

Ku Komena Nyundo: The Africana Studies Effect

by

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Abstract

This study is an investigation of the impact of Africana Studies on student thought and practice, known as the *Africana Studies effect*. Self-administered questionnaires were completed by 89 students who had taken at-least one Africana Studies course to understand the overall impact of Africana Studies on them. Coding revealed several key themes: Historical Location, Knowledge of Self, Sense of Social Responsibility, Relevant/Engaging, Communal Environment, Special Connection to Professors, and Unique Perspective. The results have implications for the effective administration of Africana Studies departments and programs and ways Universities can more effectively support Africana Studies and students.

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The emergence of leadership among the *Luba* people of Central Africa is associated with metamorphosis and transformation. The divine leader of the *Luba* must undergo a ceremony called *Ku Komena Nyundo*, the beating or striking of the anvils. The symbol of striking an anvil was chosen because a leader was believed to undergo transformation the same way that a Blacksmith transforms raw metal into tools and instruments for communities. Like the vast diversity of traditional African rites of passage, this custom is grounded in the thinking that personal transformation (spiritual/development of consciousness) is linked to the wellbeing of society.

Among the *Luba* and many other societies, adults were sometimes initiated into what are known as societies of secrets which maintained the harmonious functioning of society by producing people with specialized skills to provide essential services (Imhotep, 2009). These societies maintained and advanced specified ancient cultural knowledge and traditions. The training received was typically based on a moral and spiritual foundation (Hilliard, 1997). The knowledge they acquired had to be kept confidential so that it stayed in the hands of those who were trained to use it responsibly and efficiently (Imhotep, 2009). Initiation into these societies generally followed the same general format of transformation, including separation, testing\teaching, and reincorporation. Successfully undergoing a series of difficult initiation processes allowed individuals, to enter and advance to higher ranks within these associations (Müller and Ritz-Müller, 2000). Successful initiates joined these non-hierarchical, professional castes, often associated with professions that were vital to the community, such as iron smelters\blacksmiths, stonemasons, woodcarvers, engineers, farmers, warriors, sages, herbalists, and diviners (Imhotep, 2009; Williams, 1987). Because racism is endemic to institutions that deliver key services in the United States, personal transformation is critical because it may influence social *transformation*. Additionally, transformation is often important among populations for whom the status quo is oppressive.

This article examines the effects of courses in Africana Studies (i.e., the culturally and historically grounded study of peoples of African descent for the purpose of higher level functioning and liberation) on student success and degree completion. This phenomenon is known as “the *Africana Studies effect*,” a phrase created to represent how important Africana Studies courses and degree programs are to graduation and advancement of students as well as the universities they attend. The question this study seeks to answer is to what degree Africana Studies has actually had a transformative impact on Africana people, communities, and institutions of higher education.

Education plays a role in this culture of transformation, and in some very important ways, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have played a critical role in educational transformation. The successes of HBCUs are, in part, due to the fact that they generally provide Black students with same-race role models and supportive and nurturing environment, serving them by providing mentorship, research opportunities, and guidance through college to professional life (Stovall, 2005). Overall enrollment rates for Black students in post-secondary institutions have steadily increased over the past 40 years; increasingly outside of HBCUs (Beasley, Chapman-Hilliard & McClain, 2016). However, despite demographic shifts, Black students’ six-year graduation rates remain at nearly 40% compared to approximately 60% for all students (Beasley, Chapman-Hilliard & McClain, 2016). This is in large part due to the fact that the American educational system has not been sufficiently attentive to the unique needs of its Black students, particularly at institutions where Black students are underrepresented, including but not limited to, Predominantly White Institutions (PWI) (Carey & Allen, 1977).

Consequently, Black students have a more difficult time than White students at PWIs (Carey & Allen, 1977). Black students at PWIs sometimes see themselves as isolated academically and socially (Carey & Allen, 1977). However, since 1968, colleges and universities across the United States have experienced the growth of Black Studies (hereafter referred to as Africana Studies) (Karenga, 2010). Moreover, the discipline is grounded in the principles of academic excellence, social responsibility, and cultural grounding (Karenga, 2010). The present study is an investigation of the overall impact of Africana Studies courses on African American/Black students at a University on the west coast of the United States. Because of the challenges that Black students are confronted with on campuses where they are underrepresented, it is imperative that university administrators, faculty, and Black communities be able to draw on empirical research about culturally responsive solutions.

