Unleashing Suppressed Voices on College Campuses

Diversity Issues in Higher Education

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Case #15 Faculty Development Issues in a Department of Black Studies

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Black Studies programs are torn between the demands of the academy and student needs. Scholars hired to teach and manage Black Studies units are expected to pursue research agendas, and faculty members who fail to demonstrate research success are not promoted. However, Black Studies faculty members often feel that they have a special obligation to support African American students, which can detract from the successful completion of their research. The Department of Black Studies at Midwest Research University (MRU) suffered from this tension. Attention given to students detracted from the department’s ability to retain and promote faculty. This case study describes the history of the MRU’s Department of Black Studies and problems recruiting and promoting faculty. The case study discusses efforts of Dr. Glee to develop the department and its faculty as well as the problems some scholars had in getting promoted with tenure.

Historical Background

African American intellectuals had been proposing something like “Black Studies” for decades (Carr, 1998; Rojas, 2002). Early proposals for something resembling Black Studies include W. E. B. DuBois’ research center at Atlanta University (1910), the Association for Negro History founded by Carter Woodson (1927), the emergence of “Nile Valley” scholarship with Chiekh Anta Diop (1950s), Afro-history at Lane College proposed by Bobby Seale and the Soul Brothers Association (predecessor organization of the Black Panthers; 1966), and various demands for the inclusion of “Black topics” in the college curriculum (mid-to late 1960s).
The first fully formed Department of Black Studies was created in Fall 1969 after San Francisco State College students organized a strike for a Department of Black Studies during the 1968–1969 academic year. The strike at San Francisco State was successful because students had already created a functioning Black Studies curriculum as part of an experimental college. Student strikers were also successful because two years of conflict between the College's Board of Trustees, Governor Ronald Reagan and legislative leader Jesse Unruh weakened the administration. Black Studies' success at San Francisco State College motivated students across the country. Students soon mobilized to demand the establishment of Black Studies as an academic department at hundreds of campuses. Students offered the following justifications for Black Studies: (1) the existing college curriculum excluded Black students, (2) Black Studies should be a resource for all students, (3) Black Studies should help students in their transition from high school to college, (4) Black Studies should have an academic and social component and (5) Black Studies would emphasize the value of Black Culture.

There is much evidence that Black Studies has found a place in American higher education. Although very few universities adopted the most radical demands for all-black colleges inside existing predominantly white colleges, many started to offer Black Studies courses and about 150 created degree-granting programs now exist. Research shows that 48% of research universities have degree-granting Black Studies programs although they comprise only 10% of all institutions of higher education (Rojas, 2004). Research universities are four times as likely to have a Black Studies degree program as a liberal arts college, of which 12% have a Black Studies degree program. Institutions classified as "doctoral universities" or "masters college" in the Carnegie classification of institutions of higher education have very few Black Studies programs. A few universities offered master's degrees and five universities offer doctoral degrees (Temple University, University of California, Berkeley, Harvard University, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Michigan State University). Some reports even suggest that the field has gained legitimacy because administrators see it as a tool for attracting Black students and managing racial tensions on campus (Hine, 1990).

**Institutional Setting**

The Midwest Research University is a public university located in a large urban area and was created in the mid 1960s as a branch campus of the larger flagship campus, which is located in a "downstate" rural area. The University was originally housed in an industrial facility in 1963 and moved to its current location in the late 1960s. Its administration received...
students from the immediate metropolitan area and offers a wide range of academic and professional degrees. The university is located near major transportation routes and it is walking distance from downtown, allowing it to retain its urban character. Known originally as a regional university, the administration has recently tried to bolster the institution's research reputation by hiring an internationally known scholar to be the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, who has shown some success in attracting academic luminaries to the campus.

The University is organized much like others. The University's College of Arts and Sciences contains the Humanities, Social Science, and Physical Science Departments. During the 1960s and early 1970s, the College of Letters and Science experienced a quick expansion adding new academic programs and faculty. Like most other universities, the expansion was halted because of the financial crisis of the 1970s, and many departments had difficulties paying for new faculty positions and support staff. The situation stabilized somewhat in the 1980s.

The university has shown a willingness to attract and educate African Americans, Latinos, Asians and Native Americans. The university has made efforts to attract ethnic minorities as students and faculty. For example, students and faculty supported the establishment of a Black Studies Department and the Educational Opportunity Program. African American enrollments were initially low. An internal report from 1970 suggests that only about 200 students out of approximately 6000 were African American. This number peaked in the 1978 when approximately 3200 African Americans enrolled at the University. Since then, the African American student population has numbered approximately 2000 per year. By the 1990s, the student population included a wide range of ethnic minorities and immigrants from Eastern Europe, who were settling in the city where MRU is located.

