

40 Years of Educational Excellence, 12 Years of Intellectual Inquiry, Praxis & Transformation: PAS Graduate Programs at the University of Louisville

by

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Abstract

This paper traces the history, relevance and successes of the graduate programs in the Department of Pan-African Studies at the University of Louisville, through the perspectives and voices of former graduates. The findings reveal that students are motivated to pursue graduate programs in Black Studies because of exposure to African American courses, the need to learn more about the Black experience, and mentorship by Black faculty. They collectively agreed that although many of them were born after the Civil Rights Movement, and that conditions and outcomes of racism appear different, the relevance of Black Studies remains. They also reported that the PAS graduate program and faculty, along with other Black faculty members who mentored and tutored them along the way, reignited their passion and commitment to keeping a social mission tied to their academic pursuit and work. Overall, the results bore several similarities to the original social, economic and political factors that gave birth to Black Studies as a discipline. The graduates voiced several examples of how the methodological, theoretical and epistemological training they received in the PAS MA program prepared them for doctoral programs, other graduate programs, and for professional careers 'lifting as they climbed'.

Introduction

The intellectual history of a people or nation constitutes to a great degree the very heart of its life. – Gertrude Bustill Mossell (1894).

Over the years, as Director of the Graduate Program and then as Chair of the Department of Pan-African Studies, I have explained that Black Studies/Pan-African Studies was a response to political exigencies and part of a social movement that saw the need to fill an academic gap in North American colleges and universities. Black Studies is now a legitimate academic phenomenon with courses, programs and units. Nevertheless, many within and external to the institution, including friends and family do not understand “why I would want to study ‘Black People’ and constantly questioned my decision to seek a Black Studies degree” (Former PAS Graduate Student, 2014). Others are still confused whether or not Black Studies is a product of “affirmative type action” and therefore “not as academic” as the traditional degree programs. Martha Biondi, director of graduate studies and an associate professor of African-American Studies and History at Northwestern, shares a similar experience, and was quoted in a 2012 issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* saying that she too has to consistently explain that “Black studies is not a social-service agency aiming to ameliorate racial discontent. It is an area of rigorous intellectual inquiry that is here to stay” (p. 1). As the Department of Pan-African Studies (PAS) celebrates its 40th anniversary, it serves as a testimony that not only have we withstood the litmus test of an academic department but we also stand out within our university and in the South, as well as nationally and internationally.

Brief History of Black Studies

In the United States, Black Studies is known by different names usually representative of a specific geographical scope and focus. The variation in nomenclature reflects the volcanic birth of the discipline which resulted in structural and organizational diversity in the colleges and universities where it was established. No two programs are alike as they vary in size, composition, degrees offered, spatial resources, special programs, and nature of community outreach (Hines, 1997). Black Studies is used as a generic reference to the discipline but the many labels can be grouped into one of two main categories: those with a national range are called African-American, Afro-American, and Black, while those that are more diasporic are named Pan African, Africana, African and African American (Alkalimat et al., 2013; Hine, 1997). These various names are also preferred because they offset the stereotypical belief that Black Studies is only for Black faculty and students.

Most programs are multidisciplinary and center on one or more of the following: history, politics, culture, literature and linguistics, religion, sociology, anthropology, music, art and other disciplines within the humanities and social sciences. Regardless of the focus or name, Black Studies as a discipline is rooted in the desegregation of schools and universities, and the influx of Black students and faculty in the education system, previously dominated by Whites only. The *Brown* decision in 1954 followed by the Supreme Court decision in 1969 in the *Alexander v. Holmes County Board of Education* (Walton & Smith, 2000: 224) changed the demographic landscape of educational institutions all over the US. A decade later, students of color were in the education system and those attending colleges and universities quickly realized that there was an absence of Black and/or minority group experiences in their curriculum. The lack of Black faculty members at the institutions was also of grave concern. As such, along with the other demands of the Civil Rights Movement (CRM), students and communities advocated for Black Studies and Black faculty to be included in colleges and universities throughout the country.

Okakfor (2013), Rojas (2007) and others point out that the reason for developing Black Studies as an academic discipline was centered on two main issues: (1) the exclusion of self in the knowledge base, and (2) the need to intellectually address the socioeconomic and political inequities of the larger society from the standpoint of Blacks and other people of color. Within this broad framework, not only has the organizational structure, nomenclature and programs varied but also the objectives of the different Black Studies programs. For example, in the first 10 years Ford (1973) identified 200 programs, each with a different set of objectives. Nevertheless, Conyers (1995, 1997) in a detailed descriptive and evaluative account of the evolution of African American Studies sees the institutionalization of Black Studies as a revolution in American higher education.

Because this new, exciting, and colorful discipline appeared within the walls of the Ivory Tower during the Civil Rights era of the 1960s, Black scholarship is often mistaken as having its beginnings during this period. What most do not know is that Black scholarship started long before Black Studies was formally accepted in the traditional White-dominated academic institutions. According to Rojas (2007), prior to this period Black intellectuals had already developed numerous historical, literary, sociological and other types of scholarship that were not being taught in colleges and universities. For example, well re-known Black Studies scholar and sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois began his sleuth of scholarly works in 1896; Carter G. Woodson along with others founded the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History in 1915, and in 1916 they launched the *Journal of Negro History*. There many other examples too numerous to list. What is important to know however, is that Black intellectual inquiry has contributed to the conceptualization of issues of race, race relations, and social inequality of all types¹ long before Black Studies was accepted as an academic discipline.

