

UNC Charlotte Historical Overview of Race, Racism, and Resistance: 1830 - 2023

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Introduction

The University of North Carolina at Charlotte is one of the 16 universities within the UNC system. UNC Charlotte was originally the College of Charlotte and was founded to meet the educational needs of veterans returning from WW2 in the late 1940s (Sanford, 1996). The University grew from the roots of Charlotte College and has emerged as one of the three largest universities within the UNC system. Situated in the South, in a rural geographic area at its founding as a university, UNC Charlotte has become the state's urban university. Unlike some Southern universities, UNC Charlotte has no intense history associated with integration, such as riots or protests (Sanford, 1996). The history of race, racism, and resistance at the university is largely undocumented. However, it is crucial to document as the university community is situated within this history; its effects and implications for both UNC Charlotte and the City of Charlotte are ongoing.

This historical brief seeks to establish a framework for understanding the history of race, racism, and resistance at UNC Charlotte and provides foundational information that could be expanded upon in future research.

It is important to note that this history was approached with an attitude of curiosity and understanding, not denunciation. This historical brief is written from the paradigm of being critical but not condemning. I also recognize my own position as someone from the "outside" writing this history; I am a White individual who has been with UNC Charlotte for less than a year. I completed this project as a component of my work as an MSW field placement student with the Urban Institute at UNC Charlotte.

This historical brief will cover the history of the land that composes the UNC Charlotte campuses and describe the history of Charlotte College and its counterpart Carver College. It will also highlight the experiences of Black and Latinx communities at UNC Charlotte and depict UNC Charlotte today.

Research Approach

This brief was written using a variety of available resources. The book *Charlotte and UNC Charlotte: Growing up together* by Ken Sanford (1996) was my starting point and was integral to the overall structure of the history of UNC Charlotte. From there, I sought to fill in identified gaps concerning the areas of race, racism, and resistance. I worked backward from the current land ownership using the Mecklenburg County [Property Ownership and Land Records System](#) and the Mecklenburg County [Register of Deeds Historical Land Records](#) to trace the land history (see UNC Charlotte Land History Map at end of brief). Then, I listened to a selection of oral histories conducted by Atkins librarians to put together themes of the experiences of Black and Latinx students and faculty at UNC Charlotte. Additionally, I pulled data from the UNC Charlotte Institutional Research Analytics system to examine demographic data. Throughout this process, I supplemented these frameworks with issues-specific publications to understand relevant issues, such as specific events or historic structures. Lastly, I identified several areas where the research falls short and can be a starting point for further work.

Land History and Acknowledgement

To understand the history of race, racism, and resistance at UNC Charlotte, one must start with the land on which the university is built. In October 2021, the university established a [monument](#) on campus, and its plaque reads:

With respect to the land and people who preceded us, the University of North Carolina at Charlotte acknowledges that we are on colonized land traditionally belonging to the Catawba, Cheraw, Sugeree, Wateree, and Waxhaw Peoples, all of whom have stewarded this land throughout the generations. Before this land was colonized and named the city of Charlotte, it was used as a place of meeting and trade by a diverse group of Indigenous peoples, including the Catawba, Cherokee, Congaree, and Saponi. We also acknowledge that the greater Charlotte region has directly profited from the enslavement and forced labor of African people and their descendants. We recognize that knowing, acknowledging, and honoring the history of the land and the people is only the first step. We must support and listen to Indigenous and Black voices, while continuing to address the policies and practices that perpetuate oppression. (Pardo, 2021, para. 7).

This acknowledgment highlights that the Charlotte-Mecklenburg region was once the land of several native tribes (North Carolina Museum of History, 2023). European colonizers gradually removed the Catawba, Cheraw, Sugeree, Wateree, and Waxhaw Peoples from the North Carolina Piedmont. This occurred through forced removal, smallpox outbreaks, deadly conflicts with European settlements, and migration agreements and treaties that continually moved the

people farther West, including the Indian Removal Act of 1830, also known as the Trail of Tears (North Carolina Museum of History, 2023).

