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The Black Studies Project: Uncovering the History of the Black Studies Center at the Claremont Colleges

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Data Visualization Award Winner
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Reflective Essay
For my summer 2017 undergraduate research, *The Black Studies Project*, Professor Maryan Soliman of Scripps College, and I uncovered much of the history of my current major department, the Intercollegiate Department of Africana Studies. Through the resources at the Honnold Special Collections library, I collaboratively assembled a history and timeline of the Black Studies Center in the Claremont Colleges, and traced its lineage to the Office of Black Student Affairs, and the Intercollegiate Department of Africana Studies.

To be an Africana Studies major is to be imbued within multiple legacies of survival and resistance, and to commit to uncovering the historical precedents set by Afro-ascended forbearers that cause our pasts to remain visceral and present. Invaluable to my summer research was the thesis “Origin and Development of the Black Student Movement at the Claremont Colleges: 1966-1969”, by Isela D. Gutierre, Scripps ’00, who compiled an extensive history of the Claremont Colleges and the Intercollegiate Department of Africana Studies. To date, Gutierrez’s work is the only written material on the history of the Intercollegiate Department of Africana Studies, and her work mainly assesses the path taken to the establishment of the Black Students Center in 1968. Nearly 17 years later, my project took to task the aftermath of the Center’s establishment, the struggles that occurred in relation to its maintenance and funding, and the decisions that led to the establishment of IDAS and OBSA as separate institutions.

Using archival materials from the Honnold-Mudd Special Collections library, I learned how to conduct oral histories, a chronology, literature reviews, and how to analyze and digitally archive a Black student movement for an autonomous Black Studies center. Within this larger movement, and thinking in the context of movement workers like Angela Davis, Elaine Browne, and Assata Shakur, one of my research focuses was on black women in the Claremont Colleges during the mid-60s to 1968, and their impact and experiences within the movement for an
autonomous Black Studies center. Through Gutierrez’s thesis, printed records of student demands, and *The Student Life* archives, I identified key black woman members of the movement for and struggles for continuance of the Black Studies Center (BSC)—Eileen Wilson PO’65, Jeanne Buckley PO’65, and Sue Houchins, emeritus Professor of the Black Studies Center from 1972 to 1994. My findings within the Honnold Special Collections library led to an eventual interview with Eileen Wilson-Oyelaran PO ’65, a current trustee of Pomona College and emeritus president of Kalamazoo College. Wilson provided a wealth of knowledge about the founding of the Black Studies Center, and the imaginations of Black students, who saw potential in land near Pitzer College for a possible autonomous college for Black students. Through materials at the Honnold Special Collections library, I was able to locate the voices of Black women who organized for an institutional site that centered literature and philosophy by, and history for Afro-ascended people. Through the archival materials made available to my project, I was able to locate the imaginations of black students struggling for a center, and hopeful for a college that centered their lineages, upheld their legacies, and aligned with their visions of futurity.

To fully articulate a history of the Black Studies Center, is also to mine for the acts of resistance staged by Black students in the Claremont Colleges. In collegiate and local newspapers, papers from investigation proceedings, and demands by Black student organizers, I located evidence of sit-ins, meeting walk-outs, and planned building shut-downs as organizing tactics in favor of an autonomous Black Studies Center. In retaliation to Black student organizing, I also explored an instance of a bombing at Pomona College and at Scripps that injured the face, eyes, and right hand of a 19-year-old secretary, Mary Ann Keatley, at Carnegie. Another bomb detonated at a bathroom at Balch Hall on Scripps campus without
injuries. Approximately 80 black students evacuated on-campus and off-campus housing in light of wrongful speculation of Black students as the conspirators, and rumors of a white vigilante group, possibly headed by Mary Ann Keatley’s husband, who was allegedly opposed to Black Studies and the Black Studies movement. The archival materials of the event, and Gutierrez’s thesis, allowed me to identify the climate of violence in which black students lived following the establishment of the BSC, conditions that persist and continue to create an exigency for black student organizing.

In library archives, I uncovered poetry, and advertisements of film-screenings and workshops organized by Black student organizers. The media in Special Collections allowed for me to assemble a visual account of the struggle for the Black Studies Center, and its eventual evolution into the IDAS and the OBSA. Artifacts included pamphlets from one of the first full academic years of the IDAS, including pictures of Black students on the five campuses, course offerings, and professors attached to the Black Studies Center. Special Collections materials also included local newspaper advertisements and write-ups on community engagement work done by Black students and faculty in the Claremont Colleges, and within the Black Studies Center. Such community outreach included free childcare programs for local families (similar to Black Panther Party initiatives in the 1960s and 70s), screenings of films (some by Black students in the Claremont Colleges) open to the surrounding community, and Black arts festivals. Engagement with the surrounding community, and a commitment to making work, knowledge, and resources accessible outside of the academy is an intrinsic value to Africana Studies, one that was reified and constantly practiced by Black students within the 5Cs and in the BSC.

