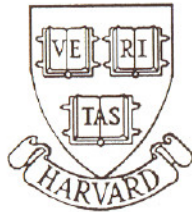


VISION

HARVARD STUDENTS LOOK AHEAD



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RELEVANT EDUCATION

BLACK STUDIES AS A MODEL FOR THE ACADEMY

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The recent push to reform the federal government has gathered force from those who wish to cut back on government programs and funding for welfare, Head Start, affirmative action, and other programs designed to aid the underprivileged in gaining a foothold in today's society. Politicians speak of a return to "traditional American values," presumably where the responsibility of one's socioeconomic status and the welfare of one's children must be taken on by the individual or family. Leaders grow increasingly critical of looking at societal, racial, and prejudicial factors as reasons for the programs providing assistance to the un-

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derprivileged and uneducated. As a society, we appear to be returning to the Horatio Alger ideal of the self-made individual who lifts himself or herself up by the bootstraps. We attribute many of society's ills to endemic problems of racism, sexism, homophobia, psychological conditions of codependency, Battered Women's Syndrome, temporary insanity, media influences on sexual promiscuity, and brutal violence available to nearly all Americans on the big screen.

The current initiatives to reduce or reform welfare and other programs will not eliminate the problems of homelessness, malnutrition, crime, unemployment, and underemployment. Our collective refusal to acknowledge and take responsibility for today's social problems—increasingly shared by both inner cities and the suburbs—will insure that the problems continue unabated. The new generation, realizing that those who once seemed to care no longer see a need to invest time, energy, or money into their futures, will become increasingly paralyzed in their socioeconomic condition and low self-esteem.

If anything is to be done for these communities and individuals, it must be performed by those individuals who place public interests above personal ones and believe that one human being can be lifted up only when another reaches a hand down to help. We, as individuals, must take control and responsibility for creating our collective future.

Coming from the academic community, we at Harvard must ask what the role of the intellectual is in this endeavor and what the role is of the academy in fostering and creating this type of intellectual. In *The Last Intellectuals*, Russell Jacoby concluded that the public intellectual, epitomized by the "New York Intellectuals" of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, had disappeared from the American scene. Gone, Jacoby said, was the intellectual who was "a writer, informed by a strong moral impulse, who addressed a general, educated audience in accessible language about the most important issues of the day" (qtd. in Boynton 53). In his article "The New Intellectuals," Robert Boynton writes that many of today's models are private figures, "their difficult books written

for colleagues only, their critical judgments constrained by the boundaries of well-defined disciplines. Think of an intellectual today, and chances are he is a college professor whose 'public' barely extends beyond the campus walls" (53).

As Jacoby and Boynton suggest, the problem with "trickle down academics" is that those with the most information and knowledge on the topics affecting all Americans tend to circulate this knowledge among themselves in the ivory towers of higher learning. Their lectures rarely move outside the classroom, and their research is published in books that end up in the academic sections of specialized bookstores. In other words, American intellectuals speak to themselves about themselves. Any ideal we might have had about educating the upper strata of society in hopes that benefits would "trickle down" to the lower strata has long ago been shattered. Despite significant advances in our understanding of the genetic and social configurations of race, for example, books such as *The Bell Curve* raise eyebrows and are rarely placed in the context of their position on this centuries-old continuum. Yet this is knowledge, to which academics in hard and social sciences have had access for decades. This knowledge does not filter down into the textbook or classroom; hence, we produce a general population that is rather uneducated in relation to the information available on a particular subject.

Boynton argues in "The New Intellectuals" that a new group of intellectuals is emerging, who are quite different from their counterparts of the 1930s:

Whereas [the earlier] intellectuals were freelance writers based in New York, most of this [modern] group is ensconced in elite universities across the country. Whereas the New Yorkers were predominantly male and Jewish, this group includes women and is entirely gentile. In contrast to the New Yorkers, who were formed by their encounters with socialism and European culture, these intellectuals work solidly within the American grain, and are products of the political upheaval of the 1950s and 1960s. Most significantly, they are black. (54)

These new intellectuals appear frequently at press conferences; their books are found on nearly every bookshelf, and they are often guests on shows like *Nightline*, *Today*, and *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. Although they may disagree on ideology and beliefs, those such as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Toni Morrison, Cornel West, Patricia Williams, bell hooks, Michael Eric Dyson, and Derrick Bell (to name a few) are everywhere lending their knowledge and prestige to the most controversial issues affecting the American public both within and outside of their disciplinary focus.

