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Duke's Struggling Cousin Rises From Its Shadow

By WILLIAM YARDLEY
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North Carolina Central University does not have a lacrosse team. Students often cannot check out books from the main library, which is being renovated after a mold infestation. The business school is fighting to regain accreditation. Sixty percent of the students receive need-based financial aid. Eighty-one percent are black. Only 28 percent graduate after four years.

Just three miles from Duke University and its master-planned marriage of Gothic elegance and academic excellence, North Carolina Central, a rambling red-brick, historically black institution, is across the tracks, across the highway, across an immeasurable cultural divide. Or so goes the armchair anthropology.

Yet North Carolina Central is also engaged in an ambitious push to enhance its academics and its campus, to remake its image and its mission. At least \$121 million in state spending in the last six years has brought new law and science buildings and dormitories, and more projects are planned.

The university is aggressively recruiting top minority students -- sometimes competing for them against Duke -- and pursuing a niche in biotechnology, hoping to take advantage of its location here next to Research Triangle Park. Enrollment is up to about 8,200, compared with about 5,400 just five years ago. Aspirations have risen, too.

Now, with the universities uncomfortably linked by a North Carolina Central student's accusations that she was raped by members of Duke's lacrosse team, which had hired her as an exotic dancer for a party, some officials, alumni and students at North Carolina Central say perceptions that their school is a struggling academic afterthought in Durham may be the hardest thing to change.

They say that the storyline of race, class and cultural divide in the South that has framed the case may be compelling, but that it is simplistic. So while Duke is under intense national scrutiny, North Carolina Central is seeking a delicate balance of supporting the accuser, improving its relationship with Duke and continuing to raise its profile.

"America by and large doesn't know who we are," James H. Ammons, the chancellor of North Carolina Central, said in an interview. "They see this incident, but they don't know that we're one of the fastest-growing institutions in the state, with an historic law school, the first public liberal arts college for African-Americans, at the center of a biotechnology initiative that's going to change the economy."

No one disputes the obvious contrasts between Duke and North Carolina Central. About 90 percent of North Carolina Central's students are in-state residents, compared with 13 percent at Duke. Tuition, room and board at North Carolina Central for one year is about \$8,000 for in-state students, and \$41,000 at Duke. North Carolina Central's endowment is about \$22 million. Duke's is \$3.8 billion.

But people with links to both universities say that the relationship is enduring and complex, that both benefit from it and that both face challenges as the lacrosse case settles into what lawyers say could be a long court fight.

Two Duke players have been indicted on charges of first-degree forcible rape, first-degree sexual offense and kidnapping. The accuser, a 27-year-old mother of two, is among 200 or so students listed on a bulletin board in the student union at North Carolina Central as being eligible for a national honor society.

"We are concerned and we are going to be as supportive as we can of the student in this incident, but we're also going to be as patient and respectful of the legal system, to let it work," Mr. Ammons said. "At the same time, we can't be distracted so much that we lose focus on trying to continue to build the university and enhance its stature."

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Founded in 1910 as the National Religious Training School and Chautauqua, a private school with a mission to prepare blacks for community leadership roles, the institution became the nation's first state-supported liberal arts college for blacks in 1925. Now it covers 135 acres on the south side of downtown Durham.

The university grew out of the thriving black community that developed as Durham prospered after the Civil War, largely from tobacco. In 1898, a group of black business leaders in Durham founded North Carolina Mutual, a life insurance company that has become one of the largest black-owned businesses in the country.

In 1907, Mechanics and Farmers Bank was founded by another group of blacks, one of whom, James E. Shepard, later founded what became North Carolina Central.

Many older commercial buildings near North Carolina Central were demolished in the 1950's and 1960's to make way for roads and urban renewal projects. Many closer to the East Campus of Duke have been saved and now house intermittent blocks of coffee shops, restaurants, book and music stores that nurture an offbeat Southern sophistication.

"We don't have a strip," said Medina Clark, a 21-year-old junior from Atlanta who is majoring in theater at North Carolina Central. "We used to, back in the time."

Four decades after integration, some black families in Durham now have one generation that went to North Carolina Central and another that went to Duke. Some recall complicated emotions when they could finally choose between the two. Others recall racial tension.

State Representative Mickey Michaux, a Democratic from Durham who is black, graduated from North Carolina Central's law school in 1964. White law professors from Duke and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the next city west, taught some of his classes.

Mr. Michaux said that before the civil rights movement of the 1950's and 1960's, Duke, a private university, had "sort of a plantation mentality." But after his younger brother, Eric, graduated from Duke's law school in 1966 and was later rejected by a state lawyer's association because of his race, Duke withdrew its involvement from the association in protest, both brothers recalled.

"They said if you can't take one of our graduates, then we don't have any use for you," recalled Mickey Michaux, now 75.

Integration has also worked the other way. The state's governor, Michael F. Easley, a Democrat who is white, graduated from North Carolina Central's law school in 1975 and his wife, Mary, who is also white, taught law there for many years.

Richard H. Brodhead, the president of Duke, was asked in a telephone interview this week if the case involving the lacrosse team members would change the relationship between the two universities.

"Certainly," Mr. Brodhead said. "The funny thing is, Chancellor Ammons and I have made ever so many public appearances together in these last few weeks, but when the lacrosse case is over, the residue will be that our schools will work more closely together in many areas."

Both leaders say they are focused on preparing students for a more technological world.

"Being in the Research Triangle, you have to be at the top of your game," said Mr. Ammons, who came to North Carolina Central in June 2001 from Florida A&M University in Tallahassee, where he was provost and vice president for academic affairs. "They've been at it longer. They have a great reputation. But a rising tide lifts a lot of boats, and the region has such a reputation for education and innovation. We're in that environment, and we have to show that we can compete."

The challenge was evident on the North Carolina Central campus this week.

Danielle Gadson, a 19-year-old freshman from Winston-Salem who is majoring in marketing, said she was planning to transfer this summer to North Carolina A&T, another historically black state university, in Greensboro. Ms. Gadson said she was frustrated that the business school had lost its accreditation, though business school officials have said they hope to regain it as early as May.

"It's kind of behind," she said of North Carolina Central in general. Asked what she thought of Duke, she said, "I haven't been over there."

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