

The Black Revolution on Campus

“Black young people feel they can change society,” a minister in San Francisco observed in 1969. “Now that’s very important.” Black students want “revolutionary change in the basic institutions in this country,” echoed a young politician. According to students in San Diego, “Racism runs rampant in the educational system, while America, in a pseudohumanitarian stance, proudly proclaims that it is the key to equal opportunity for all.” “This is the hypocrisy,” they declared, that “our generation must now destroy.”¹ This widespread feeling of power and purpose among Black college students, combined with a sense of urgency and context of crisis, produced an extraordinary chapter in the modern Black freedom struggle. Black students organized protests on nearly two hundred college campuses across the United States in 1968 and 1969, and continued to a lesser extent into the early 1970s. This dramatic explosion of militant activism set in motion a period of conflict, crackdown, negotiation, and reform that profoundly transformed college life. At stake was the very mission of higher education. Who should be permitted entry into universities and colleges? What constituted merit? Who should be the future leaders of the nation in this postsegregation era, and how should this group be determined? What should be taught and who should teach it? Perhaps most controversially, should students have a hand in faculty selection or governance? Moreover, what would happen to public Black colleges in this era of

integration? Would they close, as happened to primary and secondary schools after *Brown v. Board of Education*?

With remarkable organization and skill, this generation of Black students challenged fundamental tenets of university life. They insisted that public universities should reflect and serve the people of their communities; that private universities should rethink the mission of elite education; and that historically Black colleges should survive the era of integration and shift their mission to community-based Black empowerment. Most crucially, Black students demanded a role in the definition and production of scholarly knowledge. These students constituted the first critical mass of African Americans to attend historically white universities. Deeply inspired by the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* and the charismatic leadership of Stokely Carmichael, yet shaken by the murder of Martin Luther King Jr., they were engaged in a redefinition of the civil rights struggle at a time when cities were in flames, hundreds of thousands of young Americans were at war in southeast Asia, and political assassination was commonplace. These were “Malcolm’s children,” and they were inspired by the slain leader’s denunciation of American hypocrisy and his call for Black control over Black institutions. In essence, student leaders were turning the slogan “Black Power” into a grassroots social movement. For many of the young people in this book, it was a revolutionary, hopeful time, a time they were determined to shape. Their energy and idealism inspired Latino, Asian American, and progressive white students to launch and intensify their own campus crusades. *The Black Revolution on Campus* shows how students moved to the forefront of the Black freedom struggle and transformed American higher education, sometimes in unexpected ways.²

There were two critical moments in the Black freedom struggle when students took the lead: 1960, with the lunch-counter sit-ins and creation of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC); and 1968, with the explosion of campus activism. Yet most studies of campus protest in the late 1960s focus on the white New Left’s opposition to the war in Vietnam. Black students, so prevalent in representations of the sit-ins, freedom rides, and voter registration drives of the early 1960s, virtually disappear in histories of the late 1960s. While the white student movement of the late 1960s has garnered much more attention, Black student protest produced greater campus change. In contrast to conventional wisdom, the most prevalent demand in the hundreds of campus protests in 1968–1969 was African American in-

clusion, not opposition to the Vietnam War. The centrality of race to campus uprisings of the late 1960s has been forgotten.

The students often faced harsh reprisals, including criminal prosecution and, particularly at historically Black colleges, violent police invasions. While their confrontational tactics and Black Power rhetoric alienated many, their achievements were impressive. Their efforts pushed colleges to formalize and expand affirmative action policies and provide greater financial aid, leading to a sharp jump in Black college enrollment in the 1970s. In essence, these student activists forced a permanent change in American life, transforming overwhelmingly white campuses into multiracial learning environments. The academic community would never be the same. Reflecting the rights consciousness of the era, Black student activists asserted a right to attend college, especially public ones. Moreover, student protest stimulated demand for Black faculty and sparked the desegregation of college curricula with the creation of hundreds of African American studies departments and programs.