Similarly, while Black Studies only became a reality in the mid-1960s, the impetus for Black intellectual thought to be consolidated as a discipline in traditional colleges and universities can be traced much further than the Civil Rights period (Dulaney & Williams, 1996; Stewart, 1984). In fact, Okafor (2013, p. 71) traces activism for Black Studies in academic institutions as far back to the struggles waged by the American Negro Academy established in 1897. The institutionalization of Black Studies in the 1960s however, was a milestone and blazed the trail for women and gender studies, ethnic studies, native studies and cultural studies. Hines (1997) in her overview of Black Studies alluded that the establishment of Black Studies propelled colleges and universities to include more integrated and pluralistic curriculums, programs, degrees, faculty, and departments.

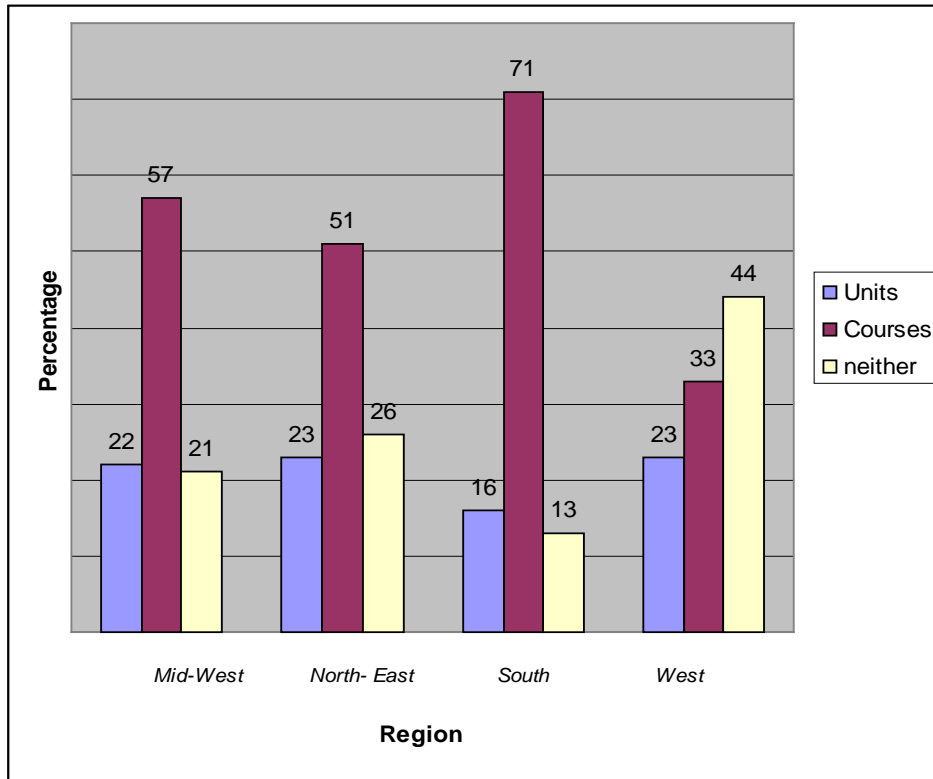
Interestingly, despite the progress made in establishing Black Studies as an academic discipline, the same issues are raised time and again. Are there sufficient numbers of students interested in the discipline, particularly at the graduate level, to make the programs economically viable and academically sustainable? What can someone do with a graduate (or undergraduate) degree in Black Studies? Amusingly, these questions are seldom asked about the more traditional degree programs but are consistently raised for Black Studies, although satisfactory levels of student enrollment, graduation rates, and placement of Black Studies graduates provide evidence of its successes.

Current Programs and Units

The first official 4-year curriculum in Black Studies was offered by San Francisco State College in 1968. Since then more than 300 Black Studies programs, departments and/or centers exist in the US (Okafor, 2013). Degree programs steadily increased and peaked between 1966 and 1975 and by 1975 approximately 7 percent of colleges and universities offered a Black Studies degree (Rojas, 2007). The Department of Pan-African Studies was also institutionalized at the University of Louisville during this period (Hudson, 2010). The lack of funding and other resources along with continued racism saw the demise of many Black studies programs during the turbulent 1970s and 1980s. However, today the most recent survey on African American Studies (Alikalimat, et al., 2013) show that Black Studies 'is alive and well' and that approximately 76 percent of colleges and universities identified by the Carnegie Foundation have programs, degrees and/or courses. Most of these are located in the larger public colleges and universities, and only 20 percent of these have established departments or other types of formal units.

Interestingly, the survey show that the region with the largest percentage of Blacks, the South, has the highest number of course offerings but the smallest number of Black Studies units², compared to the Midwest, Northeast and the West (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Black Studies Units and Courses by Region as a Percentage of All



Data taken from Table 1: African-American Studies 2013: A National Web-Based Survey (Alikimat, et al. 2013:6).