Another common thread among these intellectuals is that most of them are on faculty in Black Studies departments around the country and came to age during the Civil Rights era and Black Power and Black Studies movements. Perhaps, then, this rise of the black intellectual can be attributed, in part, to the state of Black Studies in the academy. I suggest that we look to Black Studies (also called Afro-American, African American, and Africana Studies) as a model for how we in academia can begin to take responsibility for our collective future.

First, it must be noted that Black Studies is not a discipline. Unlike "traditional disciplines," Black Studies is inherently an interdisciplinary field (Black Studies does not equal "black history"), which employs not one particular methodology, but often a combination of methodologies in every investigation. Rather than examine our collective future from the standpoint of a discipline or methodology, I prefer to use the pedagogy of Black Studies as a paradigm for all disciplines.

Although early black scholars such as W. E. B. DuBois, Carter G. Woodson, E. Franklin Frazier, and J. Saunders Brown laid the groundwork decades ago, Black Studies in the academy can be pinpointed to the revolutions of black students on predominantly white campuses, in response to Martin Luther King's assassination. The first department of Black Studies was established at San Francisco State College in 1968.

From the beginning, there were three prevailing theories on how Black Studies programs should be conducted. The first theory, which we will call the pragmatic stance, involves looking at how

Black Studies can build upon the existing foundations of black scholars. Lawrence Crouchett traces the beginning of Black Studies to the eighteenth-century projects by Quakers to "educating and training free blacks to serve as missionaries on the African continent. They saw a need for a 'special' type of education for such blacks and taught them about the culture, history and geography of black Africa" (190). Other scholars like Martin Kilson examine the work of early twentieth-century scholars like DuBois, Frazier, and Woodson, as well as Horace Mann Bond, J. Saunders Redding, and John Hope Franklin in combination with white scholars like Robert Parks, Thomas Woofter, and Melville Herskovits. They emphasize academically rigorous Black Studies programs where students choose a disciplinary focus from a "traditional discipline" within the field of Black Studies and are trained in the methodologies of the traditional discipline, but with emphasis on particular issues of African Americans. This belief states that a Black Studies curriculum "can not stand alone: it must, so to speak, be clothed in the tested scholarly and technical garment of an established discipline" (Kilson 307). This approach quickly became the most prevalent, and these departments with "multicultural disciplinary focus," such as those at Harvard, Yale, and UC-Berkeley, are heralded among the nation's best and most promising.

The second approach, which we will call the nationalist stance, involves looking at Black Studies as a department that holds a particular political ideology with a pro-black historiographic focus. In 1973, Arthur Smith (now Molefi Asante) called Black Studies the "crystallization of the notions of black social scientists and humanists [with] a creative discipline squarely resting on the foundations of our African past" (1). He called the new methodology "Afrology," signifying that Black Studies involves more than the study of black people, but is primarily Pan-Africanist in political ideology and social theory and looks to the philosophy, history, and achievements of African ancestors to inform and guide their African descendants. Thus, Black Studies courses are taught by professors with this ideology and for the purpose of rearing a generation with the same ideology. This pedagogy has been adopted

by the department at Temple University, home of the first doctoral program in Black Studies.

The third pedagogy has come from the black militant activists who demanded more black professors and increased black student enrollment at predominantly white institutions. They also sought to connect the black students who often feel alienated in the predominantly white culture of the university with the black communities from which they come. According to Nathan Hare, the first chairperson of the first Black Studies department, "Black education is black community centered. At the least, the educational process must involve the black community, transforming the community while educating and training the black student" (49). He gives the example that a student in a course in black history might be "required to put on panel discussions for younger children in church basements" (49). Hare's curriculum, therefore, has always had a compulsory community component. As he describes it, "A course in black education would contain tutorial assignments. A class project for the black history class might be the formation of a black history club; a class in community organization could form civic clubs, while individual students served apprenticeships under community organizers" (50).

