


By using the past to inform the present, Adler demonstrates the challenge facing the humanities today. If the content of what humanists study cannot be defended on its own terms, why does anyone need them? At the same time, Adler argues, the modern humanities must be expansive in their scope. Too often, subjects are chosen to reinforce parochial identities, whether that be “Western civilization” or more contemporary efforts to provide distinct curricula for marginalized identity groups. Instead, education must pull people out of their worlds. The humanities “force all students to look beyond the particular toward what we as human beings have in common” (p. 221).

Adler correctly frames the dilemma that the humanities confront. Humanities professors must defend the specific subject matter that they teach, not just “skills.” And Adler is also correct that professors should care about character. But Adler ignores the possibility that the modern university *is* about character. The scientific university is devoted to knowledge. This means that the people who inhabit the university—professors and students—should embody a particular kind of subjectivity and cultivate specific intellectual virtues. Adler may not consider this the right kind of character, but it is nonetheless a deeply moral project.

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David W. Levy. *Breaking Down Barriers: George McLaurin and the Struggle to End Segregated Education*

Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2020. 233 pp.

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The black-and-white photograph of George Washington McLaurin, a well-dressed, elderly African American gentleman—sitting alone in an alcove apart from his White classmates in a graduate class in 1948 at the University of Oklahoma (OU)—has long caught the attention of legal and civil rights scholars and educational historians.

Numerous papers, articles, and video clips have touched on McLaurin, who served as a key NAACP plaintiff in the fight to desegregate higher education, but until late 2020, there has been no book-length account of McLaurin and the well-known court case he headlined. Thanks to David W. Levy, that void is now filled.

Levy details the pivotal case *McLaurin v. Oklahoma State Regents* (1950), explaining how it gained national attention in 1948 when the federal court ruled that McLaurin should either be admitted to the university’s doctoral program or the program should be shut down altogether. The panel argued that because McLaurin could not otherwise acquire an opportunity to pursue a doctorate, by denying him admission, the state had violated his constitutional rights.



Figure 1. George W. McLaurin attending first class after court fight. Source: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20540 USA, <https://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/ds.14150>.

But as Levy explains, the ruling fell short of declaring that Oklahoma's segregation laws were unconstitutional. Instead, the judges added a bizarre sentence to their opinion: "This does not mean, however, that the segregation laws in Oklahoma are incapable of enforcement" (p. 79). OU chose to continue offering the program and admitted McLaurin. Levy then traces OU's solution: university officials would seat him separately from White classmates and make other segregated arrangements in the dining hall, restrooms, and at sporting events. As other Blacks gained entry into OU, some of the restrictions were modified but not eliminated. McLaurin's separation persisted for more than twenty months.

On appeal, the US Supreme Court in June 1950 reversed the lower court, ruling that McLaurin's differential treatment violated the Fourteenth Amendment's equal protection clause. *McLaurin* did not strike down *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), but quoting Justice Thurgood Marshall, Levy explains that the decision, along with a sister case in Texas and other NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund (LDF) victories, "gutted" it (p. 193). Levy thus offers a thorough and well-written account of these circumstances surrounding the McLaurin case and the several key cases and actions the NAACP and their local affiliates took from 1938 forward.

Levy also places the story in the context of Oklahoma history. Notably, we learn a great deal about the territory and later the state vis-à-vis politics and racial disharmony in the Jim Crow South central region.

Less well known, however, we learn from Levy that McLaurin left the program shortly after the ruling. As the NAACP pushed forward toward *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), McLaurin quietly and mysteriously dropped out. Here, Levy tries to make sense of this retreat as well as McLaurin's longer story, but like others who have studied McLaurin, he finds scant evidence and can only illuminate minimal characteristics of the man, his family, and his activism. What little Levy does find shows up on a dozen pages in the middle and end of the book. Other than census records, Levy found no sources about the McLaurins, who in their twenties had migrated from the Mississippi Delta to Oklahoma around 1910. McLaurin's professional or personal life prior to 1948 and his thirty-three-year career as an instructor at Langston University from 1915 to 1948 also remain mostly unknown. Moreover, the scant evidence Levy does find casts McLaurin as quiet, ordinary, and perhaps less committed to civil rights than other NAACP plaintiffs. By 1949, LDF lawyers and local counsel "had taken a distinct dislike to him," possibly because McLaurin was "still riding [them] for pay" (p. 207).

