

California State University, Fullerton

Program Performance Review
Department of African American Studies
External Review Report
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Review Team Members

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The Review Process

This report is based on the review team's study of the African American Studies Department Performance Review self-report and a site visit that took place on February 28, 2023. During the on-campus visit, the team met with Dr. Sheryl Fontaine, Dean of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Dr. Jessica Stern, Associate Dean of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, and Dr. Siobhan Brooks, Chair of African American Studies. The Reviewers also met with department full and part-time faculty, office staff, and students, and made a classroom visit.

This report has three sections: The first reviews the program's strengths as witnessed by the review team. The other sections discuss the challenges faced by the program and the recommendations of the review team.

Strengths

The African American Studies Department (AFAM) has a long history at CSU Fullerton, but it is currently in a period of relative stability that has sometimes eluded it as a small department. It is under an administrative umbrella, Ethnic Studies, with two

other departments, Asian American Studies, and Chicano/a Studies. While this arrangement sometimes fosters complications, it also firmly places African American Studies in the Ethnic Studies discourse at a time when the new California Ethnic Studies requirement has dramatically increased demand for the Department's courses, leading to new faculty hires and curriculum opportunities.

- The Department is committed to interdisciplinary examination of the African American experience in both historical perspective and contemporary contexts, as reflected in its new mission statement. It draws on and pursues research on the past represented by slavery and colonialism and on contemporary Black expression and social and political dynamics. This broad mandate is laudable in its ambition and relevance. The review team visited the classroom of Dr. Natalie Novoa's AFAM 361 Black Environmentalism course; it not only showcased Dr. Novoa's engaging teaching style but demonstrated the Department's interdisciplinary commitment as Dr. Novoa used poetry analysis to discuss early twentieth century urban segregation and anti-Black violence in Chicago.
- The Department has had stable leadership over the period since the last performance review. In a department with few majors but increasing demand as a service department, African American Studies has benefited from the leadership of Dr. Siobhan Brooks. She and Vice Chair Dr. Natalie Graham, both full professors, have stabilized the department and overseen the hire of three additional tenure-track faculty with a search currently being conducted for a fourth. In addition, they have assembled a large pool of lecturers to meet the demand created by the new Ethnic Studies G.E. requirement, fifteen as of this review.

- The Department's curriculum is focused primarily on introductory courses and those that fulfill G.E. requirements, with Introduction to African American Studies (lower division); and History of Racism (upper) as cornerstone courses in terms of offering frequency and enrollment. As the Department has transitioned into a new era of faculty hires and the Area F ethnic studies requirement, the curriculum has been revised over the past few years. Lower division courses on critical race theory, Black creative expression, and Black Lives Matter; and upper division courses on Black environmentalism and the Black Latinx experience have been added, reflecting not only the research interests of new faculty but engagement with significant scholarly discourses in the field.
- Department faculty have significant service responsibilities and their teaching offerings rarely afford them the chance to offer more specialized upper division courses, but they remain committed and productive scholars in the field. Over the review period, faculty have investigated topics such as sexuality and marriage; race and sex work; anti-LGBT violence against persons of color; Black recreation centers and playground in cities; African American popular music and Black femmeness; and ambient racism in urban spaces. Dr. Natalie Graham is the Poet Laureate of Orange County and has been deeply engaged in presenting her work and that of others—including young people—throughout the region. The Department draws on the fields of sociology, music, literature, and history in its faculty and hopes to hire a digital humanities specialist in 2023.

- The Department has shown strong engagement with the campus and the community beyond. It has managed to present an impressive list of public events including guest speakers and performances that address the significance of African American culture and our vital political moment in which social and racial justice are central concerns for the U.S. democratic project. The Institute of Black Intellectual Innovation, headed by Dr. Natalie Graham, is a community-based research and programming initiative addressing the Black community in Orange County.
- This is a hardworking department that is more collegial than competitive with each other. Faculty, lecturers, and students seem fully committed to the project their field represents. The faculty present themselves as a team committed to student success and the success of the Department as a whole. The senior faculty have taken on a mentoring role for junior faculty, shielding them from heavy service loads as they establish their teaching profiles. The lecturers we met showed great enthusiasm for their work and for the tenure-track faculty and described a high degree of commitment to their students.
- The Department has tracked alumni activities and reports substantial academic and professional achievement among its graduates during the review period. While we did not speak with many students, those with whom we did converse were fully committed to the Department's mission and supportive of its initiatives. It is often the case that faculty of color have additional demands placed upon them as a "cultural tax" due to the isolation students of color often feel on campus. This seems to be less a burden than a commitment among the

faculty—though the extra work is real. Students report strong support from faculty.

