



Institutional Report

(Re)establishing the Bachelor of Science Degree in Africana Studies at Tennessee State University

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Abstract

The Department of Africana Studies at Tennessee State University (TSU) has its origins within the radical efforts of faculty, students, and administrators during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Although established in 1994 as a free-standing academic unit that offered the undergraduate degree and minor concentration in Africana Studies, by 2010 the major was restructured into a minor program and the Department was merged with a larger academic unit. In 2021, TSU's Board of Trustees approved the

Siyabonana: The Journal of Africana Studies, Volume 1, Number 1, Winter 2023

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creation of the Bachelor of Science degree in Africana Studies. Its revival came at the tail end of discussions among Africana core faculty, administration, and several key committees in the Department of History, Geography, Political Science, and Africana Studies over the course of 2021. Its existence at one of a hundred or so historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) still in existence, remains critical for pursuing the university's mission of serving both its student body and the larger community. Moreover, it remains unique as one of the only discipline-specific Africana Studies programs at an HBCU with a dynamic history that has included degree-granting status. The purpose of this institutional report is to present a brief history of the discipline at TSU, review the previous curriculum and highlight the new directions of the revised major.

Keywords

HBCU, academic programs, degree program revitalization, Africana Studies undergraduate minor concentration

Introduction

On November 18, 2021, Tennessee State University's Board of Trustees approved the creation of the Bachelor of Science degree in Africana Studies. The approval came at the tail end of discussions among Africana core faculty, administration, and several key committees in the Department of History, Geography, Political Science, and Africana Studies over the course of 2021. Despite the language in the approval process during the board meeting that this was the establishment of a new degree-granting program, the Africana Studies major is a return to a program that faculty and students fought ardently to create between the mid 1980s and early 1990s. Its existence at Tennessee State University (TSU), which is one of a hundred or so historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) still in existence, remains critical for pursuing the university's mission of serving both its student body and the larger community. Moreover, it remains unique as one of the only discipline-specific Africana Studies programs at an HBCU with a dynamic history that has included degree-granting status.

Although the move from proposed program to approved program happened quickly, Africana Studies faculty have spent years building a foundation that can

support a revived major. Moreover, this revival of Africana Studies at an HBCU requires a responsibility to be cognizant and responsive to this critical social moment. It acknowledges that student needs might be different from both its original design as well as the breadth of programs at predominantly white institutions. On the one hand, the new program builds on the previous mission, philosophical perspectives, and methodologies. The 2021-2022 proposal leaned on language, structure, and purpose stated within the first department proposal that was approved during the 1993-1994 academic year. On the other hand, it intentionally expands the digital footprint that has grown over the last several years with collaborative projects while also addressing current social justice needs. In this way, the revived Africana Studies major at TSU extends beyond its initial disciplinary structure and intentions without abandoning them.

From Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial State Normal School to Tennessee State University

The Tennessee General Assembly founded TSU in 1909 as the Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial State Normal School in Nashville, Tennessee. According to sociologist and founding Chair of the Department of Africana Studies, Amiri YaSin Al-Hadid, TSU institution emerged due to the federal 1890 Morrill Act that allowed states to create segregated public higher education for Africana people during the immediate post-Reconstruction era.¹ Enrolling its first students in 1912, its initial mission as a two-year institution was to train “Negro” teachers to return to their segregated communities and provide public education.² However, according to historian and previous Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, Bobby L. Lovett, “Tennessee State has experienced several major transformations into a four-year college in 1922, a liberal arts based accredited teacher education college by 1936, graduate programs by 1942, [and] university status in 1951....³

It was not until 1958 that the Tennessee State Board of Education granted the university full land grant status, a legislative measure designating that the university (then named Tennessee Agricultural & Industrial State University) receive continued and equitable financial support from the state of Tennessee in tandem with the only other land grant institution in the state, The University of Tennessee at Knoxville.⁴ Under this status, the university, by 1968, became Tennessee State University and

continued to expand its educational offerings in arts and sciences, including agriculture, health, engineering, technology, and computer science.