Africana Studies departments are key constituencies in efforts to enhance Black student success, given that they are pedagogically focused on studying the lives and cultures of people of African descent. Moreover, compared to other departments on college campuses, Africana Studies departments often have the highest percentages of Black faculty on campuses where Black faculty are underrepresented. Because of these and other factors, a failure to engage in the systematic study of the impact of Africana Studies on students, particularly Black students, can leave universities and other key actors ill-informed and underequipped to meet the needs of Black student populations.

Existing Literature

This review of scholarly literature surveys existing research on the structure and impacts of culturally relevant pedagogy on Black students, the unique challenges that Black students face on PWI and HBCU campuses, and what is known about the impact on Africana Studies of student thought and practice (known as the *Africana Studies effect*). A limited number of studies have been conducted measuring the impact of culturally relevant pedagogy on Black students at the middle and high school levels. Investigations reveal the impact of culturally relevant pedagogy on Black students' perceptions of themselves and their possibilities. Lewis, Sullivan & Bybee (2006) conducted an experiment examining the effect of a school-based emancipatory intervention on the psychological and behavioral wellbeing of sixty-five eighth grade African American adolescents. They randomly assigned participants to either receive the experimental intervention or a regular Life Skills course (the control condition). The experimental intervention included a curriculum that covered African/African American History and Culture; Building Cohesion and Communalism; African Rituals and Practices; Enhancing Interpersonal Skills & Inner Strength; Putting Theory into Practice; Student Leadership and Activism; School and Community Partnerships; and Positive Behavior. After a semester, the intervention had led to increased communalism, belief in the value of their African and African diasporic heritage, and motivation to achieve (Lewis, Sullivan & Bybee, 2006). Investigations like this demonstrate the impact of a range of culturally responsive tools on students' self-perceptions. However, the effects of culturally relevant pedagogy go beyond shifts in values.

Some investigations have focused on particular components of culturally relevant pedagogy, such as texts. For example, Rickford (2001) examined the impact of culturally relevant texts and found that they increase student enjoyment, interest, and motivation, thus improving students' performance in reading comprehension. Results indicated that despite conventional wisdom, students who are poor readers may still engage in higher order thinking (Rickford, 2001). Rickford found that, when they have the opportunity to learn through culturally relevant literature and adequate scaffolding (through strategic questioning), they demonstrate original and critical thought (Rickford, 2001).

How might culturally relevant pedagogy affect students who are already achieving highly? While underachievement is a frequent subject of study among Black youth in education, *high-achieving* Black students remain under-researched. However, Carter (2008) examined the embodiment of a critical race achievement ideology in high-achieving Black students. She conducted a yearlong qualitative investigation of the adaptive behaviors that nine high-achieving Black students developed and employed to navigate the process of schooling at an upper-class, predominantly White, suburban public high school while maintaining school success and positive racial self-definition. Based on an analysis of interview data, participant observations, and field notes, Carter (2008) concluded that students' conceptions of race and how race operates in their daily lives informs their constructions of achievement beliefs, attitudes, and self-definitions and informs their racialization and deracialization of the task of achieving. Carter's (2008) findings indicate that students with strong racial and achievement identities may develop

a critical race achievement ideology and enact resilient, adaptive behaviors in racially challenging contexts and that enhances their abilities to meet and overcome diversity. However, higher education environments expose students to more complex environments.

African American College Student Experiences

Most African American college students attend Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) or schools where they are underrepresented. It is critical to understand colleges and universities as reflections of larger society. At PWIs, Black students often encounter a racially hostile institutional subculture, which is an extension of anti-Black racial hostility in the country and world (Stovall, 2005). On these campuses, implicit and unstated racism masquerades behind seemingly neutral academic topics like literature, philosophy, science, and many others, which essentially prioritize western literature, European philosophy, and European contributions and perspectives in science. Sometimes, White students and professors in the classrooms where these subjects are taught and discussed, unconsciously and consciously act in a racist manner (Stovall, 2005). This can make Black students feel unwelcome, and place them consciously or unconsciously on the defensive, or make them feel isolated in such environments (Stovall, 2005).