In the style of social movement history, the first five chapters tell the dramatic story of the Black student movement at selected campuses across the country. Every region in the country was part of this story, so every region has a chapter, including the South, with its historically Black colleges. The last three chapters explore the outcomes of the Black student movement, focusing in particular on the early formation of Black studies in traditional academic settings, as well as its influence on community-based initiatives. *The Black Revolution on Campus* combines activist history and intellectual history in order to show the critical linkage between the student movement and changes in university culture in the United States. It is imperative to understand the two in tandem. I chart the rise of an academic discipline that has widely influenced intellectual production in the United States even though, in the eyes of some of its founders, Black studies has failed to realize its radical potential. For many students and scholars, Black studies signified the inclusion of the histories and cultures of African-descended people, taught from the perspective of Black scholars, in the curriculum of higher education. But for many others, Black studies meant more than the creation of a new academic discipline. It “began with the utopian vision of a constant stream of young black people from the colleges and the universities helping ghetto dwellers to achieve Black Power and to transform their neighborhoods.”³

The thousands of African American students in the United States who engaged in sit-ins, demonstrations, picket lines, and campus strikes

in the late 1960s were not the first Black students on these campuses. Small numbers of African Americans had been attending majority white colleges and universities since the nineteenth century. Many of the Black students who began to enter predominantly white northern universities in the early 1960s were athletes, but this early group also included middle-class children of college-educated parents. A jump in Black enrollments came in 1967 and 1968, when new federal policy and the mounting effects of the civil rights movement modestly increased the numbers of Black undergraduates. These students tended to be from working-class, migrant families and were often the first in their families to attend college. They, in turn, engaged in direct action protest to demand greater numbers of Black students. From 1970 to 1974, college enrollments for African Americans shot up 56 percent, compared to a 15 percent increase for whites.⁴ In many respects, the broader desegregation of institutions of higher education in the American North and West was won by the children of southern migrants and constitutes another legacy of the twentieth century's massive internal migration.

The Black student movement was part of the Black Power movement, whose rhetoric, political analysis, and tactics broke from the civil rights movement, but whose goals of Black representation and inclusion were shared with civil rights activists. Black Power emphasized the creation of Black-controlled institutions and racial solidarity and entailed a vigorous emphasis on culture—both in celebrating African American culture and in seeing it as a catalyst for political action and the forging of a new Black consciousness. Black Power advocates saw themselves as unmasking U.S. institutions—including liberal ones like universities—and exposing the whiteness disguised as universalism. They were seeking to change the terms of desegregation: it must not be color-blind, but pluralist. Their call for self-determination was not antithetical to the quest for full inclusion and equal rights, but a strategy for achieving it in a nation deeply shaped by a history of white supremacy. Crucially, Black Power encouraged African Americans to see themselves as African descendants, as part of a global majority rather than an American minority. This international consciousness intensified in the 1970s, giving rise to new Pan-African and Third World identities, initiatives, and solidarities.⁵

No single individual or organization directed the activist energies of Black college students in this era, but several leaders and groups played important roles. Founded by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale in 1966, the Black Panther Party initially focused on combating police brutality,

but within a few years it was calling for revolution and an end to the war in Vietnam, as well as advocating free health clinics, Black studies in high school and college, and other programs to meet local needs. To a greater extent than has been appreciated, students admired, followed, and sometimes joined the Black Panther Party.⁶ For its part, faced with the escalating deindustrialization of Oakland, the Black Panther Party wanted to recruit from the “lumpenproletariat,” a Marxist term describing a social stratum outside the formal economy: hustlers, gang members, and ex-convicts. Nevertheless, the party was surprisingly successful in appealing to high school and college students, and as a result, Panther chapters in Oakland, New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago included student leaders. As Black students sought to build new institutions on college campuses, they were deeply inspired by the Panthers’ success in creating and running their own programs. Indeed, a nationwide independent Black schooling movement would arise in the 1970s from this ethos of countercultural self-reliance. SNCC was a second critically important source of influence on Black students nationwide. By the late 1960s, many veteran SNCC organizers had shifted their attention away from the rural south toward college campuses. The most famous SNCC leader who inspired and shaped the nationwide Black student movement was the former Howard University student Stokely Carmichael, who by 1968 had become a seasoned organizer and charismatic orator, crisscrossing the country urging Black college students to fight for greater recognition and power.⁷ But most important, leadership in the Black student movement was indigenous and local: students formed their own campus organizations and led their own struggles, even as they traveled to other campuses and learned from each other.