Currently, TSU is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges. Designated a Carnegie High Research University (R2), TSU offers “45 bachelor's degrees, 24 master's degrees and awards doctoral degrees in seven areas: biological sciences, computer information systems engineering, psychology, public administration, curriculum and instruction, administration and supervision, and physical therapy.”⁵ On average TSU enrolls approximately 7,000 to 8,000 undergraduate and graduate students each academic year; and although students from throughout the world attend TSU, the student body remains predominately African American.⁶

The Struggle for Africana Studies

The initial demands of students to create an Africana Studies department at TSU is situated within the familiar historical context of the 1960s Black Freedom Movement that ushered in the rise of Black Studies units (departments, programs, centers, and institutes) on both historically white campuses and historically Black colleges and universities.⁷ Nashville students at both Fisk University and TSU (what was then Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial State University), played major roles in this movement.⁸ Because of the unrelenting activism of community members and many students attending local colleges and universities including students attending American Baptist College, Fisk University and TSU, Nashville became the first city in the south to desegregate lunch counters;⁹ Nashville was therefore a hub of radicalism and activist minded students; they sought to recreate an academic climate that was more than just a bastion of African American history, culture, and traditions. Students wanted a “relevant education” and called for the creation of a department not unlike students at San Francisco State College, now University, Cornell University, Howard University, and many other institutions across the country. However, TSU administration responded to students’ requests for a “relevant education” by denying the creation of a department and creating a few African American specific courses in traditional disciplines.¹⁰ One major rationale for this decision was that unlike historically white institutions, TSU had a rich and relevant African American cultural

history, so a separate, distinct, and autonomous discipline to examine the Africana world was therefore unnecessary.¹¹

Almost twenty years after the initial struggle to bring about the discipline, students were again the catalyst for the creation of a degree granting free standing department. By 1984 activists within the student government wanted to provide the student body the opportunity to vote for the creation of an Africana Studies department because students across campus showed much interest in Africana Studies given the high enrollment in many of the Africana-oriented courses within traditional disciplines.¹² However, with minimal momentum after four years due to administrative pushback, on November 17, 1988, at least two hundred students occupied the office of President Otis L. Floyd.¹³ Students insisted that academic affairs approve a bachelor's degree in the discipline with all courses placed within a free-standing department.¹⁴ Because of students' actions, Floyd asked administration and faculty to form an Africana Studies Council to write an official proposal containing the rationale and curriculum for and mission of the department. The committee was co-chaired by Bobby L. Lovett, who was the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, and Amiri YaSin Al-Hadid, then a faculty member in the Department of Sociology;¹⁵ Al-Hadid would later serve as the first chair of the Department of Africana Studies with its founding in January of 1994.

After four years of negotiations with academic affairs and approvals from the Tennessee Board of Regents, then the governing board of higher education institutions in the state, the Africana Studies Council was successful; they created a thirty-six credit hour Bachelor of Science degree. With these approvals, TSU became one of only a few HBCUs to offer a bachelor's degree from a free-standing Africana Studies department. A portion of the original program description written by the Africana Studies Council reads that, "an academically based Afrocentric program of study will be designed to foster intellectual inquiry into the origin, evolution, and development of peoples of African descent in the New World. The cultural, political, social, and economic conditions of these people will be the fundamental subject matter of this program."¹⁶

For approximately eighteen years the department served students throughout campus as well as local and international communities. The founding core faculty, Mayibuye Monanabela, Wosene Yefru and Amiri YaSin Al-Hadid, provided majors and minors in Africana Studies and the larger campus community with survey and

advanced courses ranging from Classical African Civilization to Black Nationalism. Yoruba, Kiswahili, and Arabic language courses were also part of the curriculum. Moreover, faculty hosted the Association for the Study of Classical African Civilizations (ASCAC) conference in 2003, held a consistent annual TSU Africana Studies conference and “Great Debates,” (Figure 1) and offered students field studies opportunities in Senegal, Kenya, and Kemet. In doing so, faculty created a radical intellectual space at TSU where students could master discourse about the Africana world experience(s) from African and Diasporic perspectives; it also grounded students in African epistemologies and methodologies. However, during the tenure of Interim President Portia Shields, which began in December of 2010, the major degree program was reduced to an eighteen credit minor program and rehoused within the Department of History, Geography and Political Science. This transition was part of a university wide restructuring plan to deal with severe budgetary constraints during the recession that began in 2007.