Further, only half of all colleges and universities see the need to offer African American/Black Studies courses, and fewer yet (approximately 25%) have established Black Studies as a discipline with its own department. Okafor (2013) suggests that the low numerical representation of the discipline in educational institutions can be considered as the outcome of continued ‘intellectual hegemonic resistance that Black Studies continue to face’ (74). The compromise is to offer courses rather than programs, although Black Studies as a discipline have evolved and now offer PhDs at some of the most prestigious universities such as Yale, Harvard, and Northwestern.

Theory, Praxis and Transformation: Our Programs, Our Students

The PAS Department was founded in 1973, although the first set of Black Studies courses were offered in the summer of 1969 (Hudson, 2010). Today, the Department of Pan-African Studies at the University of Louisville is one of the more successful and oldest Black Studies department nationally, and only one of two in Kentucky. Overall the number of institutions in Kentucky with Black Studies programs or departments increased from 3 in 2007 to 9 in 2010. There are 40 degree-granting institutions in Kentucky but only 22.5 percent including PAS offer Black Studies³. Our baccalaureate is currently 1 of 140, the MA is one of 31,⁴ and the PhD one of 15 nationally and the only Black Studies doctoral program in the state of Kentucky and the South.

PAS is an interdisciplinary academic unit within the College of Arts and Sciences (A&S), and is committed to the study and analysis of the history, culture, and issues of people in Africa, North America, the Caribbean, and other regions of the African Diaspora. The mission of the department is to expose students to a better understanding of cultural pluralism and social inequality in a diverse world, using alternative interpretations and research epistemologies. The vision is to provide excellent educational programs that are global in reach and prepares students for graduate programs or careers. It is one of the few departments in A&S that offers 6 accredited programs: a Bachelor of Arts and a Bachelor of Science, a Certificate, a Master of Arts, a joint Masters with Social Work, and a Doctoral Program. In the past, PAS has been reviewed twice (1997, 1999) by external committees and assessed to be in the top 10 percent of all Black Studies programs nationwide. In 2009, PAS was further recognized by the National Council for Black Studies⁵ for its institutional achievement in scholarship. Moreover, our graduate programs and the research of our students fall within the historical framework of Black intellectuals across the Diaspora. They focus on issues that are currently either understudied or studied from a non-Pan African epistemological stance.

The PAS MA Program and its Graduates

Once the department began to offer graduate courses student enrollment mushroomed as many students were interested in PAS courses, whether they were enrolled in the PAS graduate degree programs or in other more traditional graduate programs on the campus. For example, when the MA was launched in 2002 there were 199 students enrolled in PAS graduate courses, this increased to 289 students in 2007-2008, and 375 in 2010-2011.⁶ In 2000, PAS offered its first graduate degree—a Certificate in Pan-African Studies and two years later (2002) the MA program was officially approved with ten students immediately registering. At the onset, most of the students who enrolled in the program were former graduates from the University of Louisville but the enrollment net quickly widened to attract students from across the country. Additionally, students internationally became enthused and were recruited to enroll in the MA program, mainly from West Africa and the Caribbean. Table 1 presents the average number of students enrolled in the MA program over the last ten years.

Table 1: Average number of students enrolled in the PAS MA Program, 2001-2014

Academic Years (AY)	Average Number of Students Enrolled (MA)
2001/2002 to 2005/2006 (5 years)	32
2006/2007 to 2010/2011 (5 years)	41
2011/2012 to 2013/2014 (3 years)	24

****Note:** This includes two cohort years and other students who are in an incomplete status or at the degree candidacy level. Source: Office of Institutional Research and Planning, University of Louisville.

From the start-up date, intake and matriculation rates fluctuated in a flow and ebb pattern indicative of the two- year cycle of the program with most of the students graduating at the end of the second year. The average graduation rate ranges between 4-8 students per annum and peaked at the end of the calendar year 2012 with 10 graduates. This graduation rate compares well with that of other universities with similar programs. For example, the last comparative data on a sample of MA degrees in Black Studies conducted by the U.S. Department of Education in 2009 showed that the PAS MA program at the University of Louisville fared better than some of the more high ranking institutions such as Yale, Harvard and Cornell (Table 2). In 2012, the number of PAS MA students who matriculated with their MA degree exceeded the requirement of the Council for Post-Secondary Education (CPE), and compared well with the lead Black Studies program at Temple.

Table 2: Masters Degree Program Sample in Black Studies

Institution	Department Focus	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08	Average 2002-07
Yale	African-American Studies	1	7	1	2	1		2.4
Harvard	African and African American Studies	DNR	DNR	DNR	3	2		2.5
Indiana	African American & African Diaspora Studies	2	2	2	2	7		3
New York	Africana Studies	3	4	3	1	9		4
Cornell	African and African American Studies	3	8	3	6	5		5
Louisville	Pan-African Studies	7	7	7	5	6	4	6.4
Columbia	African-American Studies	14	3	14	6	8		9
Ohio State	African and African American Studies	7	14	7	6	11		9
Temple	African-American Studies	DNR	6	10	15	8		9.75
SUNY-Albany	Africana Studies	8	12	11	12	10		10.6