The inherent problem in this plan (which led to the downfall of this pedagogy) is that it denies white students of Black Studies or other disciplines the means or motivation for community involvement. It assumes that only Black Studies need be relevant for the black community and that black students are the only ones who can bridge that gap. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has noted, however, the programs with the compulsory community component have not lasted. This can be attributed to several factors. One reason is that the militant students who pressed for these types of programs were no longer on campuses. They either graduated without leaving a viable legacy or began to associate with other ethnicities once the activist student movement ended. Second, the community-link program did not seem viable because the violence of the inner city frightened off many workers, who feared for their own lives in the midst of gang warfare and crime more than they cared for the plight

of their black brothers and sisters in the projects. That is, the reality of the situation undercut the goal. In addition, when university administrations increased the accountability of funding, there were not enough funds available to community uplift programs sponsored by the university for Black Studies students.

Despite the inherent difficulties, Black Studies provides information that is valuable to all youths and all communities (or at least that is the thrust of multicultural education), and there is great value to having students and intellectuals apply their knowledge and *work* in communities. Many intellectuals, particularly those in disciplines that involve field work, create resentment when they seek to enter a community, gain its trust, and leave, taking the knowledge back to a publisher to circulate among the inhabitants of the ivory tower. This does not mean to imply that field workers should enter the community with the intent to teach all that they know. This has been the problem with acculturation among many non-Western indigenous communities. However, the field workers can work in a community as it requests and contribute to it. Harvard's Afro-American Studies department, for example, has sent students to work in voter education in South Africa and with Marian Wright Edelman's Children's Defense Fund. In these cases, students lend their knowledge and manpower to the community while learning something that the isolated classroom cannot provide. Even programs espousing the pragmatic pedagogy take the benefits of the black militant-activist pedagogy and employ those strategies. The tragedy lies in the fact that these opportunities are available to few students, and even fewer students can receive payment or course credit for these endeavors.

The danger of the inner city need not be a hindrance to students for several reasons. The assumption behind the "danger of the city" argument is that the only community that can use outreach is the ghetto in a metropolitan area inhabited primarily by blacks and Latinos. This assumption is incorrect. Education needs to be "trickled down" to those in middle-class communities as well as those in areas where the only non-white person the community encounters is in the image of the drug dealer or criminal as por-

trayed on national news or television programs. The "community" is everywhere, and we need to emphasize the work of nongovernment organizations (NGOs). Many underdeveloped nations seeking to enhance their development have active NGOs that work in the communities to educate, instruct, and rebuild the local areas that constitute the nation.

Combined with a commitment to the community, these efforts to produce "trickle down academics" have inspired a number of black public intellectuals. Many of these emerging black intellectuals are both professors and pastors, writers and community leaders. The new fields of womanism, black theology, and culture criticism have led to the formation of a practical academician who strives to relate theory and experience to issues of community improvement.

If the university invested in fostering these types of intellectuals—for example, by providing course credit—a community component could be developed across disciplines where students, the intellectuals of tomorrow, would work with the larger community in dispelling stereotypes, educating citizens, and raising self-esteem. Additionally, the work performed need not always be of an instructional nature. The work done, for example, by the students of Phillips Brooks House at Harvard demonstrates the degree of their caring about the community at large: they feed children and the elderly, spend quality time with groups in the target community, and engage in activities that involve more than the application of information learned in the classroom.

The 1993 and 1994 symposiums in Boston, "The Responsibility of Intellectuals in the Age of Crack," examined what responsibility, if any, black intellectuals have to the grassroots community. Although the topic was hotly debated at the symposiums, all intellectuals must accept their responsibility to the larger society. We also need to learn that the community also has something to teach intellectuals. As Hare writes of his community component:

This would tend to increase the commitment of black students to the community while simultaneously per-

mitting them to "learn by doing." At the same time, their mere presence in the community would provide role models not generally available to black youth. Thus education is made relevant to the student and his community while the community is, so to speak, made relevant to education. (50)

If we can separate the language of black obligation from Hare's statement, we can understand that relevant education is beneficial both to the student and to the community at large. Relevant education not only empowers young people and builds esteem, but also increases the number of young critical thinkers. Thus it can break the patterns of miseducation and poverty that plague our communities and haunt our collective future.

Hare writes that in order to develop this key component of community involvement, we will need "to inspire and sustain a sense of collective destiny as a people and a consciousness of the value of education in a technological society" (50). If this sense of collective destiny and individual responsibility is taught and implemented, there is hope for both the impoverished underclass and the often miseducated middle and upper classes of America.

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