

The History of the Department of Pan-African Studies at California State University, Los Angeles



University of California, Santa Cruz Distinguished Professor Emerita Dr. Angela Davis and Dr. Melina Abdullah (professor and chair, Department of Pan-African Studies, CSU Los Angeles) at the 9th Annual Pan-African Studies Forum, June 1, 2016 at the Luckman Fine Arts Complex at CSU Los Angeles.

The Department of Pan-African Studies (PAS) is part of a field/discipline of “Black Studies,” which includes academic programs that examine the history, culture, politics, economics, and worldviews of people of African descent. Departments and programs include: Black Studies, Africana Studies, African American Studies, African Diaspora Studies, Africology, as well as Pan-African Studies.

The Pan-African approach to the discipline recognizes that although the Black American experience remains central to an understanding of Black people in the United States, teaching and research on the African continent and the African Diaspora must include the study of Black people from every continent, language group, and faith tradition, and especially continental Africans and Africans in the Americas. Simultaneously, PAS is central to the broader academic movement of Ethnic Studies, which includes Asian American Studies, Chicana/o Studies, Latina/o Studies, and Native American Studies.

Pan-African Studies at Cal State LA is the second oldest Black Studies department in the nation, founded out of the student struggles of the late 1960s. PAS was initially established as a program in 1967 and won departmental status in 1969, concurrently to the founding of the oldest Department of Chicano Studies in the nation, also at Cal State LA. As such, the history of the Department in many ways overlaps with the history of the discipline (Zulu 2006, page 103).

Black Studies, as a field, finds its roots in a community, rather than an academic effort. In 1966, the Black liberation movement firmly transitioned from the Civil Rights era to the Black Power era, with Stokely Carmichael delivering his classic “Black Power” speech on October 29, 1966 at UC Berkeley. While not fully articulated in Carmichael’s address, Black educational self-determination laid a foundation for Black Studies. Student and community organizing, especially in the Bay Area, included community, political, economic, social, and educational goals informed by a Black Power consciousness. The first Black Studies department and first and only College of Ethnic Studies was founded at San Francisco State in 1968 only after a 5-month long student and community strike, the longest student strike in university history, initiated by the Black Student Union and organized in partnership with the Third World Student Alliance and the Black Panther Party (T’Shaka 2012, pages 19-24). Similarly, the founding of Pan-African Studies at Cal State LA was a response to student and community efforts with the Black Student Union and Black Power groups at the center. This history is distinct from that of academic units that are initiated by the university, rather than demanded from it.

That Pan-African Studies was founded out of student and community struggle is key in its positioning as an intellectual effort rather than an academic one. This rejection of an academic positioning is a resistance to “institutional structures that are designed to contain ideas, repress imagination, and indoctrinate the mind,” (hooks 2003, page 186). For Black Studies as a field, this has meant that the pedagogical and epistemological approaches must find their home in and be contributory to the larger community, support justice efforts, and understand students as whole and complete people, whose temporary student status is transitory.

Since departmentalizing in 1969, PAS has experienced both growth and setbacks in its development. As a result of the political, cultural, and social gains of Civil Rights and Black Power movement, the Department grew rapidly in the late 1960s and early 1970s. By 1974, there were over 9 full time faculty members teaching in PAS.

A slow decline in faculty and student size occurred from the 1980s through the early 2000s. The size of the major began to increase in 2002, but was not supported by growth in tenure track faculty until 2009 when the Black Faculty Caucus pushed for the hiring of a third tenure-track faculty member. Support in terms of faculty hiring diminished following the 2009 hire, with the low occurring in 2013 when only one tenure-line faculty member was on duty; yet, student, faculty and community efforts, along with a shift in institutional positioning has resulted in the steady increase of faculty size and course offerings since 2013. Over a four year period, the Department has grown to 4.5 tenure-line faculty, exactly half the number of its peak in 1974.

These shifts, in many ways, parallel the shifts in power held by the larger Black community and illustrate the continued legacy of Black community struggle. In addition to playing a vital role in the establishment of Black Studies departments and being enmeshed in the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, the Department of Pan-African Studies has also been central to many more contemporary struggles that include and expand beyond the university, including:

Black Lives Matter -- Considered the most important social justice movement of the contemporary era, Black Lives Matter was founded, in part, by students and faculty from Pan-African Studies at Cal State LA. Following the acquittal of George Zimmerman, the self-appointed community watchman who murdered 17 year-old Trayvon Martin, dozens of PAS faculty, students, and alumni were among the thousands of people who intuitively organized for justice in the days that followed and convened at the call of Black Lives Matter co-founder Patrisse Cullors to form the first Black Lives Matter chapter in the nation and intentionally organize for an end to state-sanctioned violence against Black people. Many students, faculty and alumni continue their work as a part of Black Lives Matter and the larger Movement for Black Lives.

The renewed struggle for Ethnic Studies -- In 2014, during semester conversion, when the entire university curriculum was being revised, PAS faculty and students lifted a demand for an Ethnic Studies requirement. They rationalized that cultural-competency was a necessary tool for all students and especially needed on campus that is more than 90% students of color. An intense debate ensued and students, faculty and community organized several actions, including mass mobilizations to the Academic Senate, campus protests, and calls for support from elected officials, including the Los Angeles City Council, where the Council unanimously endorsed the demand. In the end, a modified "race and ethnicity" requirement was won. The Cal State LA struggle laid a foundation for larger K-12 and university demands, including the demand for Ethnic Studies in LAUSD. Many of the same students, faculty, and community members joined with LAUSD students, teachers, parents, and stakeholders to win the historic victory that made Ethnic Studies a requirement in the second largest school district in the nation in 2015. Additionally, a Task Force on the Advancement of Ethnic Studies in the California State University system was formed in response to the attempt to limit the autonomy of the Black Studies department at Cal State Long Beach.

PAS at Cal State LA mobilized and supported the call for retained departmental status at Long Beach, the subsequent moratorium on elimination or down-sizing of any ethnic studies unit in the CSU, and served on the CSU system-wide task force, with recommendations currently being reviewed and implemented at all 23 campuses.

The new Black Student Movement -- In 2015, Black students all over the nation, beginning at University of Missouri, organized and issued sets of demands to advance the standing of Black Students. Cal State LA's Black Student Union was key among the campuses that organized. The demands issued are posted on thedemands.org and include the expansion of Pan-African Studies and a demand for PAS to receive support in playing a vital role in Black student recruitment and retention. One of the demands, for the establishment of a PAS-focused living-learning community, has resulted in the establishment of the "Halisi House" named in honor of the late department chair, Dr. C.R.D. Halisi. And a second, for the creation of an MA program is in the pipeline and scheduled to be the first Pan-African/Black Studies graduate program in the California State University system, launching in Fall 2019, in time for the 50th anniversary of the Department.

In sum, Pan-African Studies at Cal State LA is firmly rooted in the history of Black Power and Black liberation struggle and continues in an intellectual tradition that ties curricular and campus-based efforts to broader justice struggles.

References

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Source: <http://www.calstatela.edu/academic/pas/pan-african-studies-history-pas-cal-state-la>