What Should We Learn from the Black Studies Experience?
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Contesting Race

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The field of Black Studies has changed in profound ways since its inception in the late 1960s. The field was initiated by students, scholars, and activists associated with the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. As time passed, adjusting to the university environment proved to be a daunting task. Drawing on prior research by the authors and other scholars, this article summarizes the evolution of Black Studies and what might be learned from the experience.

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More than forty years ago, in November 1968, striking Black students at San Francisco State College demanded the first Black Studies program. Ever since then, the public has often associated Black Studies with protest and radicalism. It is not uncommon for critics to deride the field as illegitimate because administrators often approved programs in response to protest. Advocates use the same history to justify the field. Black Studies, in their view, is the hard-won fruit of a long struggle for academic recognition. The focus on the politics of the 1960s obscures an important question: What happened to Black Studies when protest ended? The field has now had more than forty years to develop, and it is natural to ask about its place in American
higher education. How has Black Studies evolved as an educational institution? What can administrators, scholars, and students take away from its history?

The development of Black Studies is best understood as having occurred in stages. First, Black activists in the late 1960s and 1970s protested on behalf of Black Studies programs. Protests by Black college students were most common in the years 1968 to 1973 and it is in this period that most Black Studies units were created. Second, multiple proposals for Black Studies programs were debated and implemented in hundreds of universities. This second stage is particularly interesting because Black Studies programs were modified to be acceptable to administrators, professors in other disciplines, and other university stakeholders. The need to reformulate Black Studies in more traditional terms defines the first transformation of the field. Programs and departments drifted away from an exclusive focus on liberationist politics and community service. Instead, Black Studies programs were reframed as something similar to other academic units. This reframing allowed Black Studies to survive the hostile economic and political of the university system in the 1970s.

The third stage began in the late 1970s and is about the claiming of a particular niche in the academy. From a certain point of view, Black Studies is very similar to other interdisciplinary fields, like American studies, that have achieved a place in the academy but do not have the status associated with larger and older fields such as English or history. Black Studies professors have many joint appointments in other programs and they often teach in multiple departments. Scholars hold doctoral degrees not only in Black Studies, but also in fields as diverse as history, economics, health, literature, and psychology.

Each stage merits attention from scholars and administrators with an interest in how universities respond to political movements. One conclusion to be taken from the earliest stage is that protest works. In one analysis of Black student activism and the creation of Black Studies programs, published in the journal *Social Forces*, a single campus protest event by Black students nearly triples the odds that a university will create a Black Studies program. In case studies of individual universities, it is often found that Black student protest, even if not about Black Studies, was the catalyst that introduced Black Studies into the university. Administrators were more willing to consider Black Studies because protests forced administrators to seriously consider the views of Black students and faculty.

By 1969–70, Black Studies found itself with a foothold in the university system. Success in the university system, especially the research institutions where Black Studies degree programs are most
likely found requires that individuals and institutions succeed in creating knowledge. Unsurprisingly, this demand required that Black Studies advocates gravitate toward an interdisciplinary framing. Proposals for exclusively Black programs were often rejected, as were proposals with a community service component. Successful proposals emphasized that Black Studies be based on existing academic disciplines such as history and sociology.

The rest of Black Studies' history might be described as the struggle to define an identity in the spaces between the major disciplines. The failure to create an academically appealing identity left programs susceptible to the charge that they were irrelevant. Prior discussions of Black Studies found this to be the case. For example, Mario Small's 1999 analysis of two prominent programs discussed how Temple University administrators claimed that Black Studies topics were already to be found in other departments. Small reports that one response was to strengthen the identity of the program and claim expertise in areas not covered in other programs. Small also discusses the Harvard University program, which grew after its chair in the 1990s, Henry Louis Gates Jr., developed a strategy of appointing scholars with impeccable disciplinary reputations. Later research found that the charge of disciplinary overlap could stunt program growth. A case study of the University of Chicago found that professors and administrators considered a Black Studies program in the 1969–70 year, but critics were able to limit the scope of the program by claiming that other departments already addressed Black topics.

What does it mean for a program to successfully establish an interdisciplinary identity? It usually means that Black Studies programs share faculty with other programs. A 2004–5 survey of Black Studies tenure track faculty found that over 63 percent of respondents held joint appoints in non–Black Studies units. This situation is quite unlike most research university programs, where professors are primarily allied with a single program. Another manifestation of interdisciplinary identity is that professors routinely teach Black Studies courses in non–Black Studies programs. The same data shows that approximately 65 percent of Black Studies professors have taught introductory courses outside their Black Studies program. While this may not be surprising to some, one should consider a hypothetical situation where calculus is taught outside the mathematics department. Such a situation might be rightly interpreted as a sign that the mathematics program has not established a distinct identity in the university.

