

FAMU Would Go to Court To Preserve Its Identity

By EARL RICKEY
Democrat Staff Writer

Dr. Benjamin L. Perry says Florida A&M is "prepared to go to court if necessary" to preserve its character and identity within the State University System.

FAMU's fears of either a phase-out or merger with sister institution Florida State are nothing new; it's the source of concern which has changed.

In the past, pressure came from the Legislature — today it comes from the federal government.

"I really believe the state is coming to accept our role, not so much as a black institution but as a good undergraduate school," says FAMU's president.

★ ★ ★

"THE QUESTION before us now, is what intervention we may expect from the Department of Health, Education and Welfare in enforcement of desegregation guidelines."

Until a short time ago, Washington concerned itself mostly with obtaining compliance with Civil Rights Act provisions in the nation's high schools. More recently, however, the heavy hand of HEW has fallen on the university community.

Less than three months ago, university systems containing predominantly white and black institutions within the same area, have been ordered to desegregate. To date, Maryland and Pennsylvania have been given 120 days to submit plans to balance out their faculty and student bodies.

An "investigation" of similar arrangements in Southern states — including Florida — has been promised before the summer is out.

Dr. Perry has always declined to make an issue of just how "Black" Florida A&M should be, and his reasons are very practical.

"It comes down to economic support," he says. "You have to ask yourself whether the state would support an all-black school to the same degree it would other members of the system. I think the answer has to be; 'no, it would not!'"

What, then is the nature of "the character and identity" FAMU is prepared to fight for in the courts?

"Much depends on HEW's stand once it has conducted the investigation which has been promised," Perry answers.

★ ★ ★

"IF THE RESULT is that Florida A & M is 'discriminating' we are prepared to prove that our efforts to recruit students and faculty from all races have been quite extensive. Most of our problem stems from sociological pressure exerted on a potential student in his own community. I really don't think a law can be devised to deal with that."

Behind all the concern about being "swallowed up" lies considerable anxiety in the black community which appears to focus in two areas.

First: black leaders — and Dr. Perry is among them — would like to know why it is their schools which are phased-out, and their faculties absorbed by the white educational system when desegregation comes.

Secondly: Why does HEW so often fail to follow through on its desegregation rulings?

"I know of instances where almost new black schools have been shut down, and the children sent to white schools when desegregation went into effect," says Perry.

"When this happens, how many black principals do you see in schools which often have a definite majority of black students?"

"In other words, when you look at the evidence, does any one wonder that Florida A&M is concerned over its future if any change in the status quo becomes necessary?"

Worse yet, HEW itself is, many blacks believe, more at fault than the community attitudes which create racial problems in the first place.

"They will come in and say; 'FSU has too many white students, and Florida A&M has too many black students — do something about it,' then leave what is to be done in the hands of the local white power structure."

Yes, there is concern over FAMU's future should HEW make a similar ruling here as



Dr. Benjamin L. Perry
... FAMU president

it has elsewhere in recent months; but even within that framework, Perry sees a possible way around FAMU's absorption.

★ ★ ★

EVER SINCE becoming president at Florida A&M, Perry has talked increasingly of the school's role as a means of uplifting the "average" student, slowly being written out of the college picture by rising admission standards.

"No one questions the necessity of greater educational opportunities for under-achievers," Dr. Perry says. "A great deal of good can be done by educating and training these people and sending them back into their previous environments to help others."

The Role and Scope Report for 1969, still under Board of Regents study, may hold the key to FAMU's hopes of convincing everyone, the U.S. Government included, of the need for FAMU. Perry, for one, is highly optimistic about the report.

In fact, he appears to be almost quoting from its pages when he points out that "there are white as well as black disadvantaged young people — we can, and hope, to reach them both."

What would happen should FAMU be faced with merger, or "loss of identity?" Perry doesn't like to think about it.

"I was talking with a group of students recently, and they said if that were to happen, they (students) would buy the university."

"Our students feel a

tremendous sense of something akin to ownership here. I believe everyone here would fight having it taken from them."