Problems like these emerge and are allowed to fester due to assimilationist approaches to campus diversity and academic success rooted in a troubling logical fallacy. Assimilationist logic about diversity on campuses assumes that if Black students are brought to campuses, diversity is achieved and success should logically follow (Adams, 2014). Assimilationist logic relies on the notion of demographic inclusion without a truly inclusive campus cultural environment. Black students often arrive at college campuses expecting them to be liberal spaces, instead finding them unsupportive, confusing, and hostile (Adams, 2014). They are confronted with marginalization, covert racism, unsupportive cultural environments, and curriculum from which their cultural experiences have been removed or marginalized (Adams, 2014). In addition to financial and academic challenges, racial/cultural marginalization can intensify Black students' feelings of alienation and isolation, underperformance, and ultimately attrition from school (Fischer, 2007; Dahlvig, 2010). Colleges are also environments where students confronted with these challenges may discover the discipline of Africana Studies.

What Africana Studies Offers Black Students

In unique ways, African Studies pedagogical approaches have been found to provide students with social supports, racial socialization, cultural pride, departmental activities and services, and knowledge of their heritage as they relate to multiple subject areas (Carey & Allen, 1977; Adams, 2014). These pedagogical approaches in Africana Studies are associated with positive racial identity development, increased self-esteem, self-efficacy, and the likelihood of graduating (Marie, 2016).

Social supports, racial socialization, and messages about cultural pride and Black heritage are all predictors of academic achievement and resilience (Brown, 2008). The social benefits of Africana Studies are well supported. For example, Africana Studies students' acquire the skills and knowledge to cope with racism and other forms of social injustice by providing them with models of success that don't involve adopting the values of White cultures. Moreover, students enrolled in Africana Studies courses report increased cultural knowledge and personal agency (Adams, 2014). It must also be understood that Africana Studies has a reach that includes students of all identities and it impacts students on campuses beyond Africana Studies majors and minors through general education courses, electives, and departmental programs and services (Adams, 2014).

As students become aware of the social and intellectual benefits of Africana Studies, many decide to be majors or minor. Marie (2016) investigated the reasons that African American undergraduate students choose to enroll or not enroll in Africana Studies courses in an African Studies program that offered a minor. She also investigated the relationship between racial identity and Africana Studies. Participants included Africana Studies minors and students who participated in Black student organizations. Marie (2016) found that those who were Africana Studies minors: 1. felt a greater connection to the African diaspora, 2. a greater sense of self, and 3. a more positive racial identity than those who were not. Those who chose to minor in Africana Studies did so because they: wanted to learn more about the history of their ancestors and to gain a more culturally grounded perspective. Those who chose not to, did so because they viewed Africana Studies as unrelated to their major and graduation requirements, and they felt that they lacked knowledge about Africana Studies. Marie (2016) also found that participants experienced a transformation in their sense of racial identity since their first years due to the Africana Studies courses they had taken. In particular, they reported feeling a greater sense of pride and confidence in their identity and less tolerance for racial injustice. Africana Studies minors explained that taking Africana Studies courses impacted them by providing them with unique forms of academic and social support.

They reported feeling a greater sense of belonging because Africana Studies linked academic skill, rigor, and knowledge production with Black identities, cultures, and experiences. They also mentioned that Black faculty in Africana Studies were like family, especially supportive, and took a personal interest in them compared to the hostility and microaggressions they often felt in their other courses (Marie, 2016). According to Adams (2014), Black faculty in Africana Studies' approach to students is akin to 'other mothering' or being teachers, mentors, parents, and nurturers. They also felt freer to be their authentic selves in their Africana Studies courses because they create an environment where Black students feel that they have a voice. Hence, Africana Studies removes some of the psychological barriers that block Black students' progress toward graduation. The *Africana Studies effect* that this research hopes to uncover, is the totality of the impact that Africana Studies has on Black students, institutions they are a part of, their communities and environments, and the world (Adams, 2014).