A major victory for the students, the achievement of African American studies quickly became its own site of struggle with a new group of protagonists, mainly professors who held competing views of how to build Black studies. The seemingly arcane question of whether Black studies should take the form of a program, college, department, or center became deeply enmeshed in the political struggle for self-determination and the academic struggle for stature and legitimacy. Even after commitments to create Black studies had been won, another round of conflict often ensued over precisely what form it would take and who would be calling the shots. Similarly, an intellectual battle over the character of Black studies developed at the same time. Pressure to show a rationale for Black studies led many scholars to argue for the advantages of and need for a “Black perspective” in teaching and research. While some

observers feared lockstep thinking in such an approach, the defense of a Black perspective in academe relatively quickly gave way to a critical search for various ways to understand the multivalent Black experience. Three factors shaped the turbulent emergence of Black studies as a site for innovative and influential scholarship: ideological disputes over what should serve as the intellectual basis for Black studies, which had the effect of establishing multiple streams of intellectual thought within the field; the desire of some scholars to pursue relatively conventional academic careers, which led them into an ambivalent, even contentious relationship with Black studies; and the influence within Black studies of Marxist and feminist critiques of cultural nationalist approaches to the study of the Black experience. Indeed, in contrast to what many might expect, Afrocentricism, with its focus on reclaiming precolonial African achievements, cultures, and value systems, was not the predominant philosophical approach as African American studies entered higher education in the United States.

The first chapter examines the experiences and political outlooks of Black college students in the mid- to late 1960s, with an eye toward capturing their fast-growing impatience with “token integration” and their attraction to a new politics of racial pride and assertion. The students’ Black nationalism was controversial, in both Black and white communities. In addition to setting up the shift in Black student consciousness that helped pave the way for new forms of student protest, I identify the beginnings of the Black student movement at historically Black colleges and universities. Student activists met with lethal violence in Orangeburg, South Carolina, and experienced a major police assault on the campus of Texas Southern University in Houston, but they won an important victory at Howard University. By highlighting the activism at historically Black colleges in the opening chapter, I unsettle the usual geography of vanguard student radicalism, which emphasizes the New Left at Berkeley, Ann Arbor, and Columbia. In contrast to their conservative image, Black colleges were important incubators of leadership in the Black student movement throughout the entire decade of the 1960s.

Chapters 2 through 5 narrate student struggles in different regions of the country in the late 1960s and into the early 1970s. The chapters are roughly chronological, but it is crucial to understand that campus upheavals (especially in 1968 and 1969) were happening at virtually the same time across the nation. Chapter 2 provides a close analysis of what is widely understood to be the launching pad of the Black studies

movement. Vowing to shut the campus down until their demands were met, the Black Student Union at San Francisco State College launched a five-month strike that convulsed the Bay Area, drew national media attention, and put Governor Ronald Reagan, the striking students, the faculty, college president S.I. Hayakawa, and Black community leaders on a collision course. Deeply influenced by the Panthers, the students adopted militant tactics. The state's conservative leadership, however, was ready for a confrontation, and liberal San Francisco became, ironically, the setting for aggressive police tactics—officers made nearly eight hundred arrests and more or less occupied the campus for months. Remarkably, no historian has written about this enormously significant story.⁸

The third chapter showcases two diverse institutions in the Chicago area where Black student organizing produced sweeping campus reforms and laid the basis for a broader modernization of the university and for Black empowerment in the city of Chicago. In the early morning hours of May 4, 1968, one month after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., about one hundred Black students at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, took over the campus building housing the bursar's office. Occurring a few days after New York City police had arrested seven hundred students in a violent confrontation to end a protest at Columbia University, the Northwestern protest was engulfed from the start by the fear of a police raid. It was ultimately hailed as a success, both for its peaceful resolution and a settlement granting several of the students' demands. In many respects, Northwestern typified Black experiences at elite, private historically white universities. There was an emerging liberalism, and many openings for change, side by side with the legacy of a racially exclusionary cultural and institutional history. But in Evanston, as elsewhere, the students forcefully and creatively asserted themselves and offered solutions that would transform many aspects of campus life in the 1970s. They invited the famed historian Lerone Bennett and legendary Caribbean scholar and activist C.L.R. James to Northwestern, but it took several years to establish a Black studies program, a lag between activism and meaningful curricular reform that was common at elite universities.

