

Assessment Inquiry Grant Report
Department of African American Studies
Principal Investigator: Dr. Ash Woody
Report Prepared by: Dr. Ash Woody
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Title: Assessing Student Communication Skills and Historical Knowledge Development in African American Studies Courses

Introduction

This assessment inquiry project sought to examine the effectiveness of core courses within our major such as AFAM 107: Introduction to African American Studies, which is a foundational general education course and integral to the African American Studies (AFAM) major and minor. AFAM 107 introduces students to key concepts within African American Studies, including historical events and contributions of people of African descent in the U.S. and wider diaspora. However, given AFAM 107's important role in our bachelor's degree program, we have yet to develop sharp assessment tools to examine the degree to which our curriculum, assignments, and evidence of student learning align with two key departmental Student Learning Outcomes: Historical Knowledge (SLO 2) and Communication Skills (SLO 5).

Through this assessment inquiry project, The Department of African American Studies sought to strengthen our assessment efforts by collecting direct and indirect evidence to more closely examine whether core courses such as AFAM 107 and our curriculum as a whole successfully support our majors and minors' knowledge and skills development embedded in SLO's 2 and 5. Direct evidence collected include all syllabi used for AFAM 107 during the 2022-2023 academic year in order to examine course content, assignments, and activities to assess alignment of course materials with SLOs 2 and 5. Indirect evidence collected include surveys completed by current AFAM majors and minors. Questions measured student perceptions of learning in relation to historical knowledge, communication skills, and their overall learning in AFAM. The AFAM Department also used this grant as an opportunity to survey majors and minors about their perception of department's key strengths areas for improvement overall.

Methods

A combination of methods were employed to gather both direct and indirect evidence through the collection of survey data and the analysis of syllabi. Collecting direct evidence of student learning involved compiling all AFAM 107 syllabi used during the 2022-2023 academic year to assess alignment with departmental Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) focused on historical knowledge (SLO 2) and communication skills- both written and verbal (SLO 5). Investigators applied a [rubric](#) to evaluate each syllabus across several criteria: whether the syllabus explicitly included department learning outcomes, the extent to which assignments evaluated students'

historical knowledge of significant individuals and events impacting African Americans, the presence of assignments that developed written communication skills, and the inclusion of assignments that required oral communication skills.

The survey administered to AFAM majors and minors sought to assess student learning in African American Studies by evaluating their perceptions of learning historical knowledge, communication skills, and overall educational experience, while also gathering insights regarding the department's strengths and areas for improvement. The African American Studies department currently has 27 students enrolled as majors and minors. The survey was emailed to 27 students, and 10 students responded to the [survey](#), yielding a response rate of 37%. Of the ten respondents, 5 were AFAM majors and 5 were AFAM minors. All surveyed students were either juniors or seniors.

The survey included demographic questions and a series of Likert scale questions that inquired about students' perceptions of their learning, particularly in areas such as historical knowledge of African Americans, as well as written and oral communication skills. Additionally, students provided open-ended feedback on the skills they've developed through their African American Studies courses, along with key strengths and suggested areas for improvement for the department overall. Open-ended questions asked: “Based on your experiences so far, what are some of the most important skills you feel you have developed through the classes you’ve taken with African American Studies (if any)?” , “Based on your experiences so far, what are some of the strengths of the African American Studies Department?” and “Based on your experiences so far, are there any areas for improvement in the African American Studies curriculum or department as a whole that you would like to share?” Surveys were administered and analyzed using Qualtrics. Likert scale data was examined using data charts and open-ended questions were examined for key themes.

Results

An evaluation of five syllabi for the AFAM 107: Introduction to African American Studies course, used during the 2023-2024 academic year, revealed key insights into alignment with departmental Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs). Three out of five (3/5) syllabi explicitly included AFAM Department SLOs, suggesting some inconsistency in communicating departmental goals across sections of AFAM 107. However, all syllabi (5/5) incorporated assignments that evaluated students’ historical knowledge to some degree (scoring between 3 and 5 on the rubric) (SLO 2). Additionally, each syllabus (5/5) included assignments to develop written communication skills (SLO 5), indicating strong support for writing-based skill development across sections. In contrast, only three out of five syllabi included assignments requiring oral communication (SLO 5), highlighting a potential area for improvement in fostering oral communication skills within the course.

Survey results indicate that AFAM curriculum has an overall positive impact on students’ knowledge of African American history, written, and verbal communication skills. Specifically, 6 out of 10 students strongly agreed that their understanding of African American history improved due to these courses, while 3 out of 10 somewhat agreed, and 1 out of 10 strongly disagreed. In

terms of writing skills, 6 out of 10 students reported that their skills greatly improved, with 4 out of 10 noting a moderate improvement, and all students acknowledged some enhancement in their written communication abilities. Additionally, 5 out of 10 students indicated that their verbal communication skills greatly improved as a result of completing AFAM courses, while 4 out of 10 felt their verbal skills improved moderately, and 1 out of 10 perceived only a slight improvement.