Source:(U.S. Department of Education & Institute of Education Services, 2009)

In the last ten years, the department has graduated 53 students with MAs and 10 CPs (Table 3). Interestingly, close to 70 percent were women scholars and from the US. A little over 60 percent of all the candidates wrote successful theses while the others did the comprehensive examination option. The students' theses covered a wide range of topics in Black Studies and are reflective of the multidisciplinary nature of the program and faculty, but grounded in historical, social, or cultural studies. Although students had a choice in area focus most selected African American themes with 13 percent selecting to center their research on the Diaspora (Africa or the Caribbean). A small percentage (approximately 13%) also engaged in ardent field research conducting interviews, building case studies, and applying qualitative analyses. While most Black Studies are humanities based, 58 percent of the PAS MA theses were in the social sciences following in the traditions of sociology, political science/law, social history, and literary analysis, and all included a critical analysis framework.

Table 3: Degrees confirmed, 2003-2013

YEAR	CPA	MA
2003-04	2	7
2004-05	0	3
2005-06	0	5
2006-07	1	6
2007-08	0	4
2008-09	1	5
2009-10	0	5
2010-11	1	6
2011-12	2	8
2012-2013	1	4
TOTAL	10	53

Source: Office of Institutional Research and Planning, University of Louisville.

The Passion, Persistence and Relevance of Black Studies

The students who enroll in the PAS graduate programs are of the same ages like the majority of Black and White students attending any college or university today. Very few were born while the Civil Rights or the Black Power Movements were happening. Further, the current living experiences of the current cadre of students are somewhat different from those of their parents and grand-parents who grew up under racial segregation. So why did the students enroll in Black Studies graduate programs? Do they possess the same passion for Black Studies as their predecessors? And do they perceive Black Studies as relevant in a post-Civil Rights era where Black educators can be found in the ‘Ivory Towers’ and a relatively young Black intellectual couple live in the White House?

In 2006, young Black Studies scholars enrolled in Northwestern’s inaugural Ph.D. class reported that they were less preoccupied (compared with their predecessors) with the need to validate or explain why they were pursuing doctorates in Black Studies. However, they passionately espoused that the social relevance of Black Studies was still valid. Consequently, they selected dissertation topics that had clear social implications, expanding on previous studies of race but with “more nuanced examinations of sexuality, class, religion, performativity of race in day-to-day interactions, and global views about blackness” (*Chronicle for Higher Education*, 2012, p.1).

Similar questions were posed to ten former MA graduates from the Department of Pan African Studies, 7 of whom either completed or were completing their doctoral programs in different universities, and the other 3 were educational professionals. In response to why they selected Black Studies, the students reported that their interests were stimulated when they took either one African American course or a series of courses if they were enrolled in a Black Studies minor. The course materials tickled a yearning to be educated on the Black experience and motivated them to pursue further education in Black Studies, much like the students in the 1960s but which was now possible:

I wanted to improve my skills as a researcher and the epistemological thrust of Black Studies resonated strongly with me and I knew it was important for me to work from the perspective of Black folks when I produce scholarship because our voices are so marginalized in mainstream academia and society.

When I was in college no other program were able to feed and nourish my intellectual development. I wanted to learn more. I was eager to expand my knowledge further than what I did at the undergraduate level. My pursuit to further my awareness in black studies was relentless.

Most of the students also spoke about being influenced and mentored by a Black faculty member who encouraged them to apply to the MA program in PAS. As a result, the PAS MA program inherited a strong line of students from the University of Houston and Georgia State in the earlier periods. Few were further convinced after meeting PAS faculty members and hearing PAS graduate students present at the National Council for Black Studies (NCBS) conference:

It was an easy decision for me to pursue a degree in Black Studies at the graduate level. I had a positive learning experience as an undergraduate in the African American Studies program. I was surrounded by students who were motivated to learn and shared a passion for social justice, the faculty were always approachable. My decision was solidified when I attended an NCBS meeting in San Diego in 2007. There the diversity of presentations by students from Louisville was a reflection of the faculty willingness to support and develop each student's independent research agenda. The student presentations were strong. I completed my application and mailed it.

Once the students were in the PAS MA program and were exposed to a concentration of graduate courses, their interest, passion, and fervor of social activism were also reignited. Consequently, the research themes of the PAS graduate student theses mirrored both their gender interests and the emancipatory theoretical undertones of Black intellectual history. Most, if not all of the themes selected by the young scholars reflect a Pan-African epistemological position that either re-interprets historical works from a non-Eurocentric perspective, or they address contemporary issues of race and its intersectionality with gender. Examples of thesis titles by women graduates include:

1. Geographies of Mentorship: Black Women and the Civil Rights Movement, a Case Study of Septima Clark and Ella Bakers.
2. The Strong Black Woman Redefined: A Theatrical Exploration of Stereotypes.
3. Black Female Journalists: Experiences of Racism, Sexism and Classism in the Newsroom.
4. Literary Fugitives: Captivity and Freedom in the Personal Narratives of Harriet Jacobs and Assata Shakur.
5. The Unknown Struggle: A Comparative Analysis of Women in the Black Power.
6. Literary Constrictions: Challenging the Black Matriarch in the Novels of Terry McMillian.
7. Compelling Insinuations: A Histographical Womanist Examination of the Call for Social Transformation in the Literature of Black Women.
8. Invisible Woman: A Case Study on Black Women's experiences in Graduate Degree Programs in Central Kentucky.
9. The Hidden Help: Black Domestic Workers in the Civil Rights.