- The Department’s relationship to the African American Resource Center, located in the Pollak Library, is crucial. This is the key gathering place for African American students on campus, but it is also a location of interaction with Department faculty, who sometimes hold office hours and other meetings there. While the Department has few majors, it interacts with African American students across campus there and through campus and public events.

Challenges

The Department of African American Studies has several challenges related to the “umbrella” Ethnic Studies structure; identity/mission; curriculum; ability to offer its concentration/major (“Option”); resources; service commitments of its tenured faculty; and faculty without doctorates in the discipline.

- The Ethnic Studies Degree structure presents challenges to the African American Studies Option within it. The 9 units of required Ethnic Studies Core courses, regardless of an AFAM, ASAM, or CHIC designation, are all the same courses. AFAM Core Courses, 6 units required, includes specifically only one course in AFAM; the other course may be AFAM 280 *or* HIST/AFAM/ASAM/CHIC 190. In the 15 units required in the African American Concentration, 3 units may be taken outside of the department. In the 21 units required for the major, 6 units may be taken outside of the department. As stated in the Department Catalog, “The B.A. in Ethnic Studies includes 21 units of shared core courses, 15 units of

courses specific to each concentration, General Education, all-university requirements and free electives.”

- The structure of Ethnic Studies means, in effect, that students may be taking more courses outside of AFAM. This can suggest disciplinary theoretical and methodological frameworks and /or lens that AFAM students might be missing. The structure also presents challenges for resources, office space and administrative support. All three departments are vying for resources, offices space and administrative support. The need for additional administrative support was highlighted in almost every meeting the external review committee had, from tenured professors, tenure-track professors, lecturer faculty, and administrative staff. There is too much work and too little administrative support to carry it out. All the challenges listed above highlight the review committee’s concern and the concern of faculty that AFAM is mainly a service department supporting General Education. The department has few majors; in 2020-2021, the Self Study listed seven.
- AFAM’s Mission and Its identity: In the Self-Study, the Approved Mission Statement is: “The Department of African American Studies is an interdisciplinary intellectual community committed to advancing knowledge about Black people in the United States, the Caribbean, Latin America, Europe, and Africa. The department strives to interrogate the historical meanings and dimensions of slavery, colonialism, resistance, and freedom, and to explore their implications for contemporary political, social, and culture expressions of Black identity. In addition to analyzing the impact of slavery and freedom on Black life in the Americas, we also examine (sic) that continue to shape and define Black

communities in the post-Civil Rights Era United States and the contemporary African diaspora, including Black intra-racial dynamics, gender relations, marriage and family patterns, mixed raced identities, sexuality, expressive forms, and hip-hop culture.” While this board-based statement itself is fine, it is not clear if the courses listed in the catalog are regularly offered, especially the 300 and 400 level courses, and how specializations of recent hires support and advance curricular offerings and departmental mission. Were these courses already on the books or were they developed by recent hires? With such a broad range of course offerings, the department’s specific identity is not clear. It may be trying to do too much without enough tenure line faculty to support curricular course offerings presently in the catalog, especially since 400 level courses are canceled by the administration if enrollment is low.

- What does the department want to be known for? Why should students come to CSUF and major in AFAM? While the tenured full professors have solid reputations, research/creative production, and publications that indicate their areas of specialization and contribution within and to Black Studies, among the junior faculty it is not so clear what the emerging areas of specialization are and how these contribute to the field of Black Studies. Time will tell how their contributions support and focus the AFAM mission. The Self Study states “members of the department have spent the last two years working . . .to begin updating the department’s mission, committees, tracks, and curriculum, to create a viable assessment program, to ‘rebrand’ the department” and “to create a new mission statement that reflected the core values of the University’s strategic plan, recent developments in the discipline of African American

Studies, and the specialties of the current tenure-track faculty.” The committee is concerned, as stated below, that the department’s ability to fulfill its mission and identity is threatened if it does not hire faculty with Ph.Ds in the discipline. The committee notes the contributions of lecturer faculty to the department, but even here, it seems most of them do not have masters or graduate degrees in Black Studies. The most successful Black Studies departments nationwide draw upon faculty trained in the discipline.

