I chose the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff for my HBCU project, because my mother’s family hails from Arkansas, and also my great uncle served as chancellor of the University of Arkansas at Monticello campus and was a member of the advisory committee tasked with the desegregation of the U of A system in the 1970s to comply with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

The University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff is the oldest of four HBCUs in the state of Arkansas. It is the second oldest public university and the second oldest land-grant institution in the state of Arkansas (second in both cases to the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville). It is popularly known as the “Flagship of the Delta.”

The University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff (UAPB) was founded as Branch Normal College, a college to train black teachers for the state’s black schools, in 1875 by Arkansas state senator John Middleton Clayton, who had sponsored a legislative act calling for the establishment of Branch Normal College two years earlier. Many obstacles delayed its establishment until 1875: state economics as well as necessary repairs to the building that was to serve as its first site due to the workers’ illness and the sinking of the boat carrying the lumber and furniture. Pine Bluff was selected as the location because of its large black population and its status as the major economic center in south central Arkansas.

Branch Normal College’s first class was comprised of only seven students. Since slavery had ended just ten years earlier, its first students arrived with no previous education and few academic skills. The college’s first leader (“principal”) and only instructor for several years, Joseph Carter Corbin established a preparatory department to address the low academic preparation of its student body and recruited more advanced students to work as teaching assistants. It wasn’t until 1889 that funds were made available ($500) to hire one assistant teacher: Rufus C. Childress, who was the first graduate of Philander Smith College, a private HBCU in Arkansas.

Recruitment of students was difficult at first, due to rumors of high fees. This led to a policy that accepted “beneficiaries,” fourteen students per county appointed by the county judge who received a full scholarship on the condition that they would teach in Arkansas for two years after graduation. By 1881, the college’s enrollment had grown to 145 students.

The first graduate and first black recipient of a college degree in Arkansas received his Bachelor of Arts degree in 1882.Between 1882 and 1895 ten students received the Bachelor of Arts degree before Branch Normal College’s academic program was reduced.

In 1892, Branch Normal was designated as a Land Grant Institution under the 1890 amendments to the Morrill Land Grant College Act of 1890, which required states maintaining segregated systems to establish a separate land grant university for blacks as well as whites. However, although the act specified equitable division of funds among the white and African American schools, Arkansas was allowed to give eight-elevenths to Arkansas Industrial University and three-tenths to Branch Normal. This funding disparity would have great consequences over time (see below).

In 1902, Isaac Fisher, a graduate of Tuskegee Institute and a disciple of Booker T. Washington, who advocated a vocational education focused on industrial arts for blacks, headed the institution until 1911. Under Fisher’s leadership, the bachelor’s degree was removed (as no faculty members held college degrees), and the school provided only elementary and secondary education. After Fisher’s resignation in 1911, Branch Normal returned to its original mission as a college to train black teachers.

In 1927, Branch Normal College severed its ties with the University of Arkansas and was renamed Arkansas Agricultural, Mechanical and Normal College (AM&N). Two years later, in 1929, the college moved to a new campus, UAPB’s current site.

Over the forty years from 1949 to 1968, the college expanded greatly with new buildings and new programs.

In the early 1960s, Pine Bluff served as a main center of civil rights activism in the Mississippi Delta region, spurring UAPB campus activism and participation in protests, notably sit-ins inspired by the 1960 Greensboro, North Carolina Sit-ins to desegregate restaurants and diners.

In 1972, AM&N rejoined the University of Arkansas system as a full campus with university status and became the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff. There was considerable opposition to this merger by black students, faculty, and community members, leading to an unsuccessful lawsuit challenging the merger on the grounds that it was unconstitutional because there was no requirement for equal treatment of black students under the University of Arkansas’ all-white board of trustees. Students boycotted classes, protesting that the administration was not properly addressing the interests of the African American student body and calling for the dismissal of the chancellor and three other administrators; the chancellor ultimately resigned several weeks later.

In the mid-1970s, the University of Arkansas system was tasked with desegregation of its universities in compliance with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This included recruitment of black students for its predominantly white campuses as well as recruitment of white students for UAPB, among many other initiatives. According to a 1975 report, 14% of UAPB’s student body was white, a 70% increase since the Fall of 1974. It would be interesting to conduct further research on this desegregation process, issues and conflicts regarding implementation, and effectiveness/results – especially considering that today, UAPB’s student body is about 89% Black and only about 3% White. What has happened at UAPB and the state of Arkansas with regard to educational desegregation and more importantly, issues of racial justice in the past 50 years?

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*"The end of education is to know God and the laws and purposes of his universe, and to reconcile one's life with these laws. The first aim of a good college is not to teach books, but the meaning and purpose of life. Hard study and the learning of books are only a means to this end. We develop Power, Courage and Determination and we go out to achieve Truth, Wisdom and Justice. If we do not come to this, the cost of schooling is wasted".*

*John B. Watson*

*First President, AM&N College*

Today, UAPB continues its mission with the motto “Student Focused. Success Driven. Mission Based.”

UAPB serves a student body of over 2,380 undergraduate and graduate students. According to Fall 2023 statistics, UAPB remains a predominantly black college with about 88% of students identifying as Black or African American; 3% as White; 2.5% as Hispanic; 1.8% as two or more races; 0.5%; .5% as American Indian/Alaskan Native, 0.4% as Asian/Pacific Islander, and 0.3% as Native Hawaiian. About 65% of its students are from Arkansas, and 3.4% from other countries (with students representing 40 different countries over the past several years).

“The faculty is the most racially and ethnically diverse of any public institution in the state of Arkansas; 62.4% are African-American, 21.0% are Asian-American; 0.6% are Hispanic/Latino; 2.5% are Native Hawaiian; 0.6% are two or more races; and 12.7% are Caucasian-American (European descent), representing 18 different countries.” [UAPB website, accessed 2/14/2024]

UAPB offers 31 baccalaureate, 12 master's, and one doctoral degree programs, representing a broad spectrum of subject areas. The doctorate program in Aquaculture (fish farming)/Fisheries began in 2011 and is notable as Arkansas’s only comprehensive program in Aquaculture, a $1.2 industry in the Mississippi Delta region.

UAPB also offers classes at its satellite campus in North Little Rock, and at four off-campus sites: Lake Village (Chicot County), Marianna (Lee County), North Little Rock (Pulaski County), and Lonoke (Lonoke County). In addition, UAPB offers online classes.

It boasts a 13:1 student to faculty ratio, contributing to its mission “to provide a high quality, affordable education with a personal touch.”

Student activities include more than 90 student organizations, an internationally renowned Vesper Choir, Marching Band, Concert Bands, Wind Symphony, nationally recognized debate team, award-winning theater department and accomplished athletic program.

However, although UAPB appears to be flourishing, the discriminatory policies of the Arkansas state government in failing to procure federal funding have severely impacted its financial resources:

*Officials with the U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) reported in September 2023 that a number of states, including Arkansas, had underfunded land-grant Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) like UAPB for decades, leading to a disparity of more than $12 billion with compared with historically white 1862 land-grant institutions in the nation. Six states—Arkansas, Florida, Maryland, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia—have not taken advantage of the one-to-one federal match funding for the 1890 land-grant HBCU institutions in recent years but did so for the 1862 land-grant institutions.* ***From 1987 to 2020, UAPB was underfunded in state-appropriated funds by an estimated $330.9 million.***

I would like to know more about UAPB’s current status with regard to the student experience at this HBCU and in the larger context of HBCUs.