Some of the male-focused theses looked at the following:

1. Alternative Performances of Race and Gender in Hip Hop Music: Nerdcore Counter Culture.
2. Opaque Visions of the Self: The Possible Selves of African American Adolescent Males in the Context of Schooling.
3. Controlling Images and Stereotypes of the Black Boxer.
4. Away to Freedom: African American Soldiers and the War of 1812.
5. Dismantling the Master's House: Deconstructing the Roots of Anti-black Racism and the Construction of 'Other' in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.
6. Celebrating Martin and Forgetting Malcolm: The Punishment of Black Leadership Purpose and Agency.
7. The Black Power Movement? A Social-Historical Analysis of the Oakland Chapter of the Black Panther Party as a Case Study of Black Power.

Overall, the PAS MA program seems to have either generated or rekindled students' awareness of a need to intellectually address the socioeconomic and political inequities of the larger society as was the case during the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Era. Examples of these research that are illustrative of this trend included topics such as:

- A Pox Upon Healthcare: The Stereotypes, Prejudices and Biases of Healthcare Providers.
- Pushing the 'Other': Race, Ethnicity, and the American Justice System.
- What to make of Race? A Content Analysis of the Use of Race in Health Research.
- When asked whether Black Studies is still relevant in today's world, that is, in the post-Civil Rights era, all the respondents replied with a resounding 'YES'.

Black studies departments/programs are as relevant now as they ever were. In a supposedly post-racial, neoliberal capitalist era, it is ever-important that Black Studies departments and scholars continue to educate students about the past experiences, successes, and struggles of the Black Diaspora and how the sacrifices of those in the past continue to impact our reality today, both inside and outside the academy.

The contemporary problems that are seen today are directly related to the issues during the 1960's. The challenges may appear different, but they are ultimately the same. The values of equal opportunity, inclusion, diversity are still significant factors and these are all areas that Black studies programs promote to students. There is still a need for Black studies graduate programs because its existence continues to eradicate stereotypes and false truths that have negatively impacted African and African American people.

Some scholars further explained the relevance and influence of their graduate education in Black Studies to their graduate (MA or PhD) programs and research in other disciplines, as well as in their professional life:

Although, my doctoral degree is outside of black studies, I would not have made it this far in academia without my training in black studies. Importantly, the way I approached my areas of interests (health, and science and technology), the types of questions that I asked, and the critical ways that I analysis and think these issues are products of my training in PAS.

While I was in the Masters of Education program, my experience with PAS helped me tremendously. It allowed me give my classmates and my instructors a different perspective of education that they would have never thought of. They were presented with an aspect of education that represented all encounters of life.

In my overall professional development it has allowed me to have an open mind and have a complementary inclusive appreciation of the students that I teach. Knowing that the students I teach come from various struggles of life and an array of economic turmoil.

Students did not only agree that Black Studies was relevant in contemporary times but advocated for its expansion, particularly in the area of the natural sciences, health and medicine, and related topics concerning science and technology.

Issues of health go well beyond our bodies; they intersect socially and culturally, as well as at individual and community levels to shape our everyday lived experiences and interactions. Health inequalities continue to plague the African American communities at an overwhelming rate. It is critical to produce more research/activism from a black studies epistemology on these topics to help ensure that such issues will receive the appropriate response and attention, and to help better elucidate the importance of these topics and how they affect the larger African Diaspora.

Interestingly, Ford (1973) in his investigation of the 200 objectives of Black Studies programs in the first 10 years of its establishment found that one of the many concerns centered on providing “Black students a feeling of personal identity, personal pride and personal worth” (p.35). Forty years later similar responses were given by former PAS MA graduates who shared that:

It did change my life. It allowed me to discover myself, my purpose in life, and my responsibility as a black man growing up in the world. It allowed me to be a better father, son, brother, and role model to the next generation of African Americans. It made me become aware of my actions and become responsible.

I was yearning to learn more about myself. I do not think I understood my purpose until I was introduced to Pan-African Studies as an academic discipline.

On completing the MA program, a little over 50 percent of the graduates went on to do their PhDs in programs all across the country and in different disciplines. To date, 8 have completed their PhDs, 1 in Black Studies, 1 in American Studies, 2 in Sociology (Medical and General), 1 in Nursing, 1 in Human Development and Family Studies, 1 in History, and 1 in Educational Leadership, two others have completed law degrees. Another 20 percent of the 53 graduates went on to do a second Masters in Education and are in the public education system as teachers locally, nationally and internationally (Africa, China, Australia, etc). Among the other 25-30 percent of graduates who are working in the private sector, few have started their own business, and within this pool some are currently still looking into possible doctoral programs.

How well has the PAS MA program prepared students?