The land acknowledgment plaque at UNC Charlotte also highlights the impact of enslaved African and African-American people on the region. At least part of the land that constitutes the current footprint of UNC Charlotte's main campus was formerly a plantation on which the landowners enslaved people of African descent (Landmark Commission, 1976; see UNC Charlotte Land History Map).

By 1860, enslaved people accounted for 40% of the population of Mecklenburg County (Gray & Stathakis, 2002). However, there is very little documentation on the lives of these individuals. There is one remaining former dwelling of enslaved people left in Mecklenburg County. It is located in the woods off Plaza Road Extension, about 6 miles from UNC Charlotte (Ellenburg, 2019).

UNC Charlotte Main Campus Land History

In 1957, Mary Charlotte Walker Alexander donated five acres of land to Charlotte College for a road leading to the new campus (Sanford, 1996). Mary Alexander was the daughter-in-law of William Tasse (WT) Alexander I and inherited the land that was formerly a plantation (Landmarks Commission, 1976; see UNC Charlotte Land History Map). WT Alexander owned and operated a plantation that reached 935 acres at its height and enslaved at least 30 individuals (Landmarks Commission, 1976). The Alexander plantation slave cemetery is located at the Mallard Creek Road and North Tryon Street intersection on the northern edge of UNC Charlotte's campus within the Thornberry Apartment complex (Dominick, 2016). It is estimated that up to 50 enslaved individuals are interred there. There are about 30 graves marked with uncut stones in the cemetery. The cemetery is protected by a fence and is marked with a historical sign along the roadway and at the entrance to the cemetery.

Around 1958,¹ Charlotte College acquired approximately 250 acres of land from the Construction Brick and Tile Company to be used as the new site for Charlotte College (Sanford, 1996). This parcel of land was undeveloped at the time of purchase. In the previous decades, this 250-acre tract had been divided into many smaller parcels and had changed hands often (see UNC Charlotte Land History Map). A large component of this land was originally sold from the will of Sarah J. Hutchinson in 1930. However, records of the Hutchinson family and their land use, specifically as a plantation, were not recovered.

¹ This date differs across sources, including in land deed documents. The disparity may originate in differing dates on when the Charlotte college decided to buy it, bought it, built on it, and moved in. Additionally, Charlotte College joined the UNC system during this time frame.

Notably, one of the land change deeds from 1949 for tracts of land that would later become UNC Charlotte had racially restrictive language that stated, “this property [is] not to be sold to anyone of African descent” (see UNC Charlotte Land History Map).

UNC Charlotte Center City Land History

The Dubois Center at UNC Charlotte Center City opened in 2011 in the First Ward of Uptown Charlotte. The Dubois Center campus is located on the edge of the former [Earle Village](#) public housing neighborhood (de la Canal, 2018). Earle Village was opened in 1967 to house individuals who had been displaced through the urban renewal of historic [Brooklyn](#). Brooklyn was a historic Black neighborhood that was demolished in the early 1960s via urban renewal, and effectively all neighborhood residents were displaced (Grundy, 2020). Thirty-five years later (or, one generation later), in 1995, in the name of urban renewal again, Earle Village was torn down, and residents were displaced once more. The City of Charlotte planned to rebuild a mixed-income development as its replacement. Earle Village residents were promised they would have a place to return to. However, the over 400 housing units were reduced to about 220, and only about 44 families, or 12 percent of displaced people, moved into the new development (de la Canal, 2018).

Charlotte College and Carver College

What is now UNC Charlotte was first established as the Charlotte Center and then Charlotte College (Sanford, 1996). Before the establishment of the Charlotte Center, three other universities were located in Mecklenburg County. Davidson College was established in 1837 for White men, and Queens College was opened in 1857 for White women. Johnson C. Smith University was founded in 1876 for recently emancipated Black men (women were admitted starting in 1932). After World War II, two junior colleges were opened to meet the needs of returning veterans seeking to use the Servicemen's Readjustment Act, i.e., the GI Bill. The Charlotte Center was opened in 1946, offering night classes at Charlotte Central High School. The same year, Carver College opened in Second Ward High School to provide Black students similar opportunities. Carver College was named after the prominent Black agricultural scientist George Washington Carver. The Charlotte Center changed to Charlotte College in 1949 when the city of Charlotte took over the school after the state stopped funding evening college centers (Sanford, 1996).