In those dozen pages, Levy outlines that the McLaurins raised three high-achieving children, sold used books out of their home, and invested in real estate in Oklahoma City. He also notes that in 1923, McLaurin's wife, Penninah, applied to but was turned away by OU, making her the first African American to apply for admission at the institution. But beyond these few puzzle pieces, we learn almost nothing about their teaching at Langston, home life, or finances.

My initial research on McLaurin uncovered many of the same puzzle pieces that Levy found—that the McLaurins had three children, Joffre (1914), Phyllis (1918), and Dunbar (1920), and were featured in *Ebony* (December 1948) as "the most educated family in Oklahoma," in part because they had "piled up 21 advanced degrees and certificates" (p. 66). All three children finished college at the age of sixteen, and "all taught at Langston University." Notably, Dunbar earned a PhD in economics at the University of Illinois at the age of twenty-one.

Levy's research also confirms my findings that by the time George began attending graduate classes in 1948, Dunbar was a millionaire. After he and Joffre served in the US Army in the Pacific during World War II, they established a company in the Philippines that bought, repaired, and resold US military surplus jeeps, tractors, cranes, and other heavy-duty equipment. After returning to the United States, Dunbar became a highly successful banker, economist, lawyer, professor, entrepreneur, and self-styled ambassador, even joining forces with famed baseball player Jackie Robinson to found the first Black-owned and operated bank in New York City (p. 66). Upon his return from the Philippines, Joffre attended graduate school in Kansas, Illinois, and Colorado, and then taught in the Los Angeles public schools (where his sister, Phyllis, joined him in teaching); there is some evidence that Joffre may have become a principal.

Dunbar's wealth, success, and message of Black uplift through Black business ownership regularly put him and his wife, Elizabeth, on the glamour pages of the *Amsterdam News* until his tragic suicide in 1973. Although beyond the scope of Levy's book and this journal, there certainly is a need—and opportunity—to better understand what forces led such a well-educated and accomplished man at the pinnacle of life to abruptly self-destroy. As for George and Penninah, they remained in Oklahoma City until her death in 1966. George moved to Los Angeles to live with Phyllis and died two years later.

Levy concludes that the life and times of George and Penninah McLaurin remain largely a mystery. (A footnote in Levy's book mentions that a third researcher, Linda Reese, also hit a dead end in her unpublished paper "Searching for George W. McLaurin: Forgotten Civil Rights Hero.")

Perhaps somewhere in an attic in Mount Vernon, Los Angeles, or Oklahoma City sits a dusty box waiting for a historian with clues and more evidence about George and Penninah, and perhaps even about Dunbar. In the meantime, Levy's book joins a growing number of book-length accounts about other former LDF plaintiffs, notably Lloyd Gaines, Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher, and Heman Marion Sweatt. As such, *Breaking Down Barriers* helps to flesh out as best as possible the stories behind the court cases in higher education that paved the road to *Brown*.

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Kurt Edward Kemper. *Before March Madness: The Wars for the Soul of College Basketball*

Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2020. 294 pp.

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Since the earliest days of intercollegiate sports competition, the relationship between academic goals and athletic aspirations has been a recurring source of controversy. The objective of producing winning teams without sacrificing academic integrity often proved to be a delicate balancing act and sometimes a source of despair among leading officials at academic institutions. In January 1962, John T. Caldwell, the chancellor of North Carolina State College, addressed the dilemma in the wake of a point-shaving scandal at his school. He explained that college sports is the "only activity of [an academic] institution which excites the common interest of large numbers of students, large numbers of the faculty, large numbers of alumni, and large segments of the general public." But this benefit often caused "painful" problems for administrators who sought to "satisfy partially the idealism of the educator, the appetites of sports enthusiasts, and the balance sheets of trustees and business officers." In attempting to meet the competing and sometimes incompatible demands of those constituents, Caldwell suggested that he and his counterparts in schools across the nation had "a bear by the tail."¹ At the center of efforts to gain control of the bear was the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA).

Many scholars have carefully studied and analyzed the history of the NCAA's attempts to legislate against violations of academic integrity and to promote a level

¹J. Samuel Walker, *ACC Basketball: The Story of the Rivalries, Traditions, and Scandals of the First Two Decades of the Atlantic Coast Conference* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 131.