Open-ended responses also reflect a general pattern of student satisfaction, particularly regarding the quality of instruction in African American Studies courses and positive impact of faculty. When asked which skills they felt they have been able to develop as a result of completing AFAM curriculum, several key patterns in the data emerged. Many respondents highlighted significant advancements in critical thinking and analytical skills, emphasizing their ability to examine and explain complex topics and previous research. For instance, one student wrote:

“One of the most important skills I've developed is the ability to dissect dense research material (i.e., empirical articles, journals, studies, etc.) and ascertain the necessary information for my own educational purposes.”

This response highlights strong alignment with SLO 5 regarding written communication. Similarly, another student shared:

“The most important skill that I feel that I have developed so far is that I can explain complex topics like critical race theory and systematic racism to people who are completely uneducated on those topics. Yes, systematic racism and critical race theory may seem easy to explain but after taking several AFAM courses, you will understand the how complex those topics are.”

This student response reflects enhanced confidence in verbal explanatory skills and comprehension of complex ideas. Additionally, empathy and self-discovery were prominent themes among student open-ended survey responses, with participants reflecting on their personal growth and increased awareness of racial and social justice issues. One student noted:

“An important skill I've developed through my classes is the importance of self-discovery. I discover a lot about others, but these classes, alongside other more important things in my life, allowed me to better assess certain things about myself.”

Another student wrote about improved self-awareness:

“I learned about racism, stereotypes, microaggressions, and internalized racism, and I was able to analyze myself and try my best to improve as a person; I did that by looking at how I played a part and perpetrated them, along with educating those close to me and allowing them to analyze themselves and their actions as well.”

Alongside their perception of improved analytic and communication skills, students noted other key strengths of the department. One student wrote, “It feels like more of a community. Professors are kind. The classes are informative and the discussions are insightful”. Another

shared: “Strengths include consistency in various AFAM major events, relevant and interesting course listings, and amazing professors who are dedicated to the work.”

Students also shared constructive feedback when asked about areas for improvement regarding the department’s curriculum and their experiences overall. One theme that emerged from open-ended question data was the desire for improved scheduling and accessibility, with students requesting earlier events and more varied class times to accommodate those with jobs or double majors. One student shared:

“I wish that there would be more date and time options for classes. It seems as if there is only one allotted time slot for each class which can be difficult for students who are navigating a double major/minor.”

Similarly, another student wrote:

“I would love if the events or informational meetings could be held early in the morning because I notice most of them are in the afternoon and I work at that time so it’s hard to attend all AFAM related outings”.

While many praised the course listings and curriculum, expressing satisfaction with the diversity of topics offered, there is also a call for growth in course offerings and updates to ensure relevance, as one student noted that outdated materials and surface-level discussions in introductory classes detracted from their learning experience:

“Sometimes the curriculum can feel out of date if the textbooks are older, Discussions can feel surface level if a lot of students are taking the specific course as an elective.”

Finally, students highlighted the need for better outreach to encourage more students to declare AFAM as a major or minor, suggesting that the department could enhance its visibility and communicate the benefits of the program more effectively:

“Outreach — Not enough students are declaring a minor/major in AFAM, and that’s because the benefits in my view haven’t been highlighted well by the department or the university more broadly.”

While students appreciate the strengths of the AFAM department, particularly the quality of instruction and skills development, their feedback also underscores opportunities for growth in course accessibility, content relevance, and outreach efforts to attract more students to the program.

Discussion

An analysis of the AFAM 107 course syllabi and student feedback provides valuable insights into the alignment of the curriculum with departmental Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) and highlights areas for improvement to enhance communication of our department’s SLOs in course syllabi. Out of the five syllabi reviewed, only three explicitly included the AFAM Department

SLOs, indicating a need for more consistency in how learning objectives are communicated to students. This inconsistency may impact students' understanding of the skills and knowledge they are expected to gain in the course, as well as faculty awareness of the importance of aligning the curriculum with departmental SLOs. To address this issue, the department could implement a standardized syllabus template for courses like AFAM 107 that includes all relevant department learning outcomes and examples of how to align SLOs with course assignments and curriculum. Sharing this template with faculty will help ensure consistent communication of departmental goals across all AFAM 107 sections, and other core curricula.

The report also reveals that the department provides ample opportunities for students to develop their writing skills through assignments and activities, with all reviewed syllabi (5/5) incorporating tasks that support written communication. Survey data corroborates this finding, as students reported significant improvement in their writing abilities. However, based on the data, a slight gap exists in the development of verbal communication skills. Only three out of five (3/5) syllabi included assignments or activities focused on verbal communication, and survey responses indicated varied levels of perceived improvement in this area. Addressing this gap could involve integrating more assignments that require verbal skills, such as class presentations or group projects. To address this issue more comprehensively, the department could develop a common assignment template and rubric that all AFAM 107 instructors can use to facilitate student mastery of communication skills and historical knowledge in tandem. For example, a verbal group presentation on a historical event could enhance student learning in both verbal communication skills and historical knowledge within the scope of one assignment.

Although our sample size for this project was small, this assessment research inquiry illustrates how AFAM 107 and our curriculum overall successfully support students' development of historical knowledge, communication skills, and other key areas of personal and academic growth. However, improvements in consistency around departmental learning outcomes and increased focus on verbal communication skills would strengthen the course and our curriculum as a whole. The AFAM Department will utilize these findings and open-ended student feedback to continue to sharpen our curriculum's alignment with department SLOs, grow our major, and increase accessibility of our classes to students across campus.