Institutional records indicate that students were indeed interested in the discipline of Africana Studies, even as the faculty struggled to maintain department status and offer the undergraduate degree. For instance, during the first academic year (1994-1995), twenty students declared majors in the field with the first student graduating in 1997.¹⁷ This trend seems to have fluctuated given department records; in 2009, for instance, a year before the major was reduced to a minor, the department identified that forty students were majoring in Africana Studies, while hundreds of students enrolled in at least one of its yearly course offerings.¹⁸ Overall, although several students graduated with a degree in the discipline between 1997 and 2010, with many pursuing graduate degrees in public policy, business, religion, and Africana Studies, fears about the marketability of a liberal arts degree may have deterred students from majoring in the field. A 2009 external academic audit team suggested that there must be a TSU campus wide effort to promote the “viability of the degree in the marketplace. Simultaneously there needs to be a campaign to educate advisors and others....”¹⁹

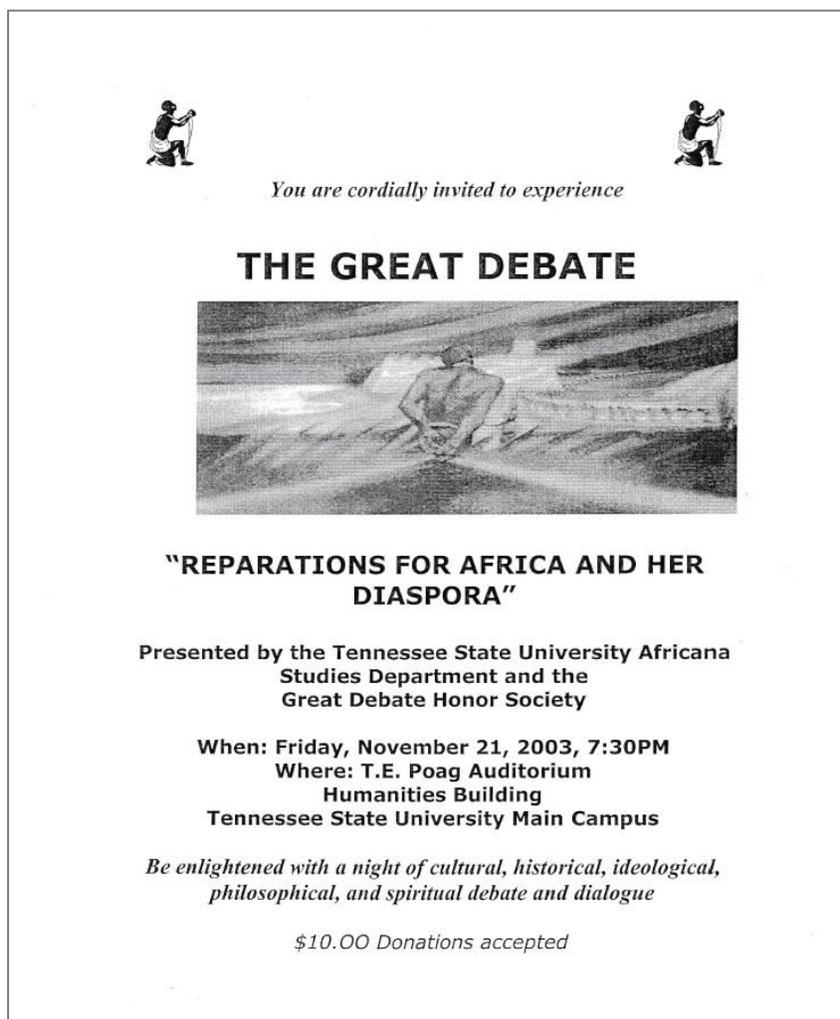


Figure 1: Great Debate Advertisement (2003),
Tennessee State University Africana Studies Collection.

Recent Developments

Since the termination of the major and the dismantling of the free-standing department, there have been several faculty transitions and collaborations, program innovations, and protracted conversations. Collectively, these events have set the tone for a renewed interest in reestablishing the bachelor's degree program. For instance, by 2016, both Amiri YaSin Al-Hadid and Mayibuye Monanabela retired from the university; however, Wosene Yefru continues his intellectual work as the current coordinator of the minor program alongside one core faculty member Sekhmet Maat who was hired in Africana Studies in the fall of 2017. One affiliate faculty member,

Andrea Ringer, was hired in History in 2018, but teaches the African Diaspora course in the Africana Studies program. Geographer Gashaw Bekele also serves as affiliate faculty and teaches a course on African geographical landscapes, resources, and environments, which is also a course offering in the program.