In 1961, Charlotte College was on the way to becoming a 4-year university and part of the North Carolina university system; during this year, the college also moved onto its new campus. There was one four-year graduating class of Charlotte College in 1965, which included one Black student. Charlotte College became UNC Charlotte later that year (Sanford, 1996).

Also in 1961, debates occurred regarding whether Mecklenburg County should keep two separate community colleges for White and Black students. The Charlotte Mecklenburg Council on Human Relations (1961) argued that one community college would better serve the needs of both populations of students in that the resources for both could be pooled and the school integrated. Other parties, including [Charlotte News](#), argued to keep the colleges separate to better provide for “special needs for Negroes.” Another circulating argument was to keep the two colleges so that Charlotte College could go on to be a university and Carver College could stay as a community college, regardless of race (Charlotte Mecklenburg Council on Human Relations, 1961).

The third option succeeded. Carver College became Mecklenburg College, and then in 1963, merged with the all-White Central Industrial Education Center, effectively integrating the two to create the new Central Piedmont Community College (CPC). CPC still serves the community college needs of the Charlotte Mecklenburg region today.

Dean W. Colvard, UNC Charlotte’s first chancellor, had previously led Mississippi State University in admitting the first Black student, despite the opposition of the state's governor Ross Barnett (Sanford, 1996). However, UNC Charlotte has no documentation of a controversial desegregation process. This lack of controversy may be due to the change in campus and the shift of Charlotte College to UNC Charlotte during the same years other institutions went through the integration process. Many changes were already happening to the college, and the integration issue may not have been at the forefront of the public’s attention. This is an area of research that could be explored more fully in future work.

The Experiences of Black Students at UNC Charlotte

The [Telling Our Stories: Black Alumni Oral History](#) collection was conducted by librarians at the Atkins Library and documents several themes about the experience of Black students at UNC Charlotte. The alums who shared their stories repeatedly spoke to the topics of creating and finding community through the African American and African studies department, Black-run organizations, and historically Black sororities and fraternities. This section highlights the history of notable Black student organizations, the impact of these organizations, and the impact and response of the Black student body to national and international events.

In February 1969, the Black student body on campus called for [raising a black flag](#) on the campus flagpole in response to the killing of three Black students by police in the Orangeburg massacre in Orangeburg, SC, a year prior. This event was met with resistance among some of the student body, especially veterans. The following week, an [editorial](#) published in the student newspaper declared that the “Black caucus” sought to promote “disunity, racial hatred, and

bigotry” through their actions. A ban was put on Black students meeting in groups of more than three to prevent the forming of a Black student union. Nevertheless, the following semester in the Fall of 1969, the Black Student Union (BSU)*² and the African American and African (AAA) department were founded. The Black Gospel Choir also formed, which was later succeeded by the Children of the Sun Gospel Choir. In 1976, the first Black student body president was elected. Most White students were gone for a basketball tournament, but most Black students could not afford to attend. The election was held as scheduled during this time, and the students returned to campus to a new student body president.

The AAA department was integral to the experience of Black students on campus. Alumni noted the department’s significance as it fostered connections between similar students and that one knew everyone’s name within the Black community. [The alumni described](#) the AAA department as a family, a safe haven, and feeling like a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) within a Predominantly White Institution (PWI). The department empowered students to “let your voice be heard” and “take your claim” in the academic community. The professors in the department played an important role as mentors. In the present day, this department is the Department of Africana Studies.

Other organizations that Black alumni noted as being integral to their experience include the United Religious Ministry Council, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority*, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority*, Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, the Student Advising for Freshman Excellence (SAFE) program*, the University Transitions Opportunity Program (UTOP) program*, and the Campus Activities Board (CAB)*. Alumni reflected that as freshmen, it was crucial for them to see leaders who looked like them in leadership roles in these organizations and in others across campus. Of course, these noted organizations only represent some of the clubs and organizations that, historically and at present, positively impacted the diverse student body.

