



# Global Nonviolent Action Database

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## Spelman College students win divestment from apartheid South Africa, 1978-1986

- South Africa Apartheid Divestment Movement (1970s-1980s)

1978

to:

1986

**Country:** United States

**Location City/State/Province:** Atlanta, Georgia

**Location Description:** Spelman College campus

**Goals:**

To get Spelman College to divest from South Africa in order to remove support from the apartheid government there

### Methods

**Methods in 1st segment:**

- 061. Boycott of social affairs

**Methods in 2nd segment:**

**Methods in 3rd segment:**

**Methods in 4th segment:**

**Methods in 5th segment:**

**Methods in 6th segment:**

- 034. Vigils

**Additional methods (Timing Unknown):**

- 001. Public speeches
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 048. Protest meetings

### Classifications

**Classification:**

Change

**Cluster:**

Economic Justice

Human Rights

**Group characterization:**

- Students at Spelman College

## Leaders, partners, allies, elites

**Leaders:**

Spelman College Students

**Partners:**

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), other members of the Atlanta University Center (AUC)

**External allies:**

Not known

**Involvement of social elites:**

Spelman students did not use much overt social activism, instead relying greatly on famous and wealthy alumni who used their money to make change.

## Joining/exiting order of social groups

**Groups in 1st Segment:**

- AUC
- NAACP

**Groups in 2nd Segment:****Groups in 3rd Segment:****Groups in 4th Segment:****Groups in 5th Segment:****Groups in 6th Segment:**

**Segment Length:** 1 year 4 months

## Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

**Opponents:**

Spelman College Board of Trustees

**Nonviolent responses of opponent:**

Not known

**Campaigner violence:**

Not known

**Repressive Violence:**

Not known

## Success Outcome

### Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

6 points out of 6 points

#### Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

#### Growth:

1 point out of 3 points

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Beginning in the 1970s anti-apartheid campaigns in the United States began to gain momentum as the governmental situation in South Africa grew increasingly worse. Across many fields there was a push to divest from South Africa in order to make the point that the United States did not support the actions of the South African government. The belief was that if the South African government was not receiving the large amounts of financial support that it did from the United States it would be forced to change its behavior. Some of the biggest investors in South Africa were American universities and colleges.

One college that has a particularly interesting story is that of Spelman College, a traditionally all-black, all-female college in Atlanta, Georgia. This proved to be important because the Spelman students felt a strong connection to the Africans being affected by apartheid. It is important to note that Spelman College is a member of the Atlanta University Center (AUC), which includes the former Atlanta University, Morehouse College, the Morehouse School of Medicine, Clark College, and Morris Brown College. The majority of Spelman's work was done in conjunction with these other institutions.

The issue of race led students at Spelman to approach their campaign differently than students at other colleges did. As African-Americans, Spelman students felt very connected to the suffering occurring in South Africa. Said Spelman student Betsy Amerson "It hurts me to know that my brothers and sisters in Africa are having a hard time" (The Atlanta Journal).

The Spelman College campaign began in 1978. The leaders for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) encouraged students at Spelman to boycott the Davis Cup, a tennis tournament at Vanderbilt, because the South African team that was competing there had no black players. This began a seven-year period during which Spelman students protested their school's investments in South Africa. They used a variety of tactics, many of which were joint efforts with other members of the AUC in order to convince the College's administration to divest from South Africa. A detailed account of the timeline for these seven years is not available and information on this campaign is sparse.

One tactic that activists at Spelman used was to interview students who were from South Africa and feature them in the student newspaper The Spelman Spotlight. They hoped that this would put a more personal face to the issue. They also hosted South African women on campus to give speeches. However, unlike Mills College, which was another all-black, all-female college, Spelman chose not to focus on the gender aspect of apartheid and brought both male and female speakers to campus.

The civil rights movement of the 1960s proved to be the biggest motivating factor for the leaders of the Spelman Anti-Apartheid Campaign. Spelman had played a major role in the civil rights movement and, like many other colleges across the country, viewed apartheid as an international human rights problem. They claimed that this was a case of "global Black oppression" (Jackson, 56).

A characteristic unique to the Spelman Campaign is that the students rarely used overt activism and instead relied on the support of wealthy alumni. It is unclear exactly what type of influence these alumni had; however, they certainly helped influence the college's ultimate decision to divest. Another important tactic that the Spelman campaign used was to hold a vigil in 1985 commemorating Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s death.

The Spelman Campaign, while not being very big or very tightly organized, was ultimately successful. In April of 1986 the trustees of Spelman College voted to completely divest from South Africa. This decision was huge, and there were many who

were not happy with it due to the fact that Spelman did not have a large endowment as it was. This move could ultimately have had a negative effect on the college's finances. Nonetheless, the campaign had been a success.

## Research Notes

### Sources:

Jackson, Nicole. "Remembering Soweto: American College Students and International Social Justice, 1976-1988". Ohio State University Thesis. 2009.

Teepen, Tom. "Divesting Ourselves of Racism" in The Atlanta Journal and The Atlanta Constitution. April 29, 1986.

Turner, Renee D. "2,000 Join Vigil Aimed at S. Africa – Young Blasts Falwell's Support of Government" in The Atlanta Journal and The Atlanta Constitution. August 28, 1985.

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[1] <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/category/wave-campaigns/south-africa-apartheid-divestment-movement-1970s-1980s>

[2] <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/category/pcs-tags/mainly-or-initiated-student-participants>