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Reviewing Black Studies

Legitimacy of discipline taken to task

By Martin C. Evans

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STAFF WRITER

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In 1968, SUNY Stony Brook students angry about the assassination of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and that the role of blacks in America was virtually ignored in the university's classrooms, blocked classes for three days, demanding that black studies be added to the curriculum.

The administration soon relented, and the university began offering a concentration in Africana studies.

But more than 30 years later, the discipline is again the talk of college campuses and political columnists after a spat over academic standards, which simmered between the president of Harvard University and a star in his African-American studies department, leaked out.

Is black studies a legitimate discipline worthy of full departmental status, with the perks and resources that go with it? Or is it, as critics say, a "pseudo-discipline" designed to provide jobs and political clout for black professors and easy grades for black students?

"Like most nonblacks, I guess, I have, anyway, always thought that Afro-American Studies is a pseudo- discipline, invented by guilty white liberals as a way of keeping black intellectuals out of trouble and giving them a shot at holding professorships at elite institutions without having to prove themselves in anything really difficult, like math," wrote John Derbyshire, a contributing editor, in an online issue of the National Review Jan. 11.

A handful of black conservative thinkers agreed, with Shelby Steele, a scholar at Stanford University's Hoover Institution, saying white guilt had allowed lower standards and "minority mediocrity" to go unchallenged.

Critics such as these have raised hackles in black studies departments here and across the country.

"There has been a great effort to turn the clock back to a time when European studies were dominant," said William McAdoo, chairman of Africana studies at SUNY Stony Brook.

McAdoo and others say it is impossible to understand America's evolution from a slave-owning nation to an urban-oriented industrial power without an understanding of the great northern migration, the formation of urban ghettos, the development of a black middle class and other topics mostly ignored by scholarly research.

They say although there are good programs and bad ones, black studies is not

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intrinsically less rigorous than any other discipline that seeks to understand social phenomena.

And they say black studies programs have preserved insights into the lives of black people that might have been lost forever.

"I'm not going to my grave without trying to perpetuate the traditions that got me here," said Henry Louis Gates, Harvard's African-American studies department chairman, whose works include an encyclopedia on Africa's influence worldwide.

African-American studies programs began springing up on college campuses in the 1960s, as colleges began admitting black students in greater numbers and these students began demanding that curriculums no longer ignore the African diaspora.

Students at Stony Brook were among the vanguard. In 1968, after demonstrators shut classes for three days, administrators there agreed to offer black studies as an undergraduate major. Africana studies was elevated to departmental status at Stony Brook in 1998.

Today, several local colleges and universities offer undergraduate concentrations in Afro-American studies, including Stony Brook, Hofstra University, SUNY Old Westbury, Adelphi University and Queens and Hunter colleges. Columbia and New York University offer graduate degrees.

"Thanks to African-American studies, there isn't a historian in America who would say you can understand the history of the United States and the Western world since Columbus without realizing that people of the African world played a major role," said Eric Foner, a history professor at Columbia University.

But supporters say college trustees, political leaders and conservative scholars have used public concerns over rising tuitions and declining academic standards to justify attacks on black studies programs.

Three years ago, SUNY trustee Candace de Russy led a successful effort to impose course requirements - a "core curriculum" - that students need to complete to earn degrees.

McAdoo said this threatens black studies departments because their courses would not fall within the core curriculum and are therefore less likely to attract students.

Controversy flared anew in December, when Harvard president Lawrence H. Summers reportedly urged star professor Cornel West to do more serious academic work and to help contain lax grading.

When West and several colleagues threatened to leave Harvard after accusing Summers of abrasive treatment and of failing to support campus diversity, Summers issued a statement confirming his support for Harvard's African-American studies.

But that brought howls from critics of black studies programs, who accused Summers of caving in to mediocrity. Jerry Martin, president of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, a Washington, D.C.-based organization that favors basic curriculums, said ethnic and gender studies departments teach a fragmented view of America.

"There once was a case for establishing these studies because they had been neglected for so long," Martin said. "But that time has long passed. It's really time to draw them back into the mainstream."

De Russy said most black studies departments are flabby, feel-good programs

that carry an anti-American bias and do little to advance hard knowledge.

"What happened is they became therapeutic in nature, and the goal became consciousness raising as opposed to conveying solid scholarship," said de Russy, who added that Stony Brook and Old Westbury have been particularly lax.

But defenders of black studies reject assertions that the field is divisive or can be dismissed as ethnic boosterism. "It's not about making people feel good, it's about telling the truth," said Old Westbury president Calvin Butts.

Butts cited "Angels of Deliverance," a 1999 book about the Underground Railroad on Long Island, co-authored by Old Westbury assistant professor Kathleen Velsor, as among the contributions the college has made to the understanding of black America. An exhibit based on the book opens Wednesday at the college's library.

Even when references to minority groups have been included in curriculums, said Stony Brook philosophy professor Gary Mar, minorities have been portrayed often as the objects of actions taken by whites - slaves freed by Abraham Lincoln or Japanese-Americans imprisoned in internment camps - rather than as active participants in their own destinies.

Scholars point out that because blacks have been present in America since white explorers arrived - an African navigator sailed with Columbus, and slaves were helping to build Jamestown, Va., a year before the Mayflower sailed for New England in 1620 - a sharper focus on neglected black history is overdue.

"It was slavery that built the economy of the U.S.," Foner said. "This isn't a matter of putting blame on anyone. But you have to understand the African-American experience if you are to understand America. It's not a side issue."

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