

Information Use in African American Studies Doctoral Dissertations at Pennsylvania State University, 2000-2007

by

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Abstract

This study analyzes African American Studies dissertation bibliographies at Pennsylvania State University (2000-2007) to determine the types and date range of materials used in their research. A statistical analysis is conducted of document types, subjects covered in the dissertations, citation patterns, age of materials, and local availability and/or access to materials cited are examined. The study is important because it the first in-depth analysis of African American Studies research use, an area not previously analyze but critical for the purpose of quality collection development and reference services at Pennsylvania State University. The results obtained from the 14,058 citations indicate interdisciplinary nature of African American Studies. Of the 83 dissertations, social sciences lead with (54), followed by humanities (13), and sciences (16). Of the 14058 citations, 12,810 (91%) are owned by Pennsylvania State University Libraries, with journals at 6477 (46.1%), 5594 (39.8%) monographs, and “other” category 1984 (14.1%) of the total citations. In addition to books and journals, the results showed doctoral students using variety of sources and much older materials.

Introduction

African American Studies or Black Studies emerged in the 60s in response to Black college students requesting curriculum changes to incorporate Black history and experience in the United States. Alkalimat (2007) notes that there is 311 degree granting institutions in the discipline of Black Studies in the U.S. The discipline continues to evolve with varying terms used to describe the discipline, including Black Studies, African American Studies, African and African American Studies, Afro-American Studies, Africana Studies, Pan African Studies, etc (Anderson 1993). According to Anderson, the varying titles mostly exist because of the geographical scope of each program or curriculum. For the purpose of this study, African American Studies will be used throughout this paper, synonymous with Black Studies, African and African American Studies, Afro-American Studies, Africana Studies, Africology, and Pan African Studies.

African American Studies examines, from numerous perspectives, the experience of people of African descent living in the United States, and encompasses history, politics, culture, literature, religion, sociology, and many other disciplines within the humanities and social sciences. Anderson (1993) noted “the field of study does not begin with the enslavement in America, but with their heritage and ancestral roots in Africa..., and their relationship with white America as well as with other racial-ethnic groups.” (4). Walter (2002) summed-up Black Studies below:

Despite all these problematics, I sense that African American Studies is about to experience a profound renaissance. The content of African American Studies explains and responds to much in our history and our present-day struggles to realize our democratic aspirations. While examining the cultural, social, economic, and political realities of the African American people, it simultaneously analyzes the black/white paradigm, the paradigm in which in the United States the racialization of other groups, domestic and international, is based. Thus, it provides a necessary touchstone in scholarship and pedagogy for similar study of all ethnic groups -- most of whom have been racialized in opposition to whiteness at some point.” (103)

The department of African and African American Studies at Pennsylvania State University integrates courses and research from the social sciences and humanities in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences with other academic areas throughout the university. Most students who graduate from the program move on to pursue graduate studies in the various disciplines with a focus on African American Studies. There are growing research needs in African American Studies; and knowing what doctoral students are citing in their research is critical for collection development and reference services. Therefore, citation analysis is of great value for African American Studies, as it can broaden or help focus the collection development. This study analyzes African American Studies dissertation bibliographies at Pennsylvania State University from 2000-2007 to see the types and age of materials used in their research. This can be attributed to the historical debate about African American Studies.

Founded in 1855, The Pennsylvania State University commonly known as Penn State University is a multi-campus public research university. The university has 24 campuses throughout the state of Pennsylvania, including world campuses. The enrollment at University Park Campus in State college is nearly 45,000 students with a total enrollment of over 87,000 across its 24 campuses. Pennsylvania State University defines its mission as one “that improves the lives of the people of Pennsylvania, the nation, and the world through integrated, high-quality programs in teaching, research, and service.” The university offers more than 120 majors and administers a 1.22 billion endowment system wide. The University Libraries today house more 5.3 million books, 88,000 serials, 536 databases, and more than 100,000 E-books.

