speech delivered from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C. on August 28, 1963 in which he called for racial equality and an end to discrimination. However, the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950’s and 1960’s was larger than any one person. It is important to consider the many voices of blacks and whites alike who took a stand against the racial inequalities that plagued our country. In this unit, we will explore the Civil Rights Movement through the lens of Nashville, Tennessee. More specifically, we will investigate the role higher educational institutions (and their students) in Nashville played in the movement.

Founded in 1866 to educate newly freed slaves, Fisk University is among the nation’s first historically black colleges. In 1888, a young man by the name of W.E.B. Du Bois graduated from the University. Du Bois is most well known for being the first African-American to earn a PhD from Harvard University. During the late 1950’s, a young female student by the name of Diane Nash, who was studying at Fisk at the time, emerged as a leader of the Civil Rights Movement in Nashville, Tennessee. Nash was
originally from Chicago, Illinois, and had never experienced segregation to the extent that it existed in Nashville. She was determined to make a change, and began attending nonviolent civil disobedient workshops along with another Fisk student, John Lewis. The workshops were led by Reverend James Lawson, who at the time was a student in the Divinity School at Vanderbilt University, also in Nashville, Tennessee.

Lawson grew up in northeast Ohio, and graduated from Baldwin Wallace College. In 1951, Lawson proclaimed himself a “conscientious objector,” and consequently refused to enter the draft. He was arrested, and spent fourteen months in jail. Shortly after his release from prison, Lawson chose to embark on a mission trip to India. While in India, Lawson studied the principles of nonviolence that Mohandas Ghandi and his followers had developed. He returned to the states in 1955, and enrolled in the Graduate School of Theology at Oberlin College. While at Oberlin, one of his professors introduced him to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who also embraced Ghandi’s principles of nonviolence. King convinced Lawson to move to Nashville, Tennessee where he would be able to make a meaningful impact on the movement for justice.

Lawson enrolled in the Divinity School at Vanderbilt University, and began mentoring (or training) students, including Diane Nash and John Lewis, from other colleges in the Nashville area who would eventually become leaders in the Civil Rights Movement.
Shortly after learning of Lawson’s participation in the resistance movement, Chancellor Harvie Branscomb expelled him from Vanderbilt University. This action resulted in the resignation of the Dean of the Divinity School as well as other faculty members at the University. Moreover, it served to motivate a number of activists in the coming years.

In 1960 at the young age of twenty-two years old, Diane Nash became the leader of the Nashville sit-ins, a movement that lasted from February to May. This movement was unique in that it was organized and composed primarily of college students and other young people. With the support of the SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference), students from Fisk University, Tennessee A&I (later Tennessee State University), American Baptist Theological Seminary (later American Baptist College), and Meharry Medical College organized peaceful demonstrations in which they would sit at segregated lunch counters in local department stores. Nash and her colleagues were arrested on multiple occasions, each time choosing to remain in prison in lieu of paying bail. On April 19, 1960, Nash had the opportunity to confront the city’s mayor, Ben West, and asked, “Do you feel it is wrong to discriminate against a person solely on the basis of their race or color?” (Olsen, 201).

Mayor Ben West agrees that lunch counters should be desegregated, April 19, 1960. Photo by Vic Cooley, *Nashville Banner*.
West conceded that he did, and in a matter of weeks, blacks were being served at the lunch counters alongside of whites. These protests of the Jim Crow laws in the South spread to other states including North Carolina. Both Diane Nash and John Lewis would join the SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee), an organization of students that would become a driving force in various civil rights protests, not the least of which were the Freedom Rides.

In the summer of 1961, CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) organized a group of students to travel in racially integrated groups throughout the South on Greyhound and Trailways buses. Their intent was to see if, in fact, bus stations in the deep South were desegregated as mandated by the U.S. Supreme Court decisions of Boynton v. Virginia (1960) and Irene Morgan vs. Commonwealth of Virginia (1946). After an initial wave of Freedom Riders were forced to end their trip in Birmingham, Alabama due to violent resistance from white elitists, Diane Nash organized a new group of student riders in Nashville to travel to Birmingham, and pick up where the first group left off. In the PBS documentary Freedom Riders, Nash is quoted as saying, “It was clear to me that if we allowed the Freedom Ride to stop at that point [in Birmingham], just after so much violence had been inflicted, the message would have been sent that all you have to do to stop a nonviolent campaign is inflict massive violence” (Stanley Nelson, Freedom Riders). There would be numerous subsequent Freedom Rides throughout the South. (See map below).
The Freedom Rides proved to be a very important development in the Civil Rights Movement because they called national attention to the disregard for federal law and the local violence used to enforce segregation (i.e., Jim Crow laws) in the southern states. Moreover, President John F. Kennedy was forced to take a stand on the issue.

