Thousands of College Students Participate in the Million Man March

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Thousands of well-dressed black men with baseball caps strolled through the streets of downtown Washington.

A STEADY WALK

At a few minutes before 7, the group left Howard on a two-mile walk to the Mall, where a crowd eventually estimated by the National Park Service at 400,000 was building. A black junior on a third-story fire escape on the campus gave a raised fist salute as the marchers passed by. For the first time, the students chanted, "Who are we? Strong black men!" loudly enough to be heard by the men shooting basketball on the first-floor windows.

A small crowd of women tagged along on the sidewalk, taking photographs and spurring on the marchers with chants of, "Keep on, black men, keep on!"

College students from across the country, no matter how far, joined the morning march at Howard, took at least a day away from studying to come to the event in Washington. In some instances, this was no small sacrifice, since many colleges were in the midst of midterm examinations, or close to them.

Students said black men in college had a special place here, even though they may suffer less than other black people from the problems that inspired the march, such as violence, unemployment and incarceration. They related these experiences to the strongest counterexamples to the margin.

On the Mall, Russell Willis, a first-year graduate student in education at Harvard University, who was wearing a sweatshirt with the Harvard name prominently displayed, "I wanted to show that people in higher-education institutions are in support of the march," he said. "We are the black men who are coming together, and we have a responsibility to the next generation."

"Ready to do something"

"A lot of people in their 20s have been ready to do something—they took someone to initiate it," said Chris Chavis, a junior at North Carolina A&T University and a distant cousin of the Rev. Benjamin Chavis, an organizer of the march. He drove up with three friends in a Mason. "We are not the Generation X or whatever."

Louis Farrakhan, the most conspicuous organizer of the Million Man March, called it a "holy day of atonement," on which black men would renounce violence, drugs, and the abuse of women. The student participants to that extent, if at least they had already rejected such things. "Atonement means coming to grips with the idea of unity," said Antonio Barnes, an international-finance major at Howard. "I think college students are very much a part of that."

Most of the students had to get to and out from Washington quickly. Malcolm, from Boston, on the football team at Hampton University, said he had worked on an engineering project until midnight, when the bus for Washington departed. He was building a space station. "At 5.m. tomorrow I'll be back in the lab before you know it. That's what this is about: education."

IMPROMPTU SHUTTLE SERVICE

The State University of New York at Brockport sent a bus to pick up students down in town. Shaw University sent two full buses. Emory University's student government helped with a $2,000 cost to charter a coach for 75 students.

On some campuses, participants said, the size of the contingent itself gave a hint of the challenges facing black America. For example, almost all of the black men at Swarthmore College in suburban Philadelphia marched—and one van was enough to hold them.

Students at the Black People's Union of George Washington University worked out a shuttle service for students flying to and from National Airport, and women in that group held a breakfast for the men on the morning of the march. On the Howard portion of the march, women didn't seem to be bothered by being forced to the margins. "This is not for us, it's for them," said Wanda Moniz, a Howard sophomore.

Some students who couldn't make the Million Man March arranged events on their campuses. Students at the University of Texas at Austin joined with others at Huston-Tillotson College for a rally that drew several hundred people. Black-student leaders at Iowa State University asked students to watch television coverage of the march. Some students said they did not necessarily support Mr. Farrakhan, but were grateful for the attention.

"I was sick of it," said one. "I was sick of it."