Literature Review

Extensive searches of the library literature found five citation studies with a focus on African American Studies. A study by Thomas W. Conkling et al (2010) of doctoral dissertations across various subject disciplines at different universities pre-web (1990-1993) and post-web (2003-2006), found high use of monographs and older materials in African American Studies dissertations. Weissinger (2003) analyzed two fields of Black scholarship: academic and activism, reached a conclusion that traditional academia represses the activist element of Black Studies research. According to Weissinger, “this element in Black Studies is forced “off campus.” It resurfaces in Black Studies periodicals and mass culture popular periodicals, both of which are outside the scholarly mainstream (55). He cautioned librarians with collection responsibility not to overlook popular and discipline-specific periodicals and other non-mainstream sources (including small presses, organizations and associations) because they are critical to Black Studies. In a related article “The core journal concept in Black Studies”, Weissinger (2010) questions why traditional disciplinary journals have been excluded from the Black Studies core journals, and yet they also contribute literature about the Black experience. The author suggested inclusion of these journals in Black Studies journals core journals.

A study by Lisa Pillow (1999) of periodical indexing of African American journals concluded that access to African American Studies journals needed to be improved, and that there was no existing comprehensive and up-to-date index for African American Studies. She noted that several research studies have addressed indexing inadequacy in such interdisciplinary disciplines as Women’s Studies. The general conclusions reached in these papers caution librarians against assuming that a discipline-specific index will provide comprehensive coverage of a topic. Camilla Pickett’s (2009) study of “Black Studies scholarships and its coverage in the Thomson Reuter’s Web of Science” questions the journal selection process by Thomson Reuters, especially when no new Black Studies citations appeared in JCR: Social Sciences Edition from 2001 to 20007; and suggested inclusion of six Black Studies journals (*Callaloo*, *The Journal of African American History*, *Journal of Black Psychology*, *The Journal of Negro Education*, and *Souls*) in the JCR and Web of Science.

Interdisciplinary subjects like African American Studies create challenges for collection development and reference services because of the varying research needs of students. Allen and Sutton (1999) stated that user groups within interdisciplinary areas such as Latin American Studies are difficult to identify and serve because the discipline is not homogenous. According to Allen and Sutton, “a Latin American department may have political scientists, sociologists, and literary scholars.” In a related study, Brooke A. Bolton (2009) describes Women’s Studies as “a very interdisciplinary subject, touches on numerous other discipline, including psychology, criminal justice, sociology, and agriculture.”

Several studies have examined citations in interdisciplinary areas, and found that interdisciplinary subjects tend to cross-discipline boundaries when searching for resources for their dissertations. A study by Hurd (1992) of “Interdisciplinary Research in the Sciences...” found that 49 percent of the recent articles published by chemistry department were not from the discipline of chemistry. She adds, “findings like these can boost the argument to eliminate departmental libraries with narrow collection management scopes.” Li Zhang’s (2007) study of international relations dissertations reflected interdisciplinarity in the discipline, and found that 62 percent of the cited materials were from other disciplines. A study by Kirsten LaBonte (2005) of an interdisciplinary group of 60 faculty at the University of Santa Barbara California provided data to map the emerging and developing disciplines and for future collection development and management decisions. The investigation of the interdisciplinary patterns of citations in social sciences journals by Daniel Rigney and Donna Barnes in 1980 found a growing trend among student researchers to cross-discipline boundaries when conducting reviews of literature.

The reviews of library literatures show that research in interdisciplinary subjects like African American Studies tend to cross-discipline when looking for resources for their research. Therefore, knowing these patterns can help subject librarians with collection development and reference service decisions.

Methods

The study analyzes African American Studies dissertation bibliographies at Pennsylvania State University over eight-year period (2000-2007) to help subject librarians with collection development and reference services. The following questions are explored: (1) what types and age of materials used in the dissertations; (2) what are the disciplines/subjects covered in the dissertations; and (3) how do citation patterns vary among discipline/subjects covered in the dissertations? To identify doctoral dissertations, the terms African American, African American Studies, Afro-American, and Afro-American Studies were used as keywords in Pennsylvania State library catalog (CAT), and Proquest Dissertations, limiting to doctoral dissertation (format), Pennsylvania State University (school) and year.

Title pages and bibliographies or reference sections were photocopied from each of the 83 dissertations, and the author then categorized each citation into four categories: journals, “monographs”, and “other” category. In this study, monograph included books, edited books, and book chapters. The “journal” included both scholarly and non-scholarly journals articles, and there was no distinction between print and online. Abbreviated and questionable journals were check in Ulrich’s International Periodicals Directory and the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC).