Methods

The present study was conducted at a public research university located in northern California where the majority of the students enrolled have racially underrepresented identities such as Native American/Alaskan Native, Latinx, Asian (multiple ethnicities), Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and those who identify as two or more races. However, 5% identify as Black/African American. Hereafter the institution will be referred to by the pseudonym, Diversity University. Eighty-nine current students at Diversity University who had taken a course in the Africana Studies Department were surveyed about their experiences in Africana Studies classes. Twenty-seven participants identified as male, 58 identified as female, and four selected not to identify. The questions they were asked are aligned with the mission and learning outcomes of the Department of Africana Studies. Among the participants, 54.4% were majors or minors in Africana Studies and 45.6% were not. Among non-Africana Studies majors or minors, all had taken at least one course in Africana Studies. Eighty-one percent of the current student respondents were Black/African American. Eleven percent of those who identified as Black/African American indicated mixed-race Black identity. Seven percent of the respondents were White, 10% were Asian, and 2% identified as another racial/ethnic identity. Ten percent ethnically identified as Mexican, Mexican American or Chicano. The researchers obtained permission from Diversity University's Institutional Review Board to analyze and publish the results of students' qualitative answers to an Africana Studies Department questionnaire. In the Africana Studies Department and at Black Students organizations at Diversity University, announcements were made, invited students to complete online questionnaires. No student names were requested & IP addresses remained were confidential. Only students who provided consent and had taken one or more Africana Studies courses were allowed to participate.

Participants completed questionnaires assessing the effectiveness of the Department of Africana Studies. However, the present study presents an analysis of students' answers to open-ended questions about the most significant impacts of Africana Studies courses on them. The present study also includes an analysis of students' responses to questions about how their experiences in Africana Studies courses differed or not from non- Africana Studies courses they had taken. Specifically, students were asked "What are the most important things you've learned in Africana Studies?", "In your opinion, what have you gained most from the class/classes you have taken in Africana Studies?" and "In your own opinion, how has your experience in your Africana Studies class/es compare to your experiences in courses outside of Africana Studies?".

Data were collected over the course of a semester. Subsequently, participants' responses were subjected to content analysis and coded into several themes or patterns of responses to each question. Themes representing the beliefs of less than 10% of the participants were discarded. Preliminary themes were reanalyzed and ultimately the strongest themes remained, while the least represented themes were eliminated. All student participant names were replaced with pseudonyms. Coding of students' responses to these questions revealed several key themes: Historical Location, Knowledge of Self, Sense of Social Responsibility, Relevant/Engaging, Communal Environment, Special Connection to Professors, and Unique Perspective. Students provided responses that fit into more than one category. These results are illustrated below.

Results

Historical Location

Forty-three percent (38/89) of student respondents stated that in African Studies courses they learned the "true" or "real" *history of people of African descent*. They repeatedly mentioned learning information about people of African descent that were new, intriguing, and exciting. They also explained how their learning caused them to see themselves. For example, some of their responses were:

- "I learned a lot about African history, to ancient Kemet. U.S. government, and historical context to Black issues" (Makayla, Black, Female, Bio-Chemistry and Africana Studies Major)
- "Learning the actual history of Africans and African Americans breaking stereotypes, and that our history didn't begin with slavery" (Niveah, Black Female, Family and Consumer Services major)
- "I have gained a better sense of the contributions that Black people have made in America and around the world. These classes remind me that I can go into any field that I want because Black people have always been doing so many different things, even if it is not normally taught in other classes." (Chloe, Black, Female, Physiology Major)
- "the history of African Americans that was never taught." (Georgene, Racially Non-Specified, Female, Physics and Astronomy Major).

Students who provided history related responses placed emphasis on Africana people's contributions to humanity and struggles for liberation. Commonly found among these responses was an emphasis on learning histories that had been excluded from students' prior educational experiences. Like Georgene, students expressed surprise, excitement, and intrigue about learning things that had not been revealed to them about histories they had personal connections to. Similar to Makayla, many of these students explained that their Africana Studies courses provided them with historical contexts that helped them to understand present states of affairs in Africana communities. Students also explained that their learning in Africana Studies challenged falsehoods and racially/culturally biased interpretations of Africana people's histories. Ultimately, some students, like Chloe, discussed how the historiography they were exposed to in Africana Studies influenced how they saw themselves and their possibilities in a more positive light.

Knowledge of Self

Forty-six percent (41/89) of the student participants indicated that one of the most important ways that Africana Studies impacted them, was by providing them with and/or enhancing their *knowledge of self*. These students explained how what they had learned, had caused them to have greater understanding, appreciation, and confidence in themselves. They made note of how what they were learning helped them to feel more comfortable with who they are. Others mentioned how their experience in Africana Studies had been a transformative experience that caused them to change their outlooks on life. Examples of student comments about knowledge of self are:

- “First off, I gained a declared major in Africana Studies, one in which I am proud to be pursuing. Next, I have developed more of a pride in Black people, a pride that became more developed once I learned more about Black people. I also feel like I can be more politically correct about other races and ethnicities now that I have been taught this about my own.” (Isaiah, a Black, Male, Africana Studies Major)
- “Best educational experience I have ever had. Changed me as a person, changed my outlook, and enlightened me. Never have I ever learned from such great educators. Really the educators in the Africana Studies Department are one of the most beautiful groups of educators I have ever met in my life. Best decision I made to take so many Africana Studies courses. I learned about society and what's fair and unfair and just the sole purpose and significance of what it is to give people equal opportunities and see them as an equal.