Resistance and Protests

Black alumni also noted that the Black student body was attuned to issues around the world, and there were responses on campus in response to national and world events. The 1969 raising of a black flag was one example of this. In 1987, many UNC Charlotte students took buses to Forsyth County, Georgia, to join a [protest](#) organized by civil rights leaders to protest the historic removal of Black people from the county. In the 1980s, students were a part of the protests that occurred on college campuses across the country to [protest apartheid](#) in South Africa. In 2007, students protested the [Jena 6 decision](#), where six Black teenagers in Jena, Louisiana, were convicted of crimes associated with an assault on a White teenager.

² Organizations with an (*) are still active on campus at the time of this writing.

In 2016, an event much closer to campus elicited student reactions and national attention. [Keith Lamont Scott](#), a Black man, was killed by police near campus in September 2016. The Black student union and NAACP hosted a 12-hour sit-in of the Union. Alumni recalled pushback from some White students against the protest but also conversations about how ongoing racism affected students in and out of the classroom.

The Experiences of Latinx Faculty and Students at UNC Charlotte

This research revealed little documented content about the history and tradition of Latinx students at UNC Charlotte. An oral history project highlighted the experiences of five current Latinx faculty at UNC Charlotte. Dr. Yvette Huet highlighted that when she came to UNC Charlotte in the 1990s, “you were either Black or you were White – there was nothing else.” The culture and status of this group were recognized more recently through formal organizations and informally through a greater understanding of diverse identities. The themes highlighted by these interviews included the benefits of Latinx culture student-run events, a Latinx / Hispanic faculty and staff caucus, and the ADVANCE Faculty Affairs and Diversity office. Additionally, there is a Latinx student union and other student organizations, all providing resources and connections to Latinx / Hispanic students, faculty, and staff.

UNC Charlotte Today

Currently, UNC Charlotte is one of the three largest universities in North Carolina, with a total student enrollment of 29,551 as of Fall 2022. Of the 2022 [student population](#):

- About 16.5% of students identify as Black,
- 12.2% identify as Hispanic/Latinx,
- 8.7% identify as Asian,
- 50% identify as White, and
- 4.4% identify as two or more races.
- 80 students identify as American Indian and 15 as Pacific Islanders.
- About 7% of enrolled students are international students.

Figures 1, 2, and 3 display student demographics over time.

Of the 1,117 total [faculty members in 2022](#):

- 9% identify as Black,
- 3.9% identify as Hispanic/Latinx,
- 13.2% identify as Asian,
- 66% as identify White
- Less than 1% identify as two or more races, and

- 6% as identify as non-US citizens.

Demographic data for staff employed by UNC Charlotte is not available.

The total footprint of UNC Charlotte today is [1000 acres](#). UNC Charlotte has an [all-expenses budget](#) of \$912,294,688 for the 2022-2023 academic year. The major categories for expense include salaries and wages (41%), staff benefits (13%), supplies, materials, and equipment (7%), services (14%), scholarships and fellowships (16%), debt service (5%), utilities (2%), and other expenses (2%) (UNC Charlotte FY 2022-23 All-Funds Budget).