The Creation of the Department of Black Studies

The Department of Black Studies was approved in the 1969–1970 academic year by the State Board of Higher Education. At the time, there were at least two proposals for Ethnic Studies at MRU. One proposal was developed by faculty members in the Education College. The proposal described a teacher education program aimed at developing urban education and community development experts. Students were to combine ethnic studies courses with an internship in a school or community organization. The proposal encountered strong opposition because of personal conflicts between the Education College dean and faculty members who sponsored the proposal. Another reason was the strong language of the proposal, which was
viewed as extreme, and the demand that the Ethnic Studies program have a governing board consisting of “community” members from outside the university. Unsurprisingly, the proposal never moved past the ad hoc committee and the bitter dispute surrounding the proposal resulted in resignations by some of the involved parties.

The successful proposal was drafted by students in consultation with faculty members and administrators. The proposed Department of Black Studies was closely modeled on existing departments. The proposed academic unit offered an undergraduate degree and had a series of courses, including an introductory course, electives and a senior seminar. Most importantly, the proposal emphasized that Black Studies must develop intellectually and move beyond its roots in protest. The Department of Black Studies was to be indistinguishable from other departments in its teaching, research, service, and internal organization. The proposal was approved by the faculty Senate and then the State Board without fanfare in the spring of 1970. The meetings of the faculty Senate indicate that the Black Studies was approved because it was seen as a modest expansion of the university’s existing degree offerings.

Evolution of the Department and Faculty Development

The Department started offering courses during the academic year 1970–1971 and awarded its first bachelor’s degrees in 1973. The Chair, Dr. Glee, an African American social scientist with a Ph.D. and an established scholarly reputation was already tenured in another department. Until her death in the 1990s, she held a joint appointment in Black Studies and Speech. Like most Black Studies advocates, she was acutely aware of the need to move away from student activism and develop academic legitimacy. She cultivated the Department’s status by hiring a well known poet who could teach literature and junior faculty who were earning Ph.D.’s in the humanities and social sciences.

Dr. Glee tried to articulate guiding principles for the department. She started by gathering data on department activities to help her understand what the department was doing. Dr. Glee surveyed undergraduate students to find out what attracted students to the department’s classes. She surveyed faculty members about the books they assigned in class to inventory what was taught in the various courses. Her findings noted that there was little thematic consistency in the department course offerings. Attempting to remedy the situation, Dr. Glee, like many other Black Studies scholars, formulated an intellectual framework for Black Studies, where courses would be organized around topics (e.g., the Civil Rights Movement or the Harlem...
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renaissance) and intellectual rigor (e.g., introductory courses versus senior seminars).

Further attempts to develop Black Studies were stymied by financial and bureaucratic difficulties in the late 1970s and 1980s. Although Dr. Glee and later chairs such as Dr. Kufu, an African historian, were successful in recruiting some permanent lecturers and two senior faculty members with joint appointments in other departments, bureaucratic delays prevented the recruitment of junior and senior scholars. Although the Dean of Arts and Science approved these faculty searches, the approval often came in the late winter or summer. The department did not have the opportunity to recruit from deepest pool of candidates. An internal evaluation of the program criticized the administration's poor recruitment efforts. In one instance, these delays discouraged a nationally recognized literary critic from considering taking an appointment at MRU.

Disorganized recruitment was not the department's only problem. The few tenure-track faculty members in the department found promotion to be elusive. For example, Ms. Treadwell, a humanities scholar, arrived at the department in the late 1970s without completing her doctoral dissertation. When Dr. Glee abruptly resigned her position as department chair for reasons not made clear at the time, none of the tenured faculty members associated with the department assumed the position as department leader. Ms. Treadwell reluctantly became the department's acting director during her second and third years at MRU. Administrative duties prevented Ms. Treadwell from completing her doctoral degree in a timely fashion, which in turn prevented her from developing a research portfolio meriting a promotion with tenure. Faculty meeting records indicate that the Department's steering committee, composed of tenured faculty in Black Studies and other Departments, were fully cognizant of the problem but did little to address the issue other than recommend to the College of Arts and Sciences that Ms. Treadwell's tenure schedule be extended. Archival records do not indicate if this request was approved but Ms. Treadwell left MRU for another university after finishing her time as acting director and completing her dissertation.