A major location of the Black student–Black studies movements was urban public colleges and universities, both two- and four-year institutions. Located on the predominantly Black west side of Chicago, Crane Junior College had a largely white faculty, curriculum, and administrators. Black student activists at Crane began by organizing the

Negro History Club, but their struggle grew rapidly, aiming to change the mission and character of the whole campus. They succeeded in changing the college's name to Malcolm X and gaining an African American as college president—the first in the city—but they were unsuccessful in their particular candidate, an African American woman. The movement at Malcolm X College involved the Black Panther Party and a group of activists who would go on to play key roles in political, labor, and civil rights struggles in Chicago. In the students' successful effort to redefine the mission of a community college, Malcolm X typifies struggles in Oakland, New York City, Detroit, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and other large American cities.

Chapter 4 looks at Black student activism at City College and Brooklyn College, elite four-year institutions in New York City. On the eve of the movement, these two colleges—taxpayer financed in the city with the largest Black population in the United States—were overwhelmingly white: Brooklyn College at 96 percent white in 1968, and City at 91 percent. A two-week occupation of City College in Harlem precipitated a political crisis in the city and ushered in a major shift in public policy, but strikingly it has garnered little attention from historians. Similarly, the struggle at Brooklyn College has been virtually forgotten, even though it was crucial in reshaping the admissions policy, the university's relationship to communities of color, and the curriculum. The radical transformation of admissions requirements at the entire City University of New York produced the biggest structural shift in opportunity during the long civil-rights era. This generation of students remade public higher education in New York City, although at Brooklyn College they fell victim to police infiltration and trumped-up criminal charges. In addition to the Black Panther Party, Black student unions were targets of the FBI's Counterintelligence Program, known as COINTELPRO.

Chapter 5 makes clear that the Black student–Black studies movements did not happen only on white campuses. The quest for self-determination inspired Black students to fight to strengthen and preserve historically Black colleges. Many students at historically Black colleges and universities had participated in the southern civil rights movement, but after 1967 they increasingly turned their activist energies to the campuses, demanding Black studies departments, student inclusion in governance, more resources, and the end of compulsory ROTC and in loco parentis. They sought to end the white control associated with the funding, mission, and governance of private Black

colleges; and in the public sector their quest was nothing less than the preservation of Black colleges. In this era of integration, “saving Black colleges” was a largely unheralded but critically important struggle. By the early 1970s, unrest was rocking Black colleges throughout the South. Students at Black colleges were more likely to encounter violence and campus invasion from law enforcement during their protests than were Black students at other schools. I explore conflicts that led to police occupations and sometimes arrests and shootings—such as those at Southern University in Baton Rouge—which have been more or less excluded from scholarship on the era and from public memorializing of deaths associated with the civil rights movement. At Southern University in November 1972, law enforcement officers fired at fleeing students, killing two young men. In the long term the violence at historically Black colleges and universities led to a quelling of student activism. Together with assassinations and COINTELPRO, this wave of campus violence contributed to a decline in such open and adversarial Black resistance.

Chapter 6 moves away from the focus on student activism to an examination of the political controversies swirling around the early Black studies movement. The establishment of hundreds of Black studies programs in colleges and universities across the country was a major achievement of the Black student movement, but their birth was marked by contention. I explore various struggles and debates that interrogate the meaning of Black studies; a point of contention arose around the idea that Black studies advocated a “Black perspective,” and some expressed concern that this would give rise to an excessively political, narrowly nationalist, anti-intellectual thrust. In contrast, as I argue, most articulations of a Black perspective strove to be international, critical, and expansive.

The battle around the shape of the new Black studies unit at Harvard illustrates how political anxieties could derail an academic unit. A student proposal for a department prevailed over an administration and faculty proposal for a program, leading to years of struggle over the form of Afro-American studies at Harvard, but the department ultimately survived. I conclude with a brief look at a pivotal Ford Foundation conference in Aspen, Colorado, in which this debate over the shape of Black studies came to a head and reinforced a shift in Ford’s funding strategy toward promoting diversity in American higher education. In this era of Black self-determination, funding from white philanthropic

sources became extremely controversial. Black nationalists sometimes rejected it but, more typically, sought to gain greater control over its use.

