Accepted Manuscript
Version of Record at: https://doi.org/10.1080/08923647.2023.2180263

WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN: A FIRST-RATE BLACK CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOL, 1927-1930

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February 2, 2023

Abstract: Nine distinguished Black scholars created an academically rigorous correspondence school in 1927. It lasted only three years. This article explores the reasons why the school failed.

Keywords: Correspondence schools, Home Study, Carter G. Woodson, Association for the Study of Negro Life and History

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Correspondence schools thrived in early 20th century America. Several hundred for-profit vendors had the vast majority of the annual enrollments, which peaked at one half million in the mid-1920s. Most students sought better jobs and higher salaries. Vocational success was their goal. But dozens of well-known universities created home study departments, with Columbia, Chicago, and Wisconsin the most popular. There was a market for academic courses in many departments. Even philosopher John Dewey and historian Frederick Jackson Turner occasionally taught by mail.

There is surprisingly little research on academic home study classes. A handbook in 1971 (Mackenzie & Christensen) noted the paucity of articles, with primary sources filling the pages where readers might have expected to see scholarship. Forty two years later, another handbook on distance education repeated the same point. Correspondence departments "lack systematic analysis" with "only a handful of articles" in refereed journals (Pittman, 2013, pp. 22 & 27).

This essay explores a new school in the late 1920s that failed to thrive. The enterprise was distinctive—an all-Black faculty teaching rigorous courses on Black culture. The instructors were well-known, as was the association that sponsored their work. The few historians who have noticed this school never explained why it faltered (Givens, 2021; Stewart, 2018). This essay compares the school to other home study vendors and also examines Black newspaper coverage of correspondence schools. The lack of effective marketing was the main reason this school folded after three years, with the high tuition and lack of college credits also hurtful.

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Rigorous (and expensive) home study courses

Created in 1915 to encourage unbiased scholarship on Black accomplishments, the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH) formed a Home Study Department in 1927. The nine faculty were remarkably talented. The foremost Black historian and founder of ASNLH, Carter Woodson, offered two history and two anthropology courses. The prolific literary critic Alain Locke, who like Woodson earned his PhD at Harvard, taught The Negro in Recent Literature along with African Art and Culture. The third exceptional scholar was sociologist E. Franklin Frazier (University of Chicago PhD) who wrote books on the Black family and Black churches. The other six instructors included three who later became Deans (James Johnston at Virginia State, Charles Wesley at Howard, and David Lane at Louisville Municipal), one who served as President of Fisk University (Charles Johnson), another who taught history (Luther Jackson at Virginia State), and the last was a minister (Miles Mark Fisher, who later wrote a prize-winning study of slave songs). In some correspondence schools, a distinguished faculty served as part-time advisors, with the day-to-day work of reading papers delegated to assistants. That was not the case at ASNLH.

The classes offered were rigorous, designed for high school graduates (with three of the 17 courses solely for college graduates). Only English Composition was remedial—"advanced work is impossible without the ability to write clearly and effectively (Home Study Department, 1927, p. 12)."[1] Of the seven history courses, four included requirements beyond textbook exams—a thesis for The Negro in History and Negro Economic History, a thorough study of a local

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community in Selected Topics in Negro Economic History, and access to a research library for Selected Topics on the Negro in History. Frequent visits to a museum were necessary in African Anthropology, and Alain Locke's The Negro in Recent Literature assigned seven books. Diligent students could seek "full credit" by passing a final examination at ASNLH headquarters or under ASNLH-approved supervision elsewhere.

Woodson overestimated the demand for challenging coursework. "Only a few" had enrolled by mid-1928, and Woodson's ledger book recorded only one payment in 1929 (Woodson, 1928, p. 410; Woodson, 1915-1950). From 1931 on Woodson's annual reports and his ledger books made no reference to home study. He had hoped the success of Negro History Week, introduced by ASNLH in 1926 and adopted by more than 80% of Black high schools by 1931, would attract teachers eager to learn more from Black scholars who celebrated Black accomplishments. He had already exchanged letters with dozens of teachers and many school districts. As a "free reference bureau," Woodson sent instructional materials and advice on how to use them; many recipients wrote back to report what happened (Givens, 2021, p. 86). In short, he was teaching by mail before 1927. The new school would therefore compete with the less expensive pedagogical work already in place.

Tuition was a hurdle. Rather than spend $25 for one home study course or $40 for two, joining a club affiliated with ASNLH was cheaper. In return for $2 annual dues, Woodson was willing to send outlines for club meetings (Dagbovie, 2012). Borrowing books from libraries or buying them directly from ASNLH were other options. Black teacher associations also circulated curricular materials, and

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in Northern cities, Black branches of the YMCA and YWCA, various churches, Harlem libraries, and urban settlement houses offered adult education (Franklin, 1990; Reid, 1936). And unlike most correspondence schools, ASNLH required full payment at the start and the fee did not include the cost of the texts.