Attention given to students slowed the development of a core Black Studies faculty. Faculty members in the department reported that they felt a special obligation to help black students. For example, faculty members sponsored cultural events such as gospel and jazz concerts along with different plays and various symposia. The assistance given to black students often consumed a great deal of time for junior faculty. An external committee report in the early 1980s lauded the faculty's desire to help students, but also noted that excessive time dedicated to students detracted from the department's ability to promote junior faculty members. Junior faculty
members simply didn’t have the time to develop the required publication record. Although MRU is a research university and the university’s academic handbook from the 1970s clearly states that research is an important promotion criteria, the department never developed norms that would help its junior faculty allocate time for research. Staffing problems such as Dr. Glee’s abrupt retirement from the chair position routinely trumped junior faculty research needs, such as Ms. Treadwell’s need to have light teaching and administrative duties.

After Dr. Glee’s retirement and death in the early 1990s, her successors sensed change in the department’s atmosphere. The emphasis on student support has declined and new faculty cohorts are, in their words, “more professionalized.” More recent recruits come from strong Ph.D. programs or have already earned tenure elsewhere, giving them the experience needed to succeed in the research university environment. Recent junior faculty hires have more clearly understood that success at MRU depends on scholarly output, as well as quality teaching. The curriculum has changed with its new faculty, resembling more closely a focused interdisciplinary program, rather than a survey of the Black experience organized around topics such as the Civil Rights movement.

Since the 1970s, students have changed demographically, socially, cognitively, and psychologically. Also, faculty members believe that black students are now less radical, less challenging in the classroom, and they make fewer demands of the department. Older faculty members can remember class sessions when students would openly challenge their authority in classroom and assert their political opinion. One faculty member reported to me that black Muslims enjoyed his class because he was comfortable with their confrontational styles. This sort of radicalism is now less frequent. There are now fewer demands on the department for Black student support, although many still feel the department should play a vital role in advising black students. Student demography has changed as well. Significant numbers of non-black students now take courses in the department and students are more willing to declare Black Studies as a double major. Both changes lessen the department’s obligation to closely mentor undergraduate students. Overall, this had a predictable effect: junior faculty had more time for research.

Although the department is now better prepared to mentor its faculty through the tenure process and students are less demanding, the department has still found it difficult to expand its program. Early in its history, some administrators proposed merging Black Studies with related programs such as urban studies or to assign some of its core courses to other academic units. Later attempts to establish a master’s program and a joint Ph.D.
with Speech and Drama never came to fruition because the department’s faculty members were mostly lecturers and assistant professors. In comparison with other programs, the department has not developed beyond its initial role as an undergraduate program. In 2004, there is still no master’s degree program or significant links to any of the university’s doctoral programs.

Discussion

Dr. Glee successfully cultivated the department’s standing by hiring qualified scholars. However, MRU’s department didn’t develop its potential as a center for scholarship because the department failed to assign its administrative tasks in ways that would allow junior faculty members to establish themselves as researchers. The weak faculty presence meant that the department never developed a reputation within the university that would allow it to develop a graduate program. In later years, the changing student population lessened the mentoring load within the department, which allowed some junior scholars to earn tenure. The appointment of more senior scholars also helped lessen the administrative load placed on junior faculty.

Discussion Questions

1. MRU’s Black Studies Department experienced problems recruiting and promoting junior faculty members. What theories of faculty recruitment and promotion would you draw upon to guide the decisions you might make? What factors facilitate the School, Department, and the campus to have tenuring expectations different from other departments?

2. An important theme in the case study is the Department’s efforts to establish an identity distinct from the “activist” identity associated with the protests that brought Black Studies to the university. How would you advise the department chair with respect to this issue?

3. What theories of student support would you draw upon to design student support services that would relieve the Department of Black Studies from a perceived obligation to help minority students? How did the school and Black Studies department socialize and mentor junior faculty about the tenuring requirements?

4. How would you advise individual faculty members in their attempt to serve students while successfully building a case for tenure?

5. How would you advise black students who want to use the resources provided by the Department of Black Studies?
References

History of Black Studies


The Academic Organization of Black Studies


Studies of Department Stability


Recommended Readings

History of Black Studies


The Academic Organization of Black Studies


**Studies of Department Stability**


**Faculty Development**