- I really learned that we are all the same. In these classes, I learned and found my passion meaning and purpose which is to help people and this is why I am now pursuing a major in Social work.” (Aniyah, a Middle Eastern, Female, Africana Studies Major)
- “I have learned a lot more about myself and who I want to be, moving forward in my life.” (Jada, a Black, Female, International Relations Major)
- “I have gained a better understanding of the importance Africana history holds to world history. I have also gained more confidence in my own cultural and racial background being of Africana descent.” (Cameron, a Black, Male, Undeclared Major)
- “I learned to appreciate my culture” (Destiny, a Black and Filipino, Female, Engineering Major)

Students who mentioned knowledge of self as something that they gained from their Africana Studies classes made comments in three categories: self-awareness, cultural appreciation, and self-perception. Students like Isaiah and Jada mentioned learning more about people of African descent and thus gaining knowledge and awareness of themselves. Students like Cameron and Destiny mentioned that their experiences in Africana Studies classes specifically provided them with a greater understanding and appreciation of the cultures of people of African descent. Lastly, students like Isaiah, mentioned that they gained enhanced confidence and pride in themselves and Black people collectively. It was primarily Black students who mentioned that they had gained “knowledge of self”. Generally, these students gained knowledge and awareness of Black people’s current realities and heritage, which empowered them with confidence and self-belief.

Sense of Social Responsibility

Nineteen percent (17/89) of the student participants mentioned learning the importance of *social responsibility* in their Africana Studies classes. These students explained how they learned the importance of using what they learn in college to serve their communities, to help underserved populations, and to challenge injustice. Some examples of responses about social responsibility are:

“in my opinion, the most important things I learned in AFRS is the importance of a global African community and how to use my interest to serve my community” (Alexis, a Black, Female, Health Education and Cinema Major)

“A sense of self-worth and identity. Knowledge that is excluded on every other academic level. The confidence to fight against oppression and teach the younger generations the correct history.” (Hailey, a Black, Female, Africana Studies Major)

“Some things that I believe were extremely important were grassroots altruism, resistance, importance of family, the importance of language, and how to go about speaking to children of Africana decent.” (Evan, a White, Male, Elementary Education Major)

In their Africana Studies courses, students who mentioned social responsibility explained that they gained a greater sense of being connected to communities of people of African descent. Students who gave responses in this category, like Hailey, express that Africana Studies classes provided them with the confidence and belief that they have the ability to make changes that will benefit communities of African people. They explain that they gained an understanding that they have a responsibility to use their knowledge to serve their communities and to fight against injustice. Lastly, their classes provided them with knowledge of how Black people are already successfully fighting injustice and ways that they can use their knowledge to contribute to the advancement of their communities.

Perspective

Sixteen percent (14/89) of the student participants mentioned that taking Africana Studies classes impacted them by providing them with a unique perspective on reality in general and on the lives of people of African descent in particular. Some examples of responses about social responsibility are:

“Afrs has presented me with a perspective of African/Black people not given in any other college of academic experience, understanding of the systematic issues facing marginalized communities” (Xavier, a Black, Male, Biology Major)

“Ever since I was little, all I have wanted to do was travel and see the world but now there is a certain perspective of how and why I see the world the way it is. I intend to dismantle the world I see around me and the social constructs it has built and its all thanks to Africana Studies.” (Jada, a Black, female, International Relations Major)

“I only had one class, but perhaps knowledge of a perspective” (Ryan, a White, Male, Psychology Major)

Students who mentioned perspective noted that their Africana Studies class(es) provided them with a unique lens that helped them understand people of African descent better. They also explained that their Africana Studies curriculum helped them to become more critical thinkers about the world in general. Some students focused on the fact that they learned to deconstruct systems of oppression. Non-Black identified students identified learning a unique perspective from Africana Studies, different from other disciplines. There were other less represented responses that student provided to questions about the biggest impact of Africana Studies on them. Some students mentioned gaining a greater *knowledge and appreciation of the African diaspora*. Still, others mentioned gaining a greater *knowledge and awareness of oppression* and its many forms.