Chapter 7 explores how a sizeable segment of scholars and activists in the early Black studies movement imagined Black studies as having a broader social impact, beyond academic life. They viewed the widespread dissemination of Black history written and taught by Black people as a means of instilling pride among African Americans and of furthering the process of Black liberation. I examine several nonacademic initiatives that were deeply related to the Black student–Black studies movements, including a remarkable series of televised Black history lectures, *Black Heritage: A History of Afro-Americans*. Even with its controversial late-night/early-morning screen times, it brought prominent Black scholars like John Henrik Clarke, Vincent Harding, Robert Browne, and St. Clair Drake into American living rooms. The Institute of the Black World, a group of radical scholar-activists in Atlanta, succeeded to some degree in modeling a movement-inspired public intellectualism; but shorn of regular funds, it struggled to fully implement its ambitious vision. The Nairobi Schools in East Palo Alto, California, an example of an independent Black institution, were the locus of an impressive grassroots project that offered instruction from preschool through junior college. Reflecting the influence of the Black Panthers as well as a utopian Pan-Africanism, independent Black institutions saw themselves as building new value systems in Black communities and countering the destructive, profit-seeking ethos of racist America. Relatedly, the Student Organization for Black Unity, formed by radical students from various campus struggles, set up a base in North Carolina and, ultimately, adopted the view that Black people in diaspora should acquire skills useful for building strong postcolonial nations in Africa. Each of these examples illustrates the diverse legacies of Black Power-era student activism, beyond the campus and beyond the creation of African American studies and affirmative action.

In the final chapter, I analyze debates and tensions in the definition of the discipline of African American studies. Should it create and emphasize a single methodology, or does its strength lie in the use of multiple methodologies? Similarly, should the Black studies movement aim for standardized curricula across the nation, or is innovation and difference a hallmark of academic inquiry in the United States? I conclude with attention to scholarly innovations that have helped advance African American studies, focusing on the effort to encompass the African diaspora in Black studies and the rise of Black women's studies. The Black

student and early Black studies movements were part of a broader constellation of social, cultural, and political developments that eventually gave rise to Black feminism. Whether known as Africana womanism or Black women's studies, systematic attention to gender and women would significantly shape scholarship and pedagogy in African American studies. But this development would have been hard to predict in 1968, and took years of struggle against patriarchal attitudes and a male-dominated opportunity structure.

In the 1970s, in particular, Black women scholars often found themselves in Black studies units indifferent or hostile to feminist perspectives. But Black feminist scholarship, particularly the concept of intersectionality, would come to exert considerable influence in the discipline and in the humanities and social sciences more generally.

In contrast to conventional wisdom, which posits that Black studies was born as a United States-centered, nation-bound enterprise that, only in more recent years, has discovered the concepts of globalism and diaspora, I argue that the early Black studies movement was internationalist and always deeply skeptical of the mythology of American exceptionalism. Many Black studies programs and departments struggled from the beginning—with varying degrees of success—to encompass Africa and the diaspora in their curricula, nomenclature, personnel, and programming. Not a new departure, the rise of African diaspora studies reflects a deeply rooted tradition and aspiration.

Finally, why label a few years of campus unrest a “revolution”? Students neither aimed for nor achieved a revolution in the traditional sense of seizing state power or precipitating a transformation of social relations. Moreover, with their demands they sought inclusion and were motivated by a desire to improve the collegiate experience. As one scholar-activist noted about open admissions: “This was certainly a militant demand though not revolutionary, since at its core it simply called for a widening of American democracy, not the institution of a totally new educational or social order.” But, he acknowledged, “by widening educational democracy, Black studies could pave the way for the introduction of new and revolutionary ideas into the curriculum, and this was correctly perceived as a threat by conservative administrators and faculty.”⁹ The title of this book hopes to capture the sweeping nature of many of their demands. Indeed, at San Francisco State College, students demanded that all Black applicants be admitted. Moreover, the audacity of the children of sharecroppers and factory workers in asserting a right to shape these institutions was in a sense revolutionary.

The Black Revolution illuminates the sense of possibility and expectation among a large cohort of ambitious, dedicated, politically attuned African American students in the late 1960s—a significant demographic who were attending college in unprecedented numbers. *Revolution* reflects the students’ sense of their own agency, their sense of their ability to affect the course of history, and the sense among many students that 1968 was indeed a revolutionary moment—even if this turned out to be false. Finally, the title conveys the sense of rapid, traumatic upheaval across society, especially in cities, which had been shaken by violent unrest since 1964. Even the usually celebrity-focused, middle-class *Ebony* magazine titled a special 1969 issue “The Black Revolution.”