Diane Nash, John Lewis, and their fellow students from Nashville were agents of change. Interestingly, Nash never graduated from Fisk University. She made the choice to pursue what she felt to be a far greater cause. It is evident, though, that the higher education institutions in Nashville, Tennessee played an important role in “supplying” the opposition to the segregation at the time. Had the students not risked their lives and decided to stand up for what they truly believed during the sit-ins and the Freedom Rides, the United States would undoubtedly be a very different place today. We owe it to these individuals to speak out against racial injustices that arise in our modern-day society. After all, we are “one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”
Activity # 1  In Their Own Words

Show the PBS Documentary *Freedom Riders* in class. The video can be accessed free of charge in its entirety by going to [http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/freedomriders/](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/freedomriders/). Note that the video is one hour and fifty-three minutes long. Depending on the length of class period at your school and whether or not you choose to have a class discussion at the end of each class, this activity will most likely take at least three days to complete. Additionally, note that a teacher’s study guide full of additional resources may be downloaded from this site.

Discussion Questions Pertaining to the Video (*These questions may be used to facilitate a class-wide discussion, or they may be assigned as free response essays).

A.) Please identify each of the following individuals, and discuss the role that each played in the Freedom Rides:
   - James Lawson
   - Diane Nash
   - Martin Luther King, Jr.

B.) Please discuss the significance of the nonviolent tactics used by protestors during the Freedom Rides. Why was the nonviolent approach so powerful?

C.) Do you believe that the response form President John F. Kennedy was appropriate? Could he have done more to curtail the violence in the deep South that erupted as a result of the Freedom Rides?

D.) What role did the media play in the Freedom Rides? How do media shape our understanding of the issues over time?

Activity # 2  - Where are they now?

Assign students to research one of the following figures in the civil rights movement:

James Lawson
John Lewis
Diane Nash

Students should write a biographical essay of 3-4 pages in length (double-spaced) which includes information about what the individuals have accomplished in their lives since the Civil Rights Movement. Students should be encouraged to reach out
to the individual they chose via email or in person with the intent of interviewing him or her about their experiences during the Civil Rights Movement.

Activity # 3 - History Through Music

Assign students to listen to songs commonly associated with the Civil Rights Movement. Students should write an essay in response to the lyrics of the song, and the context in which the song was used. Students should incorporate common themes from the movement such as nonviolence, spirituality, and racial injustice when appropriate. Some songs to consider include (but are not limited to):

- *We Shall Overcome*
- *We Will Never Turn Back*
- *Wade in the Water*
- *Walk with Me Lord*
- *I Ain’t Gonna Let Nobady Turn Me Round*
- *Keep Your Eyes on the Prize*

Note that songs may be found on CD titled “Voices Of The Civil Rights Movement: Black American Freedom Songs 1960-1966.” This CD can be purchased on Amazon.com. Songs may also be downloaded from iTunes.
Bibliography

Audiovisual Resources

PBS Educational Video – *Freedom Riders* - Running time 1:53:00
http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/freedomriders/

U.S. Congressman John Lewis delivers MLK Day keynote – Running time 1:06:34
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GTNc10s6Gsg


Useful websites

http://www.teachersdomain.org/resource/iml04.soc.ush.civil.tl_crmvmt/ (Freedom Riders)

http://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=54242 (Nashville Civil Rights protests)

http://who.library.vanderbilt.edu/interview/james-m-lawson-jr (James Lawson)

http://who.library.vanderbilt.edu/ (Civil Rights Movement)

http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/1945-present/civil-rights-movement

http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/stories_events.html (Jim Crow)


http://www.library.nashville.org/civilrights/movement.htm (Nashville Civil Rights Movement)

http://www.commercialappeal.com/photos/2008/feb/01/33908/

Useful Books


The impact sit-ins had on the civil rights movement proved to be invaluable to changing policies and norms in the 1960s. In the early 1940s, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) successfully used sit-ins to desegregate public facilities, in Chicago primarily. The day after the first sit-in at the Greensboro Woolworth’s, more students from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College, the historically black college that the original four attended, descended on the store. Even though there were no confrontations, the local media covered the second sit-in. Nashville police arrested approximately 81 students during this period. When the black community rallied behind the students with money to bail them out, the students refused the bail money and opted to serve jail terms. This issue of civil rights and education made international headlines with the affair that took place at Little Rock High School in 1957. But education was to remain at the forefront of civil rights even after this event. The two decisions set the tone for the future of higher education establishments. The Supreme Court had applied the law as they saw it and there was no higher or more powerful body in America than the Supreme Court. Warren’s decision gave judicial legitimacy to the civil rights movement here was the most powerful judicial body in America (some would argue the most powerful body in America) giving its apparent support to the ending of the abuses that seemed to transcend the south.