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The Black Studies Program: Strategy and Structure

HERMAN HUDSON

Vice Chancellor for Afro-American Affairs, Indiana University

The college student revolution of the 1960s shocked the conscience of the nation. No longer was it possible to ignore the brutalizing effects of injustice, racism, and war. Young militants broke the bonds of traditional patterns of thinking and launched a devastating attack on the hypocrisy and immorality of many of our social institutions. Some, fortunately a minority, found the disfunction and dehumanization of our society so intolerable that they simply dropped out. Most critics, however, thrust forward a variety of demands calculated to cure the ills that so sorely afflict the nation. Universal among these remedies in the field of education was the demand for the establishment of Black Studies programs.

In response to the exigencies of the moment and with little regard for the long term academic and budgetary consequences, hundreds of Black Studies programs have been set up in all sections of the country, in all kinds of institutions, from the small private college to the multiple-campus state university. Gradually, over the past two or three years both students and educators have begun seriously to grapple with the issues involved in defining the objectives, the sphere of operation, the curriculum, and the academic justification for such programs. Questions such as the following have been raised and debated, and in many institutions they remain unresolved today. What are the vocational implications of a major in Black Studies? Who should be the students and who should be the teachers in these programs? Why have a separate

Black Studies program at all when the relevant courses are already available or could be easily introduced in the traditional departments of our colleges and universities?

For me, many of these questions can be answered very simply. Inasmuch as both black and white students have been victims of the fraudulent treatment of the black man's role in the development of America, both groups, though for different objectives, need the corrective of Black Studies courses. As for the teachers in a Black Studies program, ideally they should be black. However, with the rapid proliferation of such programs and the interim scarcity of black professors, white professors may be used so long as it is clear to one and all that blacks are in control of the program.

The obvious rationale for the establishment of independent Black Studies departments is the fact that the traditional departments of our colleges and universities historically have promoted the distortion of the black man's role in American society and, therefore, they are hardly qualified to set the record straight. Structurally, the Black Studies program should be an autonomous department with a regularly established independent budget co-equal with other departments in the College of Arts and Sciences. Its faculty members should have the same rights and responsibilities as other faculty members, and they should have wide scope and administrative encouragement to devise innovative research and instruc-

tional activities. Only as an independent department, the fundamental academic unit of colleges and universities, can the Black Studies program have the stability and permanence necessary to its unique educational mission.

As for those who inquire how can you make a living with a major in Black Studies, I refer them to the varied occupations besides teaching, outlined in such articles as "The Black Studies Graduate in the 'Real World'" by W. Smith, for which a Black Studies major provides an excellent preparation.¹ Moreover, a growing number of institutions now allow a double major instead of the older undergraduate pattern of a major and a minor. More extensive curricular adjustments, including greater flexibility in setting distributional requirements for graduation, are gradually being introduced. Such reforms greatly facilitate the design of undergraduate programs with both an occupational and cultural focus. In my opinion, a forced opposition between Black Studies as a major and an established work-oriented field, such as engineering for example, is really a false issue. One can easily have both in any modern university addressing itself to the contemporary needs of its students. But the whole question of the vocational utility of Black Studies is quite irrelevant to the group necessity that blacks feel to have such programs.

What are the most frequently stated purposes or objectives of Black Studies programs? After examining some forty Black Studies proposals and programs in a great variety of institutions, Charles Hamilton of Columbia University, in an

article entitled "The Challenge of Black Studies," summarizes the following six:

1. *The Gaps Function.* Many proposals list courses in the humanities and in social sciences and history whose descriptions state that the courses are aimed at correcting the inadequacies of existing courses. They tend to fill the "gaps." They emphasize contributions of black people, etc.

2. *The Functional Theory.* This defines those proposals that say their major purpose is to educate black students for useful service in the black community once they have graduated. Usually, the emphasis here is on community organization stressing courses in black economics, black politics, and the like. At times, a proposal will suggest that the Black Studies program could be a useful pre-law or pre-medical or pre-architectural program, or at least an undergraduate major in preparation for subsequent professional training in a traditional field.

3. *The Humanizing Function.* Here the target is white students who will take courses that will help overcome white racist attitudes by imparting new knowledge and hopefully, thereby, new human values.

4. *The Reconciliation Theory.* Black Studies, some proposals state, will bring about a new spirit of cooperation between blacks and whites. This is an extension of function (3).

5. *The Psychological Function.* Black Studies will instill a sense of pride in black students who will study and learn about their heritage and history. They will develop a sense of identity.

6. *The Ideological Function.* Some proposals clearly state that the overall function is to serve as a means to develop new ideological, Third World orientations, to develop theories of revolution and nation-building . . .²

¹ William D. Smith, "The Black Studies Graduate in the 'Real World,'" *Personnel and Guidance Journal*, 48 (May, 1970), 767-768.

² Charles V. Hamilton, "The Challenge of Black Studies," *Social Policy*, 1, No. 2 (1970), 16.

