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Frederick Stephen Humphries

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Frederick Stephen Humphries was president of Tennessee State University from 1975 to 1985. His presidency covered a pivotal time in the university's history: not only did the University of Tennessee-Nashville merge with TSU, but there were frequent and often bitter discussions about university finances, accusations of having low academic standards, and debate over desegregation. The role of the HBCU in American higher education was debated as it had never been before.

Humphries was born December 26, 1935 in Apalachicola, Florida. He received a B.S. in chemistry from Florida A & M University in 1957. He chose chemistry as a major after he caused an accident in his high school laboratory: "I said, I'm gonna master this thing that damn near killed me!" And so I majored in chemistry ... that was the thing that smart people did. You either majored in math or you majored in chemistry...."¹ He earned his PhD in chemistry from the University of Pittsburgh in 1964. Prior to his presidency at TSU, Dr. Humphries had been associate professor of chemistry at Florida A & M and assistant professor at the University of Minnesota. He arrived at TSU from the vice-presidency of the Institute for Services to Education, which developed curricula for HBCUs.²

Upon his selection as president, in October 1974, Humphries said that he would strive "to remove the uncertainty around TSU's campus' as to its role in the entire state university system under the Board of Regents jurisdiction."³ He described TSU as a 'brow-beaten black institution," and he promised to improve faculty pay and student financial aid and to raise the public's opinion of TSU.⁴ Even before he was inaugurated the following year, Humphries questioned the need for UTN; one public university should be sufficient for Nashville.

The University of Tennessee had been offering limited courses in Nashville, at rented locations, since 1947⁵, and although it initially emphasized evening courses and graduate degrees, in the late 1960s it announced plans for a multimillion-dollar building and expanded offerings in

downtown Nashville. In 1968, Rita Sanders (later Geier) filed suit against the University of Tennessee system, claiming that the presence of the University of Tennessee-Nashville encouraged the continuation of a “dual system” of education. When the new building opened in 1972, the then-president of TSU, Dr. Andrew Torrance, recommended that UTN merge with TSU in order for TSU to meet its desegregation goals.

During a debate with UTN Chancellor Charles Smith at a 1977 Leadership Nashville meeting, Humphries argued that UTN was established because no one could imagine white students attending TSU. Although Smith countered that the campuses were distinctive and not in competition with each other, Humphries considered UTN and state desegregation strategies an excuse for abolishing HBCUs. He also objected to, as some state lawmakers proposed, the creation of a new university from the merger of the two Nashville educational institutions⁶.

A federal judge ruled in favor of the merger on January 31, 1977, and Humphries became the leader of the merged university, with the UTN campus becoming the TSU-Downtown campus (now the Avon-Williams campus) on July 1, 1979.

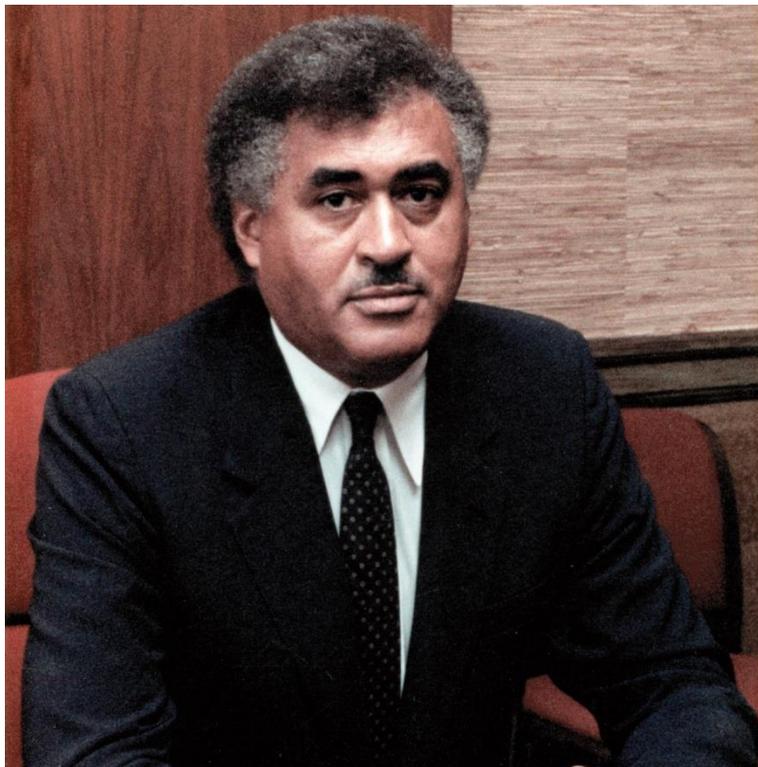
Humphries was placed on probation for nine months in 1977 and 1978 after more than twenty percent of students were academically ineligible to return for the fall 1977 semester, yet many of those were nevertheless allowed to register⁷; Humphries blamed outdated computers. Moreover, he said, “the problems at Tennessee State were deeply ingrained when I came. . . . Normally, a higher education president gets five years to straighten out his institutions problems when he takes the job.”⁸

Concerns over TSU’s racial makeup – African-American enrollment in the early 1980s was a higher percentage of the total than it had been in the late 1970s – and of hostility toward white faculty, staff, and students remained. Complaints that race influenced every campus decision

were frequent.⁹ In 1983, a judge ruled that TSU initiate plans to increase its white enrollment to fifty percent within ten years.¹⁰ The Geier case was finally settled in January 2001.¹¹

Humphries was outspoken in his concern that the 1983 NCAA Proposition 48, which and required minimum SAT/ACT scores and high school grade-point averages for prospective college athletes, would hurt historically-black colleges.¹²

Humphries resigned as TSU's president in 1985, when he was chosen as the president of FAMU, his alma mater. He served as FAMU until 2001. He was later President and CEO of the National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education.



¹ “Frederick Humphries,” The HistoryMakers (video) <https://www.thehistorymakers.org/biography/frederick-humphries-41> , accessed 18 May 2020.

² Keel Hunt, “TSU needs new priorities, President-Designate asserts,” *Tennessean*, October 6, 1974.

³ Marsha Vande Berg, “Humphries New TSU President,” *Tennessean* , October 4, 1974.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Winston Cram, “A lifetime of school made easy by extension service,” *Tennessean*, March 14, 1948.

⁶ “Colleges’ link would ensure integration” *Huntsville Times*, September 29, 1976.

⁷ Dwight Lewis, “Humphries should stay, regents member asserts” *Tennessean* June 26, 1977.

⁸ Dwight Lewis, “Humphries: may quit now or stay 9-month probation,” *Tennessean*, June 25, 1977.

⁹ Sandra Keyes, “TSU’s 1st ‘clean’ audit seen soon by state officials” *Tennessean*, November 20, 1981

¹⁰ Tom Mulgrew, “Attorneys hit appeal move in TSU ruling,” *Tennessean*, November 27, 1984.

¹¹ Michael Cass, “Higher-ed desegregation plan OK’d,” *Tennessean*, January 5, 2001.

¹² Elton Alexander, “Talent pool for pros shrinks at black colleges,” *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, February 21, 1983.