Sitting deep in the American South, the University of Louisiana at Lafayette is not immune to a past of racial segregation. When segregation was legal, the University was known as the Southwestern Louisiana Institute of Liberal and Technical Learning (SLI).

"In 1953, several black students from Lafayette attempted to enroll in SLI," Michael Martin, Ph.D. said. "They were not allowed to enroll because of the state's segregation laws. Therefore, they filed suit against the university, its president Joel Fletcher, and its registrar. The case became known as Constantine v. SLI, from the name of the first of four students in the suit, Clara Dell Constantine."

"That makes SLI's the earliest large scale desegregation of a previously all-white college in the deep South."

Martin is a professor in the history department, and he organized the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the desegregation of the university back in 2004.

"By the spring of 1954, it was evident that the US District Court was going to rule in favor of the plaintiffs, and Constantine and her cohort would be allowed to enroll," Martin said. "That May, the U.S. Supreme Court issued its ruling in Brown v. Board, which declared separate but equal unconstitutional in educational facilities, and that pretty much sealed the deal. That fall about 90 black students enrolled at SLI."

And thus, SLI became a pinnacle of southern desegregation.

"That makes SLI's the earliest large scale desegregation of a previously all-white college in the deep South," Martin said.

The university has clung to the idea of their peaceful desegregation. According to the university's website, "there was no bloodshed when four black students were granted admission."

But Martin reveals another point of view.

"Second, just because SLI was first doesn't mean that the college or its leadership was particularly progressive. In reality, they had to be forced to let black students in. And they fought hard for it not to happen," Martin said. "Even after black students were on campus, it was made clear that they could only go to certain areas and they were very much disliked by most of the school's faculty and administration."

An article by Darla Montgomery on KLKY holds that the event was not without issues.

"The campus was spared violent clashes, but the progress was not without racial tension," Montgomery said. "The experience was acrimonious..."

And it is that history that can sometimes still be felt at the university.

"Of course the separation of races is still evident here at UL. However, that has decreased dramatically in the 16 years I've been a faculty member," Martin said. "The big concern I have about this has less to do with interactions on campus and more to do with access to the university itself, something that is reminiscent of what was going on in 1954, although it is not necessarily something sanctioned by law."

He admits that these issues are far greater than the university.

"If you compare the ratio of black to white students at UL to the ratio of their populations in Louisiana and even in the Lafayette area, it seems clear that they don't match up," Martin said. "I suspect that this is a failure of our underfunded primary and secondary educational systems, but it also reflects an economic issue: the wide disparity in pay between the races. In short, university educations everywhere are becoming more expensive, even with things like TOPS, and that's putting college education out of reach for those who don't have as much income."

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