The “age” is the difference between the publication year of a resource and the dissertation year. Materials in “other” category are: ERIC documents; dissertations and theses (published and unpublished); conference papers/presentation/proceedings; reports (technical and non-technical); government documents (local, national, federal, and international); court cases/laws; newspapers; magazines; newsletters; bulletins/brochures; institution documents, government documents; archives; web (org, edu, and com), and miscellaneous.

Using Excel, each dissertation was checked for total number of citations, and formats broken down into journals, monographs, and the “other” category. Citation age is calculated by subtracting publication year of the cited work from the year the dissertation was completed. Data were analyzed by formats, discipline/subjects, and age to determine citation trends in the dissertations.

The author consulted the Statistical Consulting Center at Pennsylvania State University. The Center raised concerns with the original data, including the small number of dissertations (83). For the 33 subjects represented in the doctoral dissertations, many subjects were with only one dissertation per year, and short time range. The problem with the small sample size was resolved by grouping the 33 subjects into 3 broad academic divisions for data analysis. The software program MINITAB (Release 13) was used for data analysis, and ANOVA used to compare age of resources and formats between the academic divisions. Even after the regrouping, the sizes in the academic divisions were small. Therefore, interpretations on the results of this study are limited to the small sample of dissertations, limited years, as African American Studies at Pennsylvania State University is fairly young, founded in 1990.

Table 1: Subjects represented in the Dissertations and Academic Divisions

Subjects/Disciplines	Number of Dissertations	Academic Divisions	Total Dissertations		
Adult Education & Comparative & International Education	1	Social Sciences	54		
Art Education	1				
Adult Education	3				
Counselor Education	3				
Curriculum and Instruction	3				
Educational Administration	2				
Education Leadership	1				
Education Policy Studies	1				
Education Theory & Policy	2				
Higher Education	4				
Administrative of Justice	1				
Crime, Law and Justice	2				
Anthropology	2				
Rural Sociology and Demography	2				
Communications Arts and Sciences	3				
Mass Communications	3				
Counseling Psychology	5				
Psychology	5				
School Psychology	1				
Human Development and Family Studies	7				
Human Development and Family Studies and Demography	2				
Biobehavioral Health	5	Science	16		
Communication Sciences and Disorders	1				
Genetics	2				
Health Policy and Administration	2				
Leisure Studies	1				
Integrative Biosciences	1				
Nutrition	2				
Geography	2				
English	7	Humanities	13		
French	1				
History	4				
Music Education	1				

Results and Discussion

Table 1, shows subjects represented in the dissertations and academic divisions. The different subjects were grouped into broader academic divisions, social sciences, sciences, and humanities. The result showed dissertations patterns within the academic divisions, social sciences leading with a total of 54 dissertations followed by sciences (16), and humanities (13). Noticeably, there were no dissertations from the engineering discipline. The result also revealed the interdisciplinary nature of African American Studies. Of the 54 dissertations in the social sciences, education lead by (21) followed by psychology (11), and the rest were between 1-3 dissertations. In humanities, 7 out of 13 dissertations were from the English department, followed by history (4), French (1), and Music Education (1). In the sciences, Biobehavioral Health lead by (5), and the rest were between 1-2 dissertations.

Table 2: Type of Citations and Availability (PSU)

Availability at PSU	Type of Citation			Total
	Journal	Monograph	Other	
Available	6476	5587	741	12804
Not Available	1	7	1243	1248
Total	6477	5591	1990	14058

Table 2 shows the total number of citations and local availability and/or access to journals, books, and “other” materials cited in the dissertations. Eighty three dissertations, with a total of 14058 citations represented African American Studies dissertations published from 2000-2007. Of the total citations 14,058, 6477 (46.1%) were journals, 5594 (39.8), and the “other” category 1984 (14.1%). The finding supports earlier studies where journals were the most cited format (Buchanan and Herubel 1994). Of the 1984 (14.1%) “Other” category, 741 (5.27%) materials were available to Pennsylvania State University. The majority were unavailable archival materials, unpublished manuscripts, dissertations and theses and unpublished institution documents (Navy, Army, Air force, etc.).