Black Studies programs are academic units that have teaching obligations, as well as research missions. Therefore, it is important to ask: What do students gain from Black Studies programs? In the
2006–7 academic year, the authors conducted a survey conducted that asked 147 students in selected Black Studies courses at three large research universities to agree or disagree with a series of statements about why their enrollment in that Black Studies course. Students overwhelmingly (91 percent) agreed that Black Studies courses helped them develop specific academic skills such as writing and critical thinking. Unsurprisingly, students were particularly interested in learning about Black history (93 percent).

The most interesting finding is that students did not enroll in these courses because they were recommended by advisors or friends. In fact, only 8 percent of surveyed students agreed that an adviser recommended the course, while only 21 percent of students agreed that they took the course because their friends said it was good. Our survey results indicate that these courses are disconnected from crucial networks in the university community. These findings portray Black Studies as a field with a stable but highly circumscribed position in the university. Black Studies programs routinely share faculty and courses but are not strongly connected to the wider student body or to the staff members that can help bolster enrollments. While Black Studies programs have successfully developed an identity that legitimizes their presence in the university, these programs have not become socially integrated into the university.

These findings also speak to the commonly levied charge that Black Studies has embraced identity politics, which fetishizes racial difference and reinforces the ideological practices the field presumably critiques. It might be conjectured that Black Studies is a field based on a controversial view of ethnic identity, which might distance students and faculty from the rest of the university. However, the data from this survey of students does not support that view. Only about a third of the students we surveyed agreed that they were taking the course because they were interested in promoting multiculturalism (36 percent), while an overwhelming majority agreed that they wanted to learn more about Black history (93 percent), an indication that students are more interested in the course’s intellectual content than any presupposed political agenda. Rather than being an institution that exclusively addresses student’s racial identities, Black Studies has expanded to encompass a number of intellectual concerns, political and otherwise.

It is also likely that Black Studies professors are far more varied in their ideological perspectives than they were several decades ago. This is largely the result of Black Studies becoming increasingly interdisciplinary, partly to attract undergraduates majoring in other disciplines, but also to recruit new faculty from traditional disciplines whose research is relevant in the field. The recent debates in Black
Studies circles regarding the effectiveness of “traditional” disciplinary methods versus more specialized methods reveal just how much the field now encompasses a variety of scholarly approaches. As prior research shows, many Black Studies professors hold joint appointments that require them to split their time between teaching Black Studies courses and courses in their discipline of training. For this reason, fewer Black Studies professors are “committing discipline suicide,” but are instead importing the methodological approaches of traditional disciplines over to Black Studies. This interdisciplinary approach provides students with a diverse curriculum, thereby making it less likely that any ideological approach can establish itself as a dominant perspective.

The transformation of Black Studies from political project to interdisciplinary academic institution offers many lessons. For activists, Black Studies programs fulfill the social mission envisioned by its founders. These programs do offer courses relevant to students’ personal experiences. The price for doing so was to mitigate an explicitly political framing, which permitted the academy to grant Black Studies a continual presence in the university. For administrators, the evolution of Black Studies indicates the limits of identity-based educational politics. While it is true that many programs were created in response to protest, it is also true that programs could survive if they effectively competed in the university environment according to its standards. Cross-disciplinary alliances helped programs address this issue, but in our judgment, they are a limiting strategy that invites appropriation of topics and resources by other programs, which might ultimately diminish the field’s visibility within the university.

Research on Black Studies’ institutional development and its student population suggests that there not be an exclusive focus on promises of liberation and autonomy as they were understood at the field’s inception. Instead, Black Studies proponents might be better served if they developed more strategies to expand the field’s identity and organizational autonomy. One strategy is to cultivate graduate education. Already, there are at least eight universities whose Black Studies programs offer doctoral degrees. If these programs are successful, then Black Studies programs will no longer feel the need to hire faculty members that spread their attention among different programs. Another strategy might be to work closely with university advisors and help them communicate with potential students. A third strategy might be found in the recent attempt to reframe the field as the investigation of the African Diaspora. This might help the field draw more attention, especially from African or Caribbean specialists, or students who believe that Black Studies is
limited to the study of the African Diaspora in America. Such strategies might decrease the dependence on shared faculty and expand their appeal to a broader segment of the undergraduate population.

Black Studies survived and flourished because students and scholars fought for these programs and the field’s interdisciplinary formulation was a crucial tactic in this struggle. However, every organizational form has its limits. The interdisciplinary organization of Black Studies has resulted in faculty dispersed among many programs and Black Studies courses that are disconnected from the university’s internal networks. The challenge for the next generation of scholars is to address these issues while maintaining Black Studies’ unique academic mission and its distinct intellectual character.

Notes


8. Ibid., 93–129.


11. Ibid., 190.

12. Ibid., 192.


15. Molefi Kete Asante coined this expression to refer to the practice of some Black Studies scholars (including himself) who reject the assumptions and values of their traditional discipline of training in order to fully commit themselves to the discipline of Black Studies.