To be an Africana Studies major, is to also understand that one’s department was not assembled quietly, nor without struggle, and never without galvanization by Black students and
faculty within and outside the institution. My research experience allowed me to understand the challenges of academic historicizing, as well as the necessity of surfacing and remembering resistance that shape today. Using the materials in the Special Collections library at Honnold-Mudd, I was able to gain historical accuracy and specificity with regards to the events leading up to the creation of the Black Studies Center, and the eventual progression into OBSA, and into IDAS. My research can inform the future of both institutions, by uncovering what once was, and using past initiatives to shape trajectories forward.
Bibliography


Black Student Union. Memorandum: Notification of Black Student Union called meeting with The Claremont Colleges’ Presidents and Administrators. May 1, 1968.


Claremont University Center. Press release regarding the proposal for a Black Studies Center. April 11, 1969.


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Research Project
“The Black Studies Project: Uncovering the History of the
Black Studies Center at the Claremont Colleges”
This project focused on the origins of the Black Studies Center at the Claremont Colleges, which, in 1979, evolved into the Intercollegiate Department of African Studies and the Office of Black Student Affairs. Under the supervision of Professor Maryan Soliman, researchers traced the department’s founding from the formation of the Black Students Union in the early 1960s to the foundation of the Black Studies Center in 1969.

Researchers discovered a history punctuated by struggle for tangible, financial provisions and institutional recognition of black identity beyond admission. Black students organized amidst threats and bombings. Black students and faculty pushed for an autonomous center, where they could have courses that were relevant to their needs and experiences. This project focused on the origins of the Black Studies Center at the Claremont Colleges, which was the hard-fought culmination of years of organizing, inclusive of the writing of demands, center proposals, demonstrations, and community-building. Black students in the 5Cs recognized the exigency in a movement for black spaces on the campuses, and for a center where they could learn about themselves away from the impositions of Eurocentric, colonial and modernity-centered curricula.

The purposes of the Black Studies project were to understand the becoming of the BSC and the departments that descended from it, and to stitch together the histories of black student and faculty organizing, and black self-determination within institutions. Researchers recorded oral histories from professors emeriti, such as Dr. Agnes Moreland Jackson, Emeritus Professor at Pomona College. Researchers also used archival materials from Emeritus Professor Sidney Lance, the Special Collections library in Honold-Mudd, Denison Library, and OBSA, and literary publications in the Claremont area. The research team extends many thanks to Isela D. Gutierrez, Scripps ’80, for her excellent research in charting the foundations of the Black Studies Center up to 1969 in her senior thesis, “Origin and Development of the Black Student Movement at the Claremont Colleges: 1966-1969.”

A Notable Event

In February 1969, two bombs detonated on Claremont campuses. One was addressed to a government professor on Carnegie Hall at Pomona, and exploded in the hands of a secretary, Mary Ann Keatley. The bomb caused damage to her right hand, her face, and her eyes. The other bomb was detonated in a bathroom at Balch Auditorium on Scripps campus. They were as shocked and disturbed by the bombing as the administration” (Gutierrez 103).

Approximately 80 black students evacuated on March 8, 1969, deans, faculty, and members of the BSU finalized negotiations for the Black Studies Center. Headed by Donald K. Cheek as director in a surprising appointment, the Black Studies Center was the hard-fought culmination of years of organizing, inclusive of the writing of demands, center proposals, demonstrations, and community-building. Black students in the 5Cs recognized the exigency in a movement for black spaces on the campuses, and for a center where they could learn about themselves away from the impositions of Eurocentric, colonial and modernity-centered curricula.

The above image is an excerpt from a statement by the BSC addressing severe budget cuts and the elimination of critical programming for black students and students of color. The Summer Pre-Freshman Programs, constructed by the Black Studies Center for pre-college, first-year students of color, specifically low-income black students. The Program was eliminated on 5/1/75 despite strong resistance from black students, faculty, BSC director Dr. James Garrett, and BSC black admissions director Camilla Browne. Garrett and Browne were terminated for participating in demonstrations, alongside students, against the budget cuts to the Center and the Pre-Freshman programs.
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Concept Map
The Black Studies Project

TSL Archives from 1965 to 1980

Oral Histories (i.e. interviews with living members)

Local newspaper articles (The Progress Bulletin of Pomona, CA)

Documents from the Black Studies Center, student demands, and early documentation from OBSA, the Humanities Institute in the Claremont Colleges, etc.