Table 3: Citations by Academic Divisions and Age

Academic Division	Number of Citations	% Citations	Average Age
Social Science	8470	60.26	12.66616
Science	2809	19.98	8.56853
Humanities	2775	19.74	26.89888
Total	14054		16.044523

Note: excludes 4 incompletes

Table 3 shows citations by academic divisions and age, social sciences leading with 8470 (60.26%), sciences 2809 (19.98%), and humanities 2775 (19.74%) of the total citations. The total number in tables 2 and 3 are different because table 3 excluded incomplete citations. The p-value was significant (p=0) for ANOVA test done on citation patterns between the academic divisions. A log transformation was used to normalize the original average age. To find age differences between the academic divisions, Tukey comparison was conducted. The comparison between the academic divisions was significant in the age of materials cited (p=0). The average age of all citations in the study was (16.6) years, and between academic divisions, humanities leading with (26.9), followed by the social sciences (12.7), and the youngest sciences (8.6) years. This was also reflected in the monograph citations, where humanities and social sciences cited older materials than the sciences. The age range of materials also varied by academic divisions, with humanities leading (0-318), followed by social science (0-200), and the sciences (0-40) years. It is interesting to note that students are using older resources in the sciences with age range of 40 years contrary to other findings. Thomas Conkling et al (2010) study of “Research Material Selection in Pre-Web and Post-Web” found that African American Studies are citing older materials compared to other disciplines in the study. As reflected in this study, age should not be the overriding factor for weeding because older materials meet the diverse research needs in African American Studies.

Table 4: Materials in “Other” Category

Material Type	Total # Cited	% other
Web (edu, org, com)	417	2.97
Newspapers	341	2.42
Dissertations and Theses	203	1.44
ERIC	103	0.73
Archival materials	160	1.14
Institution Documents (Marine, Navy, Army & WAC, GAR, Airforce)	239	1.70
Conference Papers/Proceedings/Posters	126	0.89
Reports (published and unpublished)	80	0.57
Unpublished manuscripts	90	0.64
Government publications	47	0.33
Laws/court cases/policy	20	0.14
Magazines	56	0.39
Newsletters	5	0.04
Brochures/Bulletin	2	0.01
Personal Communication (interviews, letter, memo, lecture, briefing)	62	0.03
Miscellaneous (items that did not fit into the above categories)	45	0.02

Students in African American Studies are citing non-traditional materials as shown in Table 4. The results show higher number of the “other” formats cited in African American doctoral dissertations. Of the 14,055 citations, 1984 resources are from the “other” category. Web leads by 417 (2.97%), Newspapers 341 (2.42%), institution documents (1.70%), dissertations (1.44%), archival materials (1.14%), conference paper (0.89%), ERIC (0.73%), reports (0.57%), misc (0.68%), and the rest were under 1 percent. Of the 1984 “other” category, 341 (17.2%) were newspapers articles. In one dissertation, 50 percent of materials were from newspaper and magazine articles. The finding supports Thomas Weissinger’s article “Black Studies Scholarly Communication: A Citation Analysis of Periodical Literature” where he cautioned librarians not to overlooked smaller presses because of the activist nature of the African American or Black Studies (Weissinger 2002). The study highlights the need to provide access to these resources, especially materials not available at Pennsylvania State University. Thomas Conkling et al study of “Research Material Selection in the Pre-Web and Post-Web” found increased use of archival materials and newspapers in African American Studies (Conkling et al 2010).

Conclusion

African American Studies is interdisciplinary as shown in this study; a discipline that examines from numerous perspectives, the experience of people of African descent living in the United States, their ancestral home, and their relationship with white America as well as with other racial-ethnic groups. The discipline is developing and changing, and so must librarians with responsibilities in this discipline. The increasing research needs in African American Studies demands a thorough understanding of citation patterns. The “one shoe fits all” approach does not apply because of the interdisciplinary nature of African American Studies. Therefore, collaboration is essential between subject librarians for a balanced collection. The study also found resources cited in African American Studies doctoral bibliographies were older and from diverse disciplines, humanities, sciences and social sciences. Knowledge of these variations provides subject librarians with essential data for collection development and reference service decisions.

This study was local to Pennsylvania State University, but it would be beneficial to replicate this study with more dissertations at Pennsylvania State University and other institutions with African American Studies departments/programs to look for trends and coverage.

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