Students were asked the following question: “In your own opinion, how has your experience in your Africana Studies class(es) compared to your experiences in courses outside of Africana Studies?”. Coding of their responses to this question revealed several key themes: Relevant/Engaging, Communal Environment, Connection to Africana Studies Professors, and Unique Perspective.

Relevant/Engaging

Twenty-one percent (19/89) of the student participants indicated that a major factor that distinguishing Africana Studies classes from courses outside of Africana Studies is that they find they are more relevant and engaging for a variety of reasons. Some examples of responses about relevance and engagement are:

“The classes are more interesting because I learn about myself and my people” (Ryan, a Black, Non-gender identified, Psychology Major)

“I am able to complete my courses more successfully because I see myself in what I am learning.” (Kiara, a Black, Female, Africana Studies Major)

“I am always more engaged in my Africana studies classes. The wide variety of things that I can learn about are newer and more exciting to me. I feel like I learn and retain more information from my Africana studies classes than from my other classes.” (Chloe, Black Female, Physiology Major)

These students explain how Africana Studies classes were uniquely relevant and engaging to their lives, applicable to the real world, and thought-provoking. They frequently point out that seeing themselves in their curriculum makes them more engaged and interested. Because they are more relevant and engaging, several students, like Chloe and Kiara, explained that they learn more effectively in Africana Studies courses.

Communal Environment

Twenty percent (18/89) of the student participants indicated that a major factor that distinguishing Africana Studies classes from courses outside of Africana Studies is that they see their classroom environments in Africana Studies are more welcoming and safe. Some examples of responses about the communal Africana Studies environment are:

“it helps me to be able to assert myself, voice, and presence in non-Africana studies classes and to use that voice to inform non-Black students. I felt more welcome, safe and classrooms felt like family environments due to shared cultural experiences” (Laila, a Black, Female, Health Education Major)

“My experience in my AFRS classes has allowed me to be in class with other Blacks who share similar experiences as me. I also got to hear from those with different experiences being in these classes gives students the opportunity to talk about things they wouldn’t normally because they may not feel as comfortable outside of Africana Studies.” (Isis, a Black, Female, Anthropology Major)

“I don’t feel like an outsider like I have felt in non-African Studies classes.” (Hailey, a Black, Female, Africana Studies Major)

“Africana Studies courses are a breath of fresh air. The classroom becomes a safe space for me to learn about my history that has been omitted for the majority of my life. In these classes, I am surrounded by students who look like me, and taught by professors who represent who I am, and what I can become. I am encouraged and inspired when I am in these classes. In other classes I am constantly having to defend my Blackness, in AFRS I do not have to.” (Sydney, a Black, Female, Africana Studies Major)

Students who found Africana Studies courses to provide them with uniquely communal class environments identified that Africana Studies classes were welcome places, where they felt at home and safe enough to be more open to be themselves, to express themselves, and discuss issues such as culture, race, and racism. Several of them indicated that in non-Africana Studies courses they sometimes felt like outsiders, and isolated, such that they might not feel free to discuss such topics. They also mentioned that Africana Studies courses were more diverse and open to differing perspectives, such that they felt more comfortable questioning conventional beliefs or practices that are often taken for granted.

Special Connection to Professors

Twelve percent (11/89) of the students who participated, indicated that what differentiated their Africana Studies classes from their courses outside of Africana Studies was their special connections to Africana Studies professors. Some examples of responses about students' relationships to Africana Studies professors are:

“It was more personal, I feel that my professors are more relatable.” (Imani, a Black, Female, Health Education Major)

“There is more of a connection with the professors who teach Africana Studies that make you want to learn more and do more in your community” (Kennedy, a Black, Female, Journalism Major)

“As far as GEs goes, I believe my Africana studies professors had higher expectations of the students. They seemed to respect their classes as something more than a GE credit. I believe they have been very critically engaging compared to most of my classes and they really make you reflect on your own family and life.” (Evan, a White, Male, Elementary Education Major)

“I feel like it's more relatable to my identity and with a small class, I gained a better relationship with my classmates and professor.” (Aaliyah, a Black, Female, Biology Major)

Students who mentioned that Africana Studies was unique because they were able to form special connections with their professors, explained that they perceived their Africana Studies professors as more passionate, relatable, open-minded than professors outside of Africana Studies. Students also noted that Africana Studies professors have higher expectations for their students. These factors, caused students, like Kennedy, to form stronger connections with Africana Studies faculty relative to those outside of Africana Studies.