Each of the above purposes and objectives alone constitutes a legitimate rationale for Black Studies and various combinations of them are implicit to one degree or another in many of the newly established programs. But the most important function of black studies programs, in my view, is to politicize people of color by means of a psychological conversion to blackness. By a psychological conversion to blackness, I do not mean merely the wearing of a tiki, an Afro- or a dashiki, for these are external badges which may or may not symbolize internal commitment. Nor do I mean that true blackness is necessarily revealed by incorporating in one's speech the hip jargon of radicalism, for this too may be feigned rather than felt. Nor is the spirit of blackness a newly invented thing by today's college generation who after all learned about soul food, gospel, the blues, sacrifice, and survival from their parents who in turn learned these things from their parents.

The conversion to blackness that I advocate is rooted in the inner faith that the destiny of all Afro-Americans is indivisible, that the survival of the group is more important than the progress of the individual, that the addict shooting dope in the ghetto is just as much a brother as the bourgeois suburbanite. No single black person can be truly secure before the law, on his job, in his home, or in the nation's schools and colleges until the masses of black people are liberated and secure. To be black then is to derive strength and self-confidence from identification with the suffering and the success, the pain and the poverty, the gains and the glory of a shared black heritage.

Recently, in a seminar discussion on the role of Black Studies in educating the

miseducated held at Indiana University, the lecturer asked a militant student, "Sister, are you black?" The student answered, "I think I am." "But how do you know?" the lecturer questioned. The student unhesitatingly responded, "I feel it in my bones." This was precisely the right answer, for the Negro who does not "feel it in his bones" just isn't black and he can never release his full psychic power for self-realization that alone can make him a whole man. This liberation of psychic energy through the job of black identity, I suspect, is what people are describing when they refer to a feeling of "soul." Well-designed Black Studies programs controlled by blacks, I believe, can help cultivate this feeling.

I do not mean to suggest that all Negro college students will want to major in Black Studies. Some will aspire to careers in education, or medicine, or business, or professional athletics. Others may prefer the newer fields of electronics or computer technology. Still others will prepare themselves for the new opportunities in such traditional areas as home economics, social work, or the allied health sciences. It is only to be expected that, since the minds, talents, and motivations of Negro youth vary greatly, they will make different occupational choices in accord with individual interests. But the one transcendent choice that all Negroes have to deal with at one stage of life or another is the choice of ethnic identification, and the satisfactory resolution of the question of self image is the necessary prerequisite for success in any endeavor. I am convinced that the most powerful regenerative force for black survival is a black man defining himself emotionally, intellectually, and ethically in terms of his black brothers and sisters. As a recent

paraphrase of an old saying puts it: "What does it profiteth a dude to gain the world if he loses thereby his soul brother."

In addition to the psychological function, Black Studies can prove the factual base and the analytical techniques that will enable future black leaders to reinterpret the black man's role in American society, in the past and present, and to project realistic strategies to improve his condition in the years ahead. Whatever the black man's role in America is to be, it will be a changing one as the whole society moves in new directions, and it will be a role in which the black man takes increasing responsibility for its formulation and design. Black Studies can provide the setting for the development of a sense of black heritage and the exploration of black destiny.

A well-designed Black Studies curriculum should have courses in the black humanities and social sciences at the core with ample provision for appropriate elective choices in other units of the university. There should also exist on the part of the Black Studies faculty a specific commitment to develop new and creative courses in such areas as the black theater, the black novel, the history of the education of black Americans, the big city ghetto and independent black communities, and current issues in black political activism. Such courses should have both an academic and social action orientation. The relative emphasis on academics or social action will be conditioned by the location and resources of each institution.

At Indiana University, where I was charged with the responsibility of initiating an undergraduate major in Afro-American Studies in the fall of 1970,

many of the ideas expressed in this article are currently being implemented. The overall objective of the Indiana University program in Afro-American Studies is to develop in students a programmatic awareness of Afro-American heritage and destiny. Majors in the department are expected to demonstrate: (1) thorough knowledge of Afro-American history, literature, art, and music, (2) general familiarity with the analytical techniques of the social sciences applicable to Afro-American problems, and (3) practical methods of relating the knowledge of the classroom to the life of the black community.

The Program in Afro-American Studies like other programs and departments in the College of Arts and Sciences offers or approves three kinds of courses that have the Afro-American as the principle object and content of study—general introductory, core major, specific advanced. These categories encompass a wide range of interdisciplinary subject matter across the college curriculum, but a concentration in Afro-American Studies is more than a disparate collection of discrete courses. It is a coherent, carefully articulated study of the heritage and destiny of the Afro-American from the earliest times to the present.

In conclusion, I wish to state what I believe to be the challenge and the opportunity before us. Black people today are uncompromisingly insisting on their right to participate in those decision-making processes that vitally affect their lives—all the way from national housing and education policies, to the control of local police, to the semantics of self-designation. The term *black*, once a pejorative epithet as used by whites, has been converted into a symbol of ethnic pride be-

cause colored people, or Negroes, decided for themselves that "black is beautiful." Black people want to choose their own leaders and spokesmen, define their own socio-economic goals, design the reconstruction of their own neighborhoods, recover and preserve their own cultural

identity. Our schools and colleges through generous and sustained support of imaginative Black Studies programs can help prepare black people to achieve these goals. All that is needed is the will to do so.