- Service: Full professors Dr. Siobhan Brooks and Dr. Natalie Graham are carrying a full load of service commitments in the department, college, university, and community. They both are doing this because they are called upon to do this service by the university and because they want to keep the service commitments lighter for tenure track faculty who must produce effective teaching and professional development records for tenure and promotion. With the structural challenges outlined here, fulfilling the department’s mission and curriculum, department identity, and service commitments, hiring associate/full professors with the doctorate in Black Studies (African American Studies, Africana Studies, Pan African Studies, African Diaspora Studies, etc.) should be next hiring priorities to help resolve some of the challenges.
- Orange County: With only a 2 percent black population (or as one faculty member stated, 1.9 percent), recruiting black students, strong black community support and connections with AFAM are challenges that Drs. Brooks and Graham are doing their best to meet. But this community outreach cannot rest on their resilience and efforts alone. They both are burning out. Additional faculty support is needed to carry some of this service work and additional

faculty are needed to make AFAM a space that is known for something beyond Orange County; its curriculum and programming must reach students beyond the region. As the largest CSU campus, its AFAM department should have a reputation and identity beyond Orange County.

Recommendations

Based on the Self Study and site visit, the reviewers find several areas of concern and make the following recommendations:

- The Area F requirement has generated a baseline investment of \$900,000 for CSU Fullerton from the State of California. The Department of African American Studies is one of three units eligible for this financial support. These funds are allocated to supplement the financial increase related to the hiring of additional staff and lecturers for the proper implementation of the course requirements. The Deans' Office has decided to save \$200,000 annually from the \$900,000 for a future structure to house the three departments and provide additional classroom and office space. The Dean's Office is correctly concerned about long-term spatial needs. Yet it is unclear to the external reviewers how the remaining \$600,000 has been distributed to the three Ethnic Studies departments. A clear budget that breaks down the distribution for the three units would bring transparency to all. Specifically, how much can African American Studies expect for their annual budget based on the disbursement of these state funds?
- The Department of African American Studies suffers from a lack of majors. The low number is a national trend and reflective of anti-blackness. Unfortunately, 400-level courses are usually taken by Department majors and are therefore

Deleted: outside of the hiring of additional lecturers.

most vulnerable to cancellation and ultimately being dropped from the curriculum. Yet the new AB 1460 mandate and the number of minors heavily populate lower-division African American Studies courses. Since the Department is providing 1/3 of the courses that meet the AB 1460 requirement for the campus, we suggest that their 400-course minimal enrollment be reduced to six students as opposed to ten. The Dean's Office can simply factor in that the four students have already been covered by an AB 1460 course.

- There is an immediate need to hire an additional staff person to support the African American Studies Department Chair. At the time of our external review, there was a Temporary Part-Time Administrative Coordinator and one Full-Time Lead Person who is split between three Departments. It is simply unsustainable for any Academic Department to function without appropriate Administrative Staff, especially given the additional course offerings linked to the 1460 Area F requirement. We recommend that one Full-Time Administrative person be hired to manage the state budget allocation. Although College's administrative structure does not allow for it, the Administrative Staff should report directly to the Department Chair to ensure clear communication.
- We were not taken on a tour of the Department facilities (faculty and lecturers' offices, conference rooms, staff lounge, etc.). This is a common practice for most external reviews. Given the role of the Institute of Black Intellectual Innovation (IBII) we wanted to see the space and how the campus valued this intellectual jewel by providing an inviting location. We can only assume that the facilities are lacking and inadequate.

- The efforts of Professor Graham have produced the Institute of Black Intellectual Innovation (IBII). The Department of African American Studies is the academic anchor for IBII even though collaboration with several units is evident. The IBII hosts an annual Innovative Arts Future Conference and is an important link to Orange County communities. The Office of the Provost provides funds to hire a student assistant and a program coordinator. This is clearly minimal staffing which places the burden on Dr. Graham and her departmental colleagues. The external reviewers were surprised that despite the public value that the IBII brings to the University it has not translated into baseline funding support. The cultural tax on Dr. Graham and her colleagues benefits the image of the University but is not reciprocated by substantial funding commitments.
- All the current Faculty have earned degrees outside of African American Studies and have chosen to teach in the field. One can now earn a Ph.D. in Africana Studies from twenty institutions. Therefore, we advise future search committees to encourage applications with this interdisciplinary degree. Africana Studies Ph.Ds bring an array of experiences within academic departments and professional organizations such as the National Council of Black Studies (NCBS) and the Association for the Study of African American History, Life, and Culture (ASALH). Having a strong presence in the discipline will enhance the future growth of the Department.

Summary

The African American Studies Department at CSU Fullerton is struggling to meet its ambitious mission, teach its curriculum, and strengthen ties to its campus and regional

communities. The laudable efforts of the faculty and lecturers to meet these challenges reinforces why the University must take intentional steps to address these concerns and support the Department's endeavors. Without such support, the Department will burn through faculty members, fail to develop a strong student body of majors, and struggle to sustain its community outreach efforts.