The number of students with the PAS MA that were accepted in various PhD programs in universities across the country is demonstrative that a degree in Black Studies can be successfully used to enter doctoral programs. Despite the statistics there are still a few that query the academic abilities of a Black Studies department and its multidisciplinary program in preparing students for discipline-based doctoral programs. As a result, we asked our students who are currently in PhD programs or who may have recently graduated this question. Some of their responses are reported below:

My time in PAS gave me a solid foundation for my graduate program at the University of Wisconsin. It taught me how to think critically about theory and methodological approaches in ways that my peers did not. I was praised for the way I articulated certain developmental issues from a Pan-Africanist perspective. In regards to the classroom, I was one of the few students that actively participated in discussion. This is because PAS had an expectation for us to engage in intellectual discourse and I carried that into my new graduate program.

PAS directly influenced my decision to continue my education at the doctoral level through the development of critical thinking skills and excellent mentorship.

Issues of training in critical thinking skills resonated in most of the scholars' responses. Moreover, the scholars spoke in comparison to their peers and reported on how well prepared they were. They found using Pan-Africanist perspectives and epistemologies very useful in analyzing a range of issues in disciplines that were not Black Studies. Strikingly, in the responses the importance of mentorship and the high expectations of faculty members were identified as key in student preparedness for doctoral programs in all disciplines. As one student remarked:

PAS helped expose and acclimated me to graduate life, both the academics and politics of graduate school. Through PAS I was able to engage in research, be mentored by renowned scholars, and study abroad.

Another confessed:

My professors in PAS stimulated me to expand my intellectual repertoire, challenging me to engage in more critical course materials and pursue my own intellectual interests. Moreover, the confidence they instilled in me through mentorship was a driving factor in my decision to pursue my PhD. Overall my educational experiences in PAS translated directly into my current research, and are key factor in structuring the approaches I now use to teach and mentor students.

The type of mentorship that they students spoke about was not only focused on the development of one's intellectual abilities but also being encouraged, believed in, and mentored by professionals who looked like them:

Mentorship is of the utmost importance. I would have never gone on to pursue a PhD if it was not for the encouragement of my professors. I did not see it as a possibility; not because I was not smart, but because I never thought someone "like me" could earn a PhD. Their presence (being young, Black, PhDs themselves) and their encouragement helped me see that I could do it, that I could hold that identity.

They believed in me even when I did not believe in myself

The PAS department was my home from home. The staff and professors made me feel at home, like I mattered. They pushed me to chase my greatness. They wanted me to reach my full potential and constantly challenging me to become better. Every time you felt like you made strides toward reaching your goal of gaining more knowledge, they would push the bar a little higher. Without the PAS department, so many people would have not finished college or even graduated.

The mentorship that the students referenced were not only from faculty members in the PAS department but also of the department's faculty associates. For example, when one of PAS's Associate Faculty died students reminiscence that:

He took me in under his wing at a crucial moment in my intellectual and personal development. I must admit it was not a comfortable place to be....but he taught me that comfort and learning are often enemies of one another

He took so much time and energy into shaping and reshaping the mind of a boy with some decent ideas but a thick skull.

He thought me to think with vigilance and act with dignity in a contemptuous world. His mentorship went beyond the classroom. His singular goal was to produce critical thinkers...be systematic and rigorous he would always say as he pushed us to arrive at deeper levels of thought and sharper analysis.

He had a disdain for injustice, cruelty, and unfairness and transmitted this righteous disdain to those of us under his tutelage. He sought not to make us enraged...but told us that there was too much work to get mired in rage.

Overall, the scholars reported that the combination of a rigorous methodological and theoretical program along with high level of mentoring allowed them to negotiate doctoral programs of varying disciplines in universities in all regions of the US. It also provided the young scholars with certain professionalism that they said made them outstanding students and leaders. Further, the mentorship received translated into a willingness and commitment to provide mentorship to others:

Equally important was PAS's willingness to develop in me and my colleagues the research methods, writing skills, and theoretical lens to become organic intellectuals. After leaving PAS I was not only prepared to study, and write academically about the experiences of others, but I was also informed about how to do action research which seeks to improve the lives and lots of my own students.

While these comments were made by graduates of the PAS MA program, the sentiments expressed were also echoed in student opinion surveys implemented by the University of Louisville between 2007 to 2012 among all students enrolled in PAS courses (undergraduate and graduate). The survey revealed that 90-100 percent of the students polled felt that PAS helps them to develop a strong sense of ethical responsibility to social and cultural issues in the community, develop their critical thinking and problem solving skills, understand the multidisciplinary approach and theoretical perspectives related to social issues, and they would recommend the program to others. Also, 75-85 percent of the students agreed that the overall performances of faculty and staff, and the academic standards of the department, were all excellent. Every year at least one PAS faculty member is nominated as a ‘favorite faculty’ in a process that spans the entire campus.

The Social Mission

From the testimonies of the students, the research areas and questions they seek, and the paths they have selected for their professional lives – the social mission of Black Studies emerging from PAS appears to be organic and growing. As Black Studies programs and departments were institutionalized in colleges and universities, some feared that the social mission specific to the discipline will disappear, or at least be tamed. The argument is made that for Black Studies to survive that it must conform and that the acculturation process will remove the social mission of the early Black Studies programs, that is, to link intellectual inquiry and education to the upliftment of community. According to Rojas (2007), some Black Studies programs and departments were stabilized in universities and colleges by “abandoning cultural nationalism and community education” (p. 215).