Unique Perspective

Eleven percent (11/89) of the students who participated, indicated that what differentiated their Africana Studies classes from other courses was the unique perspectives they were exposed to in Africana Studies. Some examples of responses about these unique perspectives are:

“Differences would be the Africana perspective in the study. Other classes focus on their own perspectives or viewpoints: Eurocentric viewpoint, evolutionary viewpoint, etc.” (Jordan, a Mixed-Afro Latina, Female, Biology Major)

“It gives incredible context and alternate angles to mostly one-sided stories.” (Madison, a Black, Female, Psychology Major)

“Helped me analyze the world in a newer light with a more critical eye for western philosophy” (William, a Black, Male, Business Management Major)

Students who mentioned that Africana Studies classes were unique because of the unique perspectives they take, explained that they perceived their Africana Studies courses as offering unique frameworks or lenses of analyzing Africana people’s realities and challenging culturally biased and racist scholarship. Students in this category explain that Africana studies teaches them to study in a way that prioritizes the history, culture, needs, and priorities of the people being studied.

Discussion

It is important to recognize that the present study was conducted at an institution that serves a population in which most students identify as underrepresented ethnicities. This population is unique given that other investigations of the *Africana Studies effect* have been conducted at PWIs. However, despite the demographic variety of Diversity University, Black students remain underrepresented in the student population as approximately 5%. Diversity University’s auspicious pseudonym is ironic given students’ testimonies in the present investigation. Moreover, Black students at Diversity University expressed some of the same concerns as Black students at PWIs; such as feelings of being unwelcome and experiences of academic, social, and cultural isolation (Stovall, 2005).

The present study has uncovered the impact that Africana Studies has on students, the institutions they attend, and beyond: the phenomenon known as the *Africana Studies effect*. The *Africana Studies effect* at Diversity University may be defined by Africana Studies courses’ provision of several key elements including Historical Location, Knowledge of Self, Sense of Social Responsibility, Unique Perspectives, Relevant & Engaging Pedagogy, Communal Environments, and Special Connections with Professors. Building on previous studies of effective culturally relevant pedagogies, the present study found *historical location* to be central to the impact of the *Africana Studies effect* (Lewis, Sullivan & Bybee, 2006). Students found their Africana Studies courses’ inclusion of Africana people’s histories that have been excluded or marginalized, to be exciting, surprising, and intriguing. Each of the elements of the *Africana Studies effect* that students revealed were interconnected.

The historical location provided by Africana Studies' pedagogy was related to what students repeatedly identified as *Knowledge of Self*. Black students around the country face educational experiences that require them to navigate higher education without seeing their cultural narratives reflected in their curriculum (Beasley, Chapman-Hilliard & McClain, 2016). However, the student participants in the present study emphasized how Africana Studies provided them with information that led them to develop a greater awareness of themselves, appreciation of their cultures, and perceptions of themselves. Although previous studies on the impact of Africana Studies emphasize students' perceptions of themselves as individuals, the present study revealed that Africana Studies courses influenced students to understand themselves as individuals *and as members of African/Black communities*. Extensions of this individual and collective self-knowledge were their statements about gaining a greater appreciation and understanding of Africana cultures. Additionally, a part of Knowledge of Self was students' explanations about how they gained greater confidence, pride, and belief in themselves and their peoples. Previous research has also found that when Black students see themselves reflected in their curriculum, they are able to challenge racist notions about their intellectual inferiority while continuing to see validity in their ethnic identities (Beasley, Chapman-Hilliard & McClain, 2016).

Students in the present study often spoke of how they brought their enhanced self-belief and sense of agency with them into their non-Africana Studies courses and majors. This sense of cultural and racial pride has been linked to academic success and resilience in spite of experiences with racism inside and outside of the classroom. Consistent with the role that transformation has played in Africana cultures historically, several students mentioned how their experiences in Africana Studies were personally transformative shaping the ways they saw themselves and their communities. Similarly, previous work on the *Africana Studies effect* has found that taking Africana Studies courses is related to transformation in students' racial identities. The results of the present study suggest that this transformation includes racial identity and extends to students' scholarly identities and their relationships with the world beyond the campus. The present study reveals that Africana Studies provides not only knowledge of self, but also awareness of what might be done with that knowledge. Students repeatedly mentioned that they gained a *sense of social responsibility* in their Africana Studies courses. This finding is consistent with the discipline's grounding principle of social responsibility combined with academic excellence.

