

# The institutionalization of the black studies department in america

[History](#), [African American](#)



In 1968, the Black Studies department was founded at University of California, Santa Barbara as a result of student activism and a radical movement for fundamental education reform. The Black Student Union protested as a means of addressing racial issues faced by the black population on campus. This direct action taken by student activists set in motion the fundamental changes at UCSB - the creation of Black Studies and the establishment of a discipline through which educates students the history, politics, and culture of Black Diaspora.

The institutionalization of the Black Studies department at UCSB was a tough and arduous undertaking. In their efforts to make change in the educational system that lacked to reflect the needs of black students in the University, the Black Student Union took over North Hall on October 14, 1968 making a set of demands, one in which included the establishment of a college for black studies at the University. Their demands were met and the Black Studies department was created; however, although the students were successful in bringing about change on campus, they faced many ongoing challenges during the process for developing the department. The department was short-staffed and struggled to find those " who were willing to put in extensive hours needed to construct their own curriculum." They also dealt with condemnation and were criticized by many who perceived ethnic studies as an illegitimate discipline.

Despite the challenges and discouragements, faculty members and students continued to fight for growth and acceptance with great efforts. The department of Black Studies at UCSB has expanded largely and made and

still continuing to make significant academic growth with now having over 4,000 students enrolled and raking top-10 nationally for faculty research.

The experiences of Black people has been, for hundreds of years, defined through the European lens and Black Studies, serving as a corrective and inclusive discipline, was founded as a means to reclaim their sense of self-definition. Malcolm X, in the speech he delivered on February 14, 1965, discusses the issue on colonial misinterpretation of Africa and how it brought about hatred within the black society:

Why should the Black man in America concern himself—since he’s been away from the African continent for three or four hundred years—why should we concern ourselves? What impact does what happens to them have upon us? Number one, first you have to realize that up until 1959 Africa was dominated by the colonial powers. And by the colonial powers of Europe having complete control over Africa, they projected the image of Africa negatively. They projected Africa always in a negative light: jungles, savages, cannibals, nothing civilized. Why then naturally it was so negative [that] it was negative to you and me, and you and I began to hate it. We didn’t want anybody telling us anything about Africa, much less calling us Africans. In hating Africa and in hating the Africans, we ended up hating ourselves, without even realizing it. Because you can’t hate the roots of a tree and not hate the tree. You can’t hate your origin and not end up hating yourself. You can’t hate Africa and not hate yourself.

Malcolm X points out and emphasizes the critical issue of the power to define. For so long Blacks have been disparaged and negatively portrayed by their oppressors that they began to perceive themselves in the same manner. Black Studies centers on educating and disseminating the actualities of their history and what they have endured and attained to vindicate the race against its disparagers. Zora Neale Hurston's *Barracoon: The Last Story of the Last "Black Cargo"* exemplifies the importance of learning history through a non European centered framework. *Barracoon* is based on the narrative about Cudjo Lewis' enslavement and his experience of the Middle Passage is told from his perspective and this allows us to sympathize with him and apprehend not only the account of his sufferings, but the account of the sufferings of all Africans captured as well. Africans were portrayed and seen as savages and not civilized because they lacked in clothing. However, in *Barracoon*, when Cudjo shares his experience on the slave ship to the United States, he says, "When we ready to leave de Kroo boat and go in de ship, de Many-costs snatch our country cloth off us. We try to save our clothes, we ain' used to be without no clothes on. But dey snatch all of us". This this demonstrates the Black Studies as a corrective and inclusive discipline as it corrects the misperceptions of Africans as being savages and it is inclusive of the accounts of their experience. Black Studies' aim is to teach students about the history of Black Diaspora and present different perspectives to allow students to get a better understanding of the history and allow them think critically about current events.

Through Black Studies, it has allowed the reframing of black people's experiences through their perspectives rather than that of their oppressors. The department addresses cultural issues to increase awareness of Black history's actuality. Since it was first founded the studies have expanded and diversified, creating awareness of intersectionality of race, class, gender, sexuality. The department has also successfully fought for acceptance and changed the views of establishment who had initially refused to see it as legitimate. Although the Black Studies department at UCSB is now widely welcomed and accepted, the validity of the discipline is still challenged in other educational institution today.