Student Demographics 1972 – 2022

Figure 1. UNC Charlotte Student Demographics 1972 - 2022

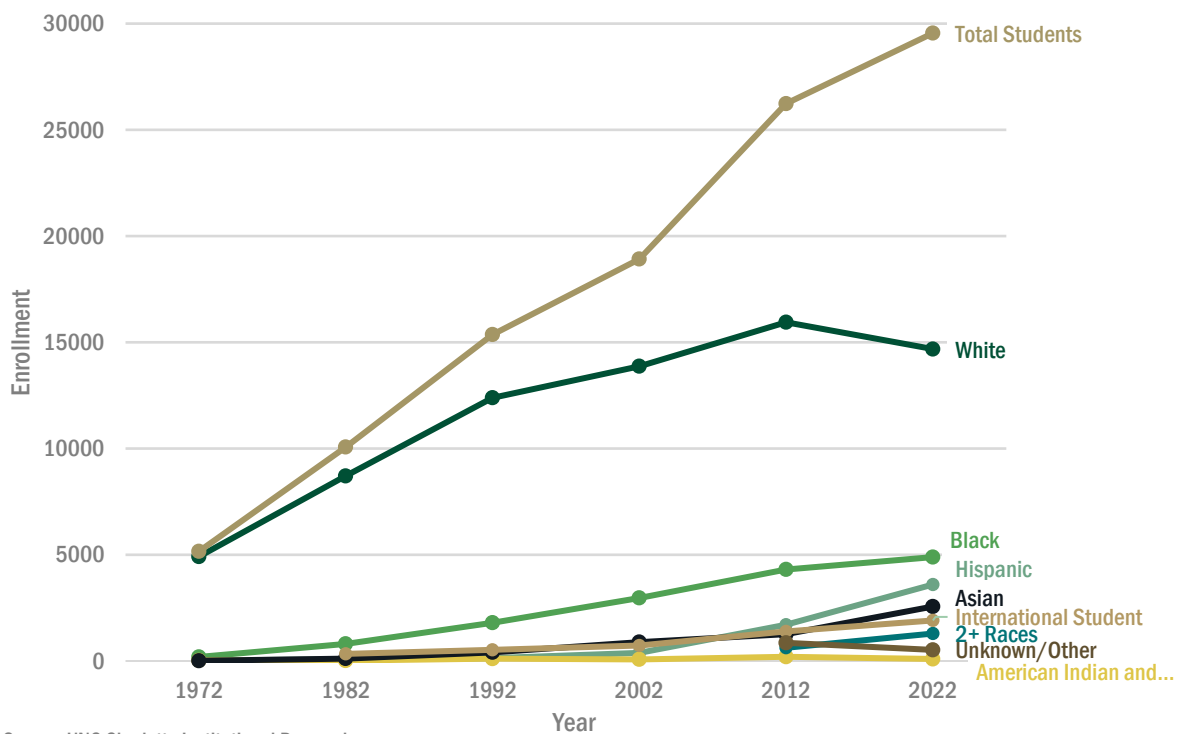


Figure 2. UNC Charlotte Student Demographics 1972-2022, Excluding Total Students and White Students