One of the reasons Africana Studies courses have had such an impact, according to student participants is due to how *relevant and engaging* Africana Studies courses are. This finding adds to previous research an explanation of why students are attracted to Africana Studies but goes beyond curriculum content. Not only did the student participants indicate that they found the curriculum content relatable and exciting, thus engaging. Students found Africana Studies course to be both relevant and applicable to their everyday lives, a hallmark of culturally relevant pedagogy.

Because Africana Studies courses were relevant and engaging, students found that they learned better and retained information better. Beyond course content, the relevant and engaging characteristics of Africana Studies courses were inextricably connected to the finding that Africana Studies courses offered students a *communal learning environment*.

Similar to participants in previous work on the *Africana Studies effect*, student participants in the present study explained that the environments in Africana Studies courses give many students a strong sense of belonging (Adams, 2014; Marie, 2016). Students felt that Africana Studies class environments made them feel, welcome, at-home, and free to be and express themselves on issues that might otherwise be unwelcome. The communal environment of Africana Studies courses cannot be understood as separate from the *special connection with Africana Studies professors* that many students mentioned. It is likely that students felt safe, not only because the curriculum was relevant, but also because they found many Africana Studies professors to have high expectations, coupled with passion, compassion, relatability, and open-mindedness. On college campuses where Black students are underrepresented, they sometimes have relationships with faculty characterized by mistrust, cultural insensitivity, and lack of support (Beasley, Chapman-Hilliard & McClain, 2016). The fact that students report positive relationships with Africana Studies faculty may be related to the fact that the Africana Studies faculty at Diversity University are all of African descent. Moreover, Black students generally have more positive relationships with same-race faculty (Beasley, Chapman-Hilliard & McClain, 2016).

Conclusion

Too often Africana Studies is misunderstood because it is reduced to its units of analysis and subject matter, typically Africana people themselves. In other cases, it is understood as investigations of various related subject areas, dimensions, or topical areas, such as Africana History, Africana Sociology, Africana Psychology, Africana Aesthetics, Africana Economics, Africana Anthropology, and Africana Politics, to name a few. However, studying Black people or related topics alone does not qualify an academic exercise as Africana Studies scholarship or Africana Studies pedagogy (McDougal, 2014). Africana Studies is defined by its more core characteristics: its approach to study and its purpose for study (McDougal, 2014). For these reasons, it is not surprising that participants in the present study mentioned one element of the *Africana Studies effect* in response to multiple questions: its *unique perspective*. A major theme in student participants responses was their unique perspectives in studying the lives of peoples of African descent. Indeed, Africana Studies is defined by its approaches to study and its purpose, guided by unique theories, paradigms, and frameworks of analysis that it introduces students to.

The findings from the present study suggest that Universities like Diversity University might benefit from thoughtfully institutionalizing their Africana Studies courses into their general education requirements. Moreover, to magnify the benefits that Africana Studies courses have, particularly for underrepresented groups, such as African/Black students, it is critical that similar institutions increase financial support and promotion of Africana Studies programs and departments. The present study cannot be used to draw conclusions about all Africana Studies departments and programs across the country, although it does contribute to a growing body of literature on the *Africana Studies effect* at a national level. The present findings may be informative to universities with similar demographics and similar student attitudes and beliefs. Future research may benefit from a quantitative measure of the *Africana Studies effect* at multiple institutions across the country to increase the generalizability of findings. There is also a need for longitudinal research to chart the developmental effect of experiencing Africana Studies curriculum over time. Moreover, longitudinal research may be best suited to provide more in-depth analyses of the long-term impact of the *Africana Studies effect* (Beasley, Chapman-Hilliard & McClain, 2016). Like the Blacksmith of *Luba* society, and of classical African educational systems rooted in transformation, Africana Studies has had a transformative impact on both people and institutions which has long had measurable and immeasurable effects on the lives of students of African descent, and the overall institution of higher education. Research and institutional mobilization are central to its perpetuation into the Afrofuturity.

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