The Bursar's Office sit-in

Racial progress at Northwestern, never particularly smooth or steady, had reached a sharp turning point by the 1967–68 school year, when the African American enrollment on the Evanston campus had risen to 160. Until 1966 it had been almost always less than 50. The University’s accomplishments in recruiting and admitting more African Americans were positive, but the immediate result was that difficult racial issues were bubbling up with more force than ever.

Among these issues was the strict segregation of housing in Evanston and the resulting lack of decent apartments for African American undergraduates and graduate students near campus. This situation had been difficult for several years, although the University had long refused to impose sanctions against local landlords who discriminated. Eventually the University came around and wrote letters to all landlords expressing their intolerance of such practices. This was too little, too late for many African American students, who were already forming organizations on campus.

In the spring of 1968 Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, and race riots tore open many American cities, including Chicago. Very quickly, several African American organizations at Northwestern grew militant and expressed starkly separatist views.

The black undergraduate group For Members Only called for the organization of black-only fraternities, an idea that was widely resisted by white students. “I can’t see that we’re doing anything but encouraging campus segregation,” said one student in the Daily. But, despite the controversy, the idea was soon endorsed by the administration.

Racial strains did not abate. Later that spring, African American students made additional demands related to recruiting, admissions, and curriculum matters. When the administration balked, the students took their most radical step to date. On May 3, more than 100 members of For Members Only and the graduate student organization called the Afro-American Student Union marched to the administration complex and occupied the Bursar’s Office in the first major sit-in experienced at Northwestern. The students delivered an expanded list of demands and threatened to keep the financial nerve center of the University closed until they were satisfied. For 36 hours, the occupation of the Bursar’s Office was a peaceful though tense confrontation. “Closed for Business ‘till Racism at NU Is Ended,” read a sign on the door. The press gathering outside was told by the protesters’ spokespeople that nothing would be damaged as long as police didn’t move against them.

Police did not. Instead, Roland Hinz, who was then vice president of student affairs, opened negotiations with James Turner ’68, the leader of the Afro-American Student Union. Mindful of angrier student protests at Columbia and Berkeley that spring, the administration carefully considered the student ultimatum. And so they came to terms. On a number of matters, the administration promised student involvement, though they drew the line when it came to admissions and financial aid decisions. Importantly, the administration drafted a concise and largely acquiescent
response to the student demands. One of the most enduring concessions was the development of a Department of Afro-American Studies.

When the crisis was over and the Bursar's Office vacated, the press gave mixed reviews. The Chicago Tribune, still a strongly conservative newspaper, wrote a harsh editorial criticizing the University for giving in to "Black Power." But other papers, including the Daily Northwestern, endorsed the agreement between the African American students and the Miller administration. "It again places 'old, conservative Northwestern' among the leading institutions in attempting to understand Negro needs," the Daily editorialized.

The rise of Eva Jefferson

Another important effect of the 1968 protest was the rise of one of the most celebrated Northwestern students of the era, Eva Jefferson '71. A middle-class African American, Jefferson was a freshman when she participated in the occupation of the Bursar's Office. In the years that followed she was involved in campus politics on many levels until she was elected in April 1970 as the Associated Student Government's president, the highest student office at the University.

While Jefferson was not a separatist, her platform had a radical edge. "The quality of education is poor," she said. "The quality of social life is poor, and the quality of student services is poor." She blamed these problems on a lack of student participation and vowed to encourage change.

Initially, student apathy looked like it would be hard to crack. In Jefferson's election campaign, most student forums had more candidates in attendance than other students. While Jefferson defeated the fraternity-endorsed candidate (who was also black) by a comfortable margin, little was expected of her or her office at Northwestern University.
first. Political activism on campus was rising, but it was mostly focused on national issues – the environment and Vietnam – not Jefferson’s campaign issues, which had more to do with the conduct of fraternity and sorority rush.

But Eva Jefferson quickly showed herself to be bigger than the relatively toothless student government. Her moment came in early May 1970 after the Ohio National Guard shot and killed four student protesters at Kent State University, igniting one of the largest national student protests in history. The next day, a nationwide “student strike” was called, and 5,000 Northwestern students responded by attending a rally in Deering Meadow. Eva Jefferson rose to lead it.

Northwestern’s strike was eventful. It was supported by the faculty and won the endorsement of the administration. Classes were called off for the remainder of the week. In a spontaneous act of rebellion, students barricaded Sheridan Road and passed out leaflets to drivers. Accompanying these peaceful events were the more violent arson burnings of the Department of Linguistics, suspected (wrongly) of engaging in military research, and the Traffic Institute, regarded as a police bastion in a time when police were broadly regarded as political enemies of anti-war students. But compared to many other campuses, Northwestern’s strike was orderly, and the person most credited for that was Jefferson. When a contingent of radical students started a night-time raid on the NROTC building, Jefferson got on the loudspeakers: “I can see torches out there,” she said. “I don’t know what they are, but they remind me of other torches on other nights.” Her allusion was to the Ku Klux Klan, and these words from a black woman had the moral authority to end what might have been an ugly conflagration.

There was a moderate tone to Jefferson’s leadership of the strike, but she was never accused of weakness. And over the summer and school year that followed, she became a celebrity and nationally recognized student spokesperson. A high point came when she appeared with three other students to debate Vice President Spiro Agnew on The David Frost Show. Jefferson was the lightning rod of this 90-minute exchange, especially when the vice president accused her repeatedly of advocating violence.

“I wish you would listen to what I am saying, because I have said two or three times that I am not in favor of violence,” she snapped at Agnew. “I have never participated in a violent act except at the Chicago ‘police convention,’ called the Democratic Convention, in which I was tear gassed.”

Jefferson did not persuade Agnew to change his views, but she got fan mail for weeks after her appearance with him. And she succeeded in influencing some other notable conservative Republicans, namely those on the Northwestern Board of Trustees. During the strike, she even cajoled board chairman John G. Searle to wear a red antiwar armband at a meeting she had with board members and senior administrators. In the strike’s aftermath, Eva Jefferson convinced many other conservatives at Northwestern that the student protest movement was an intelligent force to be reckoned with.