What other reasons might explain the rapid demise of ASNLH home study? There was Woodson's prickly personality, his tendency to take on too many projects simultaneously, his haphazard bookkeeping, and his foremost commitment to his own research (Goggin, 1993; Greene, 1989). The meager archival evidence, however, sheds no light on whether those lifelong traits hampered his home study venture, and Woodson's biographers offered no explanations for the failure of this promising initiative. So the following interpretation draws on the history of other correspondence schools. How did they sustain themselves? What did they do that ASNLH might have tried?

Advertisements and Salesmen

To increase demand, most correspondence schools relied on extensive advertising and they often hired salesmen. At Columbia University, for instance, newspaper and magazine ads took approximately 10% of the annual budget in the late 1920s, with another 4% for flyers and circulars (Hampel, 2010). Columbia's outreach lacked the brazen and often misleading claims of many for-profit schools, but there were enticements like "everyone can reap great benefit from continued study" and "to be happy and successful one must continue study throughout life." (Hampel, 2010, pp. 2499-2500). In contrast, ASNLH spent $40 on application blanks and postcards in 1928, with only $271 for advertising <u>all</u>

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forms of Association work that year (Woodson, 1915-1950).

Many for-profit schools hired salesmen prone to exaggerations and lies. Unqualified prospects were assured they could succeed. Career opportunities and average wages were often inflated or invented (Hampel, 2009). In contrast, when Columbia in 1925 hired reputable "student advisers" (half were former ministers) annual enrollment tripled in two years, and in Wisconsin, eight salaried field agents publicized all aspects of university extension—home study, evening courses, traveling libraries, lectures, and summer institutes (Hampel, 2010). ASNLH had no sales force. What the Association needed was a large initial investment—far beyond its meager assets—to publicize and sell the courses.

In addition, the high standards of the courses, which Woodson compared to college work, meant the market would be relatively small compared to home study vendors offering vocational training (Noffsinger, 1926). ASNLH's focus on the well-educated set it apart as distinctive, which in hindsight could have been an advantage—find a special niche untapped by others. But a major incentive to enroll—earning college credits—was a gamble. ASNLH never affiliated with a college or university; accredited colleges would have been hard pressed to award credits from an association without official recognition in higher education.[2] Woodson thought most Black colleges were either run by or subservient to conservative whites (Goggin, 1993). A partnership with nearby Howard University (where he spent the 1919/20 academic year and clashed with the white President) might have helped--Howard's School of Religion offered both on-site courses and home-study, and so did Virginia State College (Brown, 1924).[3]

Even if that tie had been forged, the enterprise could have faltered. The

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closest parallel to ASNLH home study was an initiative begun in the 1880s by William Rainey Harper, a biblical scholar who created the American Institute for Sacred Literature (AISL), offering courses in Hebrew, Greek, several other languages, and theology. Like ASNLH, the work was intense and the niche small—ministers able to pay AISL for advanced education. Enrollment never exceeded 625 in the late 1880s, and it dropped in the 1890s when Harper became the President of the University of Chicago. Summer schools and journal subscriptions brought in additional revenue—so did the sale of 500 shares of stock to raise $5,000-- but AISL ran deficits year after year, subsidized by donors and by Harper (Beck, 1968). The prospects for any academically intense correspondence school focused on the liberal arts were never bright in this country. Harper showed that it could be done—and he demonstrated how hard it was to sustain. It is regrettable that Woodson lacked the financial aid that enabled Harper to persevere.[4]

Correspondence Schools in the Black press, 1890-1940

There is another way to consider the failure of ASNLH home study: analyze how Black newspapers depicted correspondence schools. There is no research on Black correspondence schools (or Black enrollment in white schools), and until someone finds archival records to fill the gap, analysis of the Black press sheds light on perceptions of home study.

Two online collections of African-American newspapers, one compiled by Readex and another by ProQuest, were examined. The African-American Newspapers Series 2 included 75 papers, and by entering “correspondence

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school" and "home study" as separate keywords, 327 items from 25 papers were retrieved. Historical Newspapers: Black Newspapers from Proquest included seven newspapers, and the same keywords returned 298 items from six newspapers. The years searched in both databases spanned 1890 to 1940. I took notes on advertisements, fiction, announcements, news articles, humor columns, movie reviews, and letters to the editor.[5] Of the 625 items, 60.5% were advertisements (n=378) from 45 different schools.

In light of the 50 year time span of the data, it is clear that home study was not a frequent topic seen by Black newspaper readers. Only 31 of the 82 newspapers had *any* items. Six hundred twenty five items over 50 years is fewer than thirteen per year. The numbers suggest that home study was little known, which meant that Woodson and ASNLH needed to build, not just reach, a market.

The vast majority of all the ads promised vocational benefits by acquiring specific skills like bookkeeping, preaching, hair styling, and automotive repair. Business, religion, female beauty, and technology (radio, cars, and airplanes) were the most widely advertised courses. The type of curriculum ASNLH taught might have been offered by Wiley College and Virginia State College (their ads did not list specific courses) but the other three Black colleges that advertised taught only religion and business by mail.