Today, few academic disciplines include a public service mission. Further, the primary goal of academic disciplines is to create and transmit knowledge, certification, and in the training of ‘elites’ not the broader population. However, not everyone agrees with this agenda, Marable (2000) for example, disagrees with limiting academia and makes the plea for scholars, particularly in Black Studies, to act upon and not just interpret events. Similarly, Jennings (2000) strongly argues for the continuance of community-based research in Black Studies which she believes is necessary for moving the community forward socially, economically, and culturally. The idea that the work of Black scholars and Black scholarship should be transformational stems from Black intellectual history and leadership as was espoused by Black women educators such as Mary McCleod-Bethune since the 1900s and later by Anna Julia Cooper, Mary Church Terrell, Fanny J. Choppin and other educators. Thus, while attaching a social mission to college education may seem incongruent with the more traditional purposes of academia, our students tended to agree more with what Marable (2000:89) advocated, that is, for Black scholarship to be ‘descriptive’, ‘corrective’, and ‘prescriptive.’

In a sense, all education should be transformational in guiding students in developing a social and historical consciousness. Yet this is particularly true of Black Studies. Black Studies owes its existence to the black liberation struggle. As an academic discipline it remains inextricably bound to its roots and its history of social activism. Black scholars, therefore, cannot effectively engage in the discipline as teachers or researchers without acknowledging and engaging in the traditions that gave birth to the field.

This trend of thought spurred an inquiry into the extent to which our department was pulled towards elite training' and that social activism and community-education had been abandoned. In other words, did our PAS MA graduates who are now in other graduate/doctoral programs or working adopt a transformational approach, or were they more career-oriented? The responses of the scholars surveyed were as follow:

When I think about my career trajectory, PAS has fueled my drive for social justice and given me an understanding that research does not have to be just for research sake. We can use research to help people in communities; and African American communities in particular. My joint appointment with cooperative extension allows me to do applied research and engage in programmatic efforts that touch many youth across the state of Alabama.

I have integrated PAS throughout my education process. The Pan-Africanist lens has influenced me to promote values of diversity and it always encouraged me to stay active in my community.

I think Black Studies has changed my perspective on life. I understand now that the problem will always be bigger than me. It is my responsibility to do what I can and then to pay it forward to my community.

My research area centers around African American girls and engaging them in action research projects for positive social change. I am also leading an anti-bullying initiative and bringing in curriculum that addresses intra-racial bullying (due to colorism and internalized oppression) that occurs particularly with Black youth.

The feedback from the young scholars reveals that change-orientation is important to their research, the education of others, and in providing transformational leadership themselves. They clearly link this orientation to their experiences in the PAS department:

I cannot fully describe the impact that PAS has had on my professional career. It is that big. Generally, I aim to be the embodiment of a PAS professional in that I seek to use academic discourse and research to locate and implement practical and pragmatic ways to improve the lives of those I work with and for. This journey commenced the day I enrolled in the PAS department, at the University of Louisville.

Leading in Black Intellectual History: One of Fifteen Doctoral Programs

In fall of 2012 the department launched a new doctoral program in Pan-African Studies with an initial enrollment of seven. After Temple established the first Ph.D. program in 1988, the number of PhDs in Black Studies slowly grew and by the late 1990s three prestigious universities offered doctoral degrees with different names and focus. The University of Massachusetts at Amherst launched a PhD in Afro-American Studies in 1996, the University of California at Berkeley offered an African-American & Africana Diaspora PhD in 1997, and at Harvard University African American Studies was offered as a doctoral degree in 1999. Twenty-five years later there are only 15 doctoral programs in Black Studies. Moreover, of the 15 doctoral programs the PhD in Pan-African Studies at the University of Louisville is the only one in the South, and the only program nationally that has the name Pan-African. Dr. Asante, one of the pioneer of Black Studies in his letter of support to the PAS doctoral program succinctly pointed out that “it is time that Louisville distinguishes itself from all legacies that resist progressive thinking”(Appendix 1, PhD Proposal 2011).

A doctoral degree allows for the interrogation of history, as well as present and future encounters through a rigid program of research, critical thinking, and application of theory. In the case of Black Studies these elements focus on people and issues in the African Diaspora, and people of color world over. The relevance of a PhD in Black Studies is best explained by Caribbean journalist and scholar George Laming who expressed that “the most urgent task and the greatest intellectual challenge is how to control the burden of this history and incorporate it into our collective sense of the future (Laming, 1995, p.25). Where better to do this but in a doctoral program where the focus is on the generation and dissemination of research on the historical, cultural and social conditions of the people of the African Diaspora, in ways that will help counteract the misperception that others have about them.

The department’s PhD in PAS combines courses in research strategies and intellectual approaches with subject-specific areas of expertise in history, religion, philosophy, political science, sociology, music, linguistics, art, anthropology, psychology, health, education, crime, and social work. The program therefore offers candidates two options: a multi-disciplinary degree in Black Studies or a discipline-based degree with a focus in African-American or African Diaspora Studies.