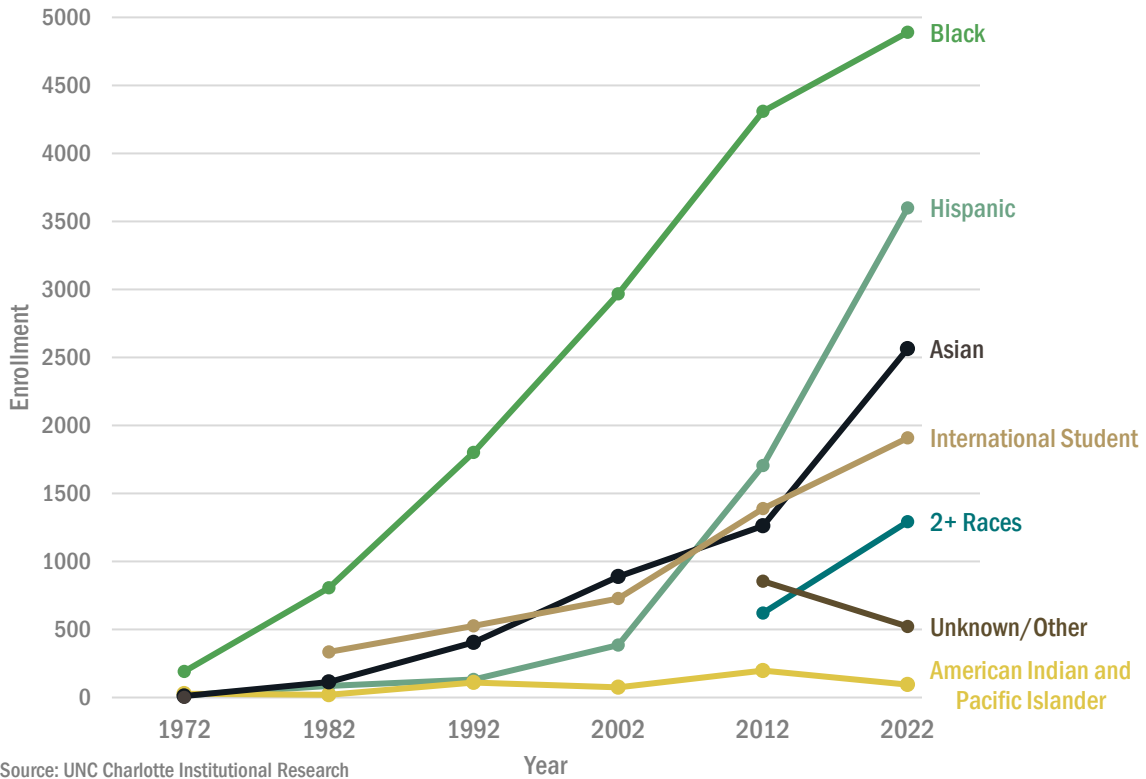
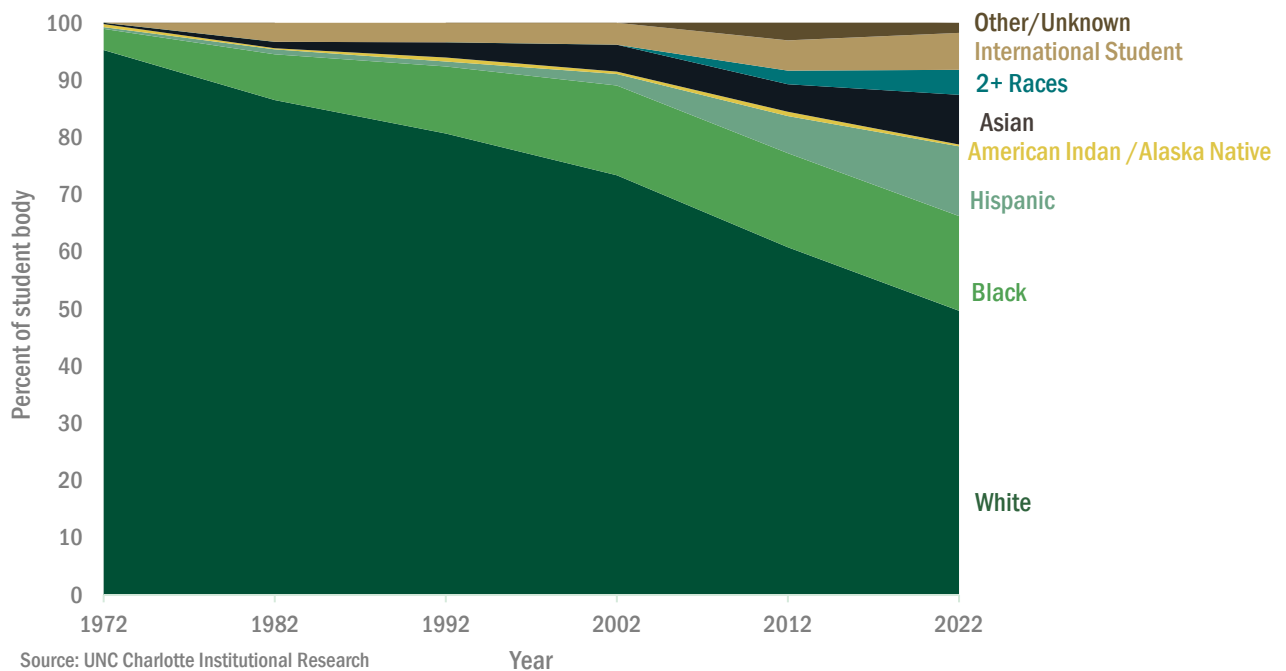


Figure 3. UNC Charlotte Student Demographics 1972-2022 By Percentage



Conclusion

This historical brief highlighted key aspects of UNC Charlotte's history concerning race, racism, and resistance. However, some elements are missing from this history. One notable missing piece includes the experiences of Hispanic / Latinx students and other students of historically marginalized groups. Another area where further research could be conducted is further tracing back the land on which UNC Charlotte sits. The current land history is incomplete; most of the land only traces back to the 1930s. Additionally, each area of this brief could be explored more fully and in-depth. This research stands as a starting point for further work.

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UNC Charlotte Land History Map

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Numbers refer to Mecklenburg County Register Of Deeds Remote Access Site for Historical Land Records: Book#.Page#