How many of the ads came from Black owned and operated schools? Only two had African American in their name. The text of other ads indicated at least four more created by Black educators, and it is possible that many religious and "beauty culture" schools also originated with Black teachers. And what about white schools? Did they ever advertise in the Black press? Only one member of

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the National Home Study Council placed ads in Black newspapers (NHSC was the "trade association" formed in 1926 to promote ethical conduct, and its fifty members accounted for approximately two-thirds of proprietary correspondence school enrollments. Hampel, 2009). The largest for-profit schools (International Correspondence Schools, LaSalle, American, Alexander Hamilton, U.S. School of Music) never ran ads in Black newspapers. Only one white university did so (Pennsylvania State University) and only in 1929, although its extensive home study fare began in the 1890s (Kett, 1994).

There are noteworthy patterns in how the newspaper material praised and criticized home study. Occasionally an editorial would assert the value of learning by mail. Math and handwriting for waiters—preparing for civil service exams—"mental development"—and an unbiased alternative to the "poisoned education" from whites: those were the four tributes printed.[6] What was far more common was the announcement and celebration of individual accomplishment, especially for graduates from one of the large and reputable schools--International Correspondence School (13 references) and the American School (5 references) led the way, ahead of LaSalle, Blackstone Law, Settlement School of Art, Home Correspondence, and three unnamed places. Only one article chastised a home study graduate—an amateur detective in Harlem jailed for making arrests. The newspapers made it clear that Black students had done well in respected Northern correspondence schools, even if no editorials, news articles, or advertisements described those specific places.

Criticism of home study usually took the form of jokes. Often reprinted from other papers, the short entries spoofed home study and its students as naïve.

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Would a memory course help a woman recall her age? Could a two-week class in silence quiet a verbose barber? Why is Willie trying to learn aviation through the mail? Can home study teach husbands to talk in their sleep? How does a correspondence school student cut class? Mail empty envelopes. Reviews of five movies spoofed characters who valued correspondence courses (for instance, in A Hero for a Night [1928] a man learned to fly but he overlooked the lesson on landing the plane). Only one article chided "literary burglars" for over-exuberant advertisements for writing movie scripts. No articles lambasted unethical salesmen or legally binding contracts obliging dropouts to pay the full tuition (those were the most common complaints by white reformers who tried to expose the disreputable schools--Hampel, 2009).

A mixture of satire of the gullible and respect for the serious: the Black press conveyed a message that should have reassured readers of the value of good home study courses. We cannot say that the entire Black community lacked experience with home study or scorned it as exploitation. We may never know all the reasons why this golden opportunity to sustain a top-notch correspondence school faltered, but it seems clear that Woodson stayed true to his scholarly commitments. He did not dilute the curriculum to attract more students. He was a scholar more than an entrepreneur, and in the early 20th century home study field, that priority was rare.

But without entrepreneurial outreach, scholars were unlikely to find many students. As one administrator at the University of Wisconsin acknowledged in 1930, "Ideally, the demand for service should come from the people, but actually it does not." (Allen, 1930, p. 74). Advertising, selling, competitive pricing, and

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college credits gave Wisconsin and other colleges an appeal that yielded thousands of enrollments. If ASNLH had done the same, it might have survived longer than three years.

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Accepted Manuscript
Version of Record at: https://doi.org/10.1080/08923647.2023.2180263

ENDNOTES

[1] This sixteen page pamphlet described the requirements (six pages), the courses (six pages), the faculty (one page), and the Association (one page), with a cover page and table of contents. The Woodruff Library at Emory University has a copy; I bought my copy online.

[2] And most colleges that did award credits for work-by-mail did so only for their own home study courses. That was the case for Woodson when he took correspondence courses from the University of Chicago in 1905 and 1906. The philanthropic foundations that supported ASNLH urged Woodson to affiliate with a college or university for the sake of fiscal stability.

[3] By the early 1920s Howard had approximately 250 home study students, mostly Southern ministers, with coursework including elementary school subjects (Brown, 1924).

[4] As Goggin (1993) demonstrated in detail, Woodson repeatedly asked the Carnegie, Rockefeller, Rosenwald, Commonwealth and other foundations for grants (for historical research, collections of documents, publication of the Journal of Negro History, and unrestricted endowment). He knew how to seek funds, but there is no evidence he ever did so on behalf of home study.

[5] In addition to the ads, I read 66 references to home study as homework, 48 announcements (including five for Woodson's school), 32 humor items, 17 letters, 9 stories, 5 movie reviews, and 70 uses of the key words unrelated to particular schools, students, or courses.

[6] Indianapolis Freeman, August 12, 1905; Topeka Plaindealer, August 12,1904; New Amsterdam News, January 6,1932; New World, February 20, 1932.