In order to graduate, doctoral candidates must complete a dissertation, a required number of courses, and a certain level of professional development. At the end of the program, graduates will be prepared to enter the professional work force as specialist in Pan African Studies in a wide range of professional positions such as educators, trade consultants, politicians, lawyers, diplomats, social scientists, administrators, community development professionals, and many other fields of endeavor.

The program is also designed to keep the door open for collaboration with local community organizations. The PAS department encourages doctoral students to link their research interests with that of Louisville's community, and in particular the African American groups, organizations and residents, many of whom are localized in West Louisville. Additionally, graduate student assistantships can be linked to certain community based groups/organizations such as the Urban League, The African American Heritage Museum, Louisville Arts Council and others, and have the advantage of identifying potential research areas of common interest, such as issues arising from the socioeconomic conditions of minority and low-income groups. The intention of this type of research program is for there to be on-going contributions of Black Studies to the enhancement of the life of local communities through "fostering of a better understanding of race relations and eliminating racial inequalities" (Letter of Support, Urban League, Appendix 1, PhD Proposal, 2011). In the specific case of the University of Louisville, this link to community is widely encouraged as the institution itself has a strong community-engagement program, and is committed to working with the African-American populations and that of the wider Kentucky residents.⁷ The doctoral program is therefore consistent with the university's strong commitment to the urban mission of integrating intellectual work with enhancing the life of the local community.

On a global scale, the department and its programs including the new doctoral degree maintains a Pan-African focus through its courses, faculty and student population, as well as PAS initiated Memorandum of Understandings (MOUs) between the University of Louisville and foreign universities in West, East and South Africa, and with the University of the West Indies. The aim of these programs and agreements is to provide students with a living experience in a foreign culture, as well as the educational and analytical tools necessary to investigate, document, create new knowledge, and reinterpret stereotypical beliefs about all aspects of the lives of people of the African Diaspora. This orientation of PAS can already be observed in some of the research completed by the MA students in their theses publications on: 1) Postwar Sierra Leone: Are Programs of Reconstruction Addressing the Cause of War; 2) Aliens Next Door: Settlers, Natives and the Burden of Imposed Citizenship in the Great Lakes Region; 3) Nkrumahism and Neo-Nkrumahism; and 4) Rainbow Nation or Rambo Nation? A Comparative Literary Analysis of Thematic Changes in Pre and post 1994 Black Township Novels. It is expected that the PhD program will capitalize on the study abroad educational and research programs and promote a better understanding of global diversity and social equity through institutional partnerships and research collaborations. According to a supporter of the doctoral program:

Globalization and immigration in Kentucky, like the rest of America is becoming increasingly multicultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious. The Ph.D. in Pan-African Studies will result in intercultural understandings and collaborations on both national and international levels that are imperative for living in today's world (Letter of support, Appendix 1, PhD Proposal, 2011)

Some Conclusions

Black Studies and Black intellectual inquiry have come a long way over the years and have contributed much to the understanding and development of all peoples. The input of the department of Pan-African Studies at the University of Louisville over the last 40 years is of great significance to this burgeoning 'new' approach to knowledge production, interpretation, dissemination and validation. Moreover, in the last 12 years the scholars graduating from the PAS MA program are now part of a group of elite intellectuals and professionals who have confessed to not becoming elitists but to maintaining a strong social commitment to people of color and all oppressed groups locally, nationally and internationally.

The best way to measure the successes of the department's graduate programs is to observe what distinguishes our Black/Pan-African scholars from others. The programs, research areas, professional work, and orientation that our graduate students selected and continue to do so in doctoral research, in teaching, and in the work environment suggests that like W.E.B. Du Bois and C.L.R. James, "it is not the nature of the range of their interests, but rather the specific function they gave to those interests, and the concrete purpose which motivated their study of human society" (George Laming, 1995, p. 13).

"Is Black Studies still relevant" is best be answered by one of our current PhD students who believe that:

The struggle continues. Hard won battles of the past are now being re-fought in US cultural wars and in the courts. Consequently, the mission of Black Studies remains as necessary as when the discipline first emerged on college campuses in the late 1960s. Moreover, our nation's schools do an abysmal job teaching history, and generally avoid providing comprehensive instruction pertaining to the contributions of women and the various groups who built this country. Black Studies fought its way onto campuses across the US to correct these deficits. Women and Gender Studies and various ethnic studies programs followed in the wake of Black Studies and used its model of struggle to establish their presence in academia. Although rarely acknowledged, these programs revolutionized the curricula in higher education by making courses and programs more inclusive and reflective of the socio-cultural reality of this nation and its history.

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Endnotes

¹ Gunnar Myrdals's *An American Dilemma* published since 1944 provides an excellent intellectual understanding of the race problem in the US, among many other very early publications.

² The 2013 African-American Studies Survey by Alkalimat et al. (2013) identified a unit as an organized entity within the university structures such as a department.

³ Department of Education (2009), Institute of Education Services, national Center for Education Statistics.

⁴ Gradschools.com <http://www.gradschools.com/search-programs/african-american-studies>

⁵ NCBS is the premiere organization of Black Studies programs in the USA.

⁶ Numbers calculated from the UofL course schedules.

⁷ University of Louisville Community Engagement Office.