During his tenure as coordinator, Wosene Yefru published his second book, *African-Centered Critical Thinking: A Historiographical Commentary on the Nile Valley Civilization*. In 2017, his textbook became the basis for the core curriculum for the Introduction to Africana Studies course. In doing so, for the first time since the inception of Africana Studies at TSU, all faculty who teach sections of the introductory course use this text and structure their sections to meet the same course objectives and student learning outcomes; though faculty have full freedom to incorporate other supporting, foundational, and timely materials into their sections. Taken by minors and students seeking to fulfill a general education course requirement, the Introduction to Africana Studies course is the gateway course to other Africana Studies courses and the minor. Because of this curricular innovation, yearly course enrollment for all courses in Africana Studies exceeds five hundred students per academic year and many students each year declare a minor in the discipline. In addition, Africana faculty have organized annual Africana Studies student interest mixers and an annual speaker series; faculty have also led student travel to the 2018 ASCAC conference in Philadelphia, P.A. and to Lima and Machu Picchu, Peru during the summer of 2019 (Figure 2). Conference travel and study abroad excursions ceased in 2020 due to the pandemic.

The program has furthermore remained dynamic since the termination of the major through its engagement with eBlack studies and other digital humanities projects. Africana and History faculty and students at TSU, along with African American Studies faculty at Fisk University, have coordinated a grant-funded digital project that examines the historical intersections of Black institutions and public health. The coalescence of these Black Studies units has offered up unique approaches to the oral history project, including more African-centered perspectives in questions and curation. In 2019, Sekhmet Maat and Andrea Ringer, along with A. Hannibal Hamdallahi of Fisk, received funding from Vanderbilt University's Mellon Partners in Humanities grant to document the founding of each university's respective Africana and African American Studies programs. The grant provided resources to archive documents relating to the origins of the department and capture its memories

through oral histories. The project included both the preservation of this history and the creation of a public-facing project in a digital exhibit. Newspaper articles, letters of congratulations on the department opening from political figures, and early course syllabi fill the digital exhibit and demonstrate the radical origins of these programs that have been largely overlooked in scholarship. Documenting this history was a necessary step to reviving the major at TSU. It uncovered critical pedagogical underpinnings of the program's founders and set the foundation for the new proposal to reinstate the degree program.

Tennessee State University
Africana Studies Program
 Maymester 2019 Study Abroad

PERU:
 The African Diaspora



Machu Picchu, Peru

**STUDY ABROAD
 INTEREST MEETING !**

**Thursday, November 8th @ 3pm
 &
 Tuesday, November 13th @ 3pm**

204 Elliot Hall

For more information email:
 Prof. C. Williams at cjackson3@tnstate.edu or
 Dr. S. Maat at cmcalli1@tnstate.edu

**SCHOLARSHIPS ARE AVAILABLE
 FOR A LIMITED TIME!!**

Figure 2: Africana Studies Program,
 Study Abroad Interest Meeting Advertisement, 2018.
 Courtesy of the authors.

Beyond documenting its own institutional history, the TSU Africana program has also made a concerted effort to engage with larger histories of Africana Studies programs through the creation of *Siyabonana: The Journal of Africana Studies*. The journal is co-edited by Africana scholars at TSU; California State University Northridge; California State University, Sacramento; and George Mason University. Operating as an open-access, online, peer-reviewed academic journal, *Siyabonana* serves as an accessible and inclusive African-centered space for scholarship. The inaugural issue, due out in late 2022, centers the ongoing work at TSU by asking questions about the founding of Africana programs at other HBCUs and Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs).

The final and most substantial moment leading to the reestablishment of the bachelor's degree program was academic affairs' request for faculty to write an official proposal to reinstate the degree program. Since 2017, Amiri YaSin Al-Hadid, although retired, has remained in communication with TSU President Glenda Glover, members of academic affairs, and the dean of the College of Liberal Arts about the need to reconsider the status of the program; for Al-Hadid, Portia Shields' decision to terminate the major and dismantle the department was unjust. Taking his concerns under consideration, Glover and the vice president of academic affairs tapped the dean to form an Africana Studies Committee comprising TSU faculty with training and research areas in Africa and/or in the Diaspora. The committee members included historians Ringer, KT Ewing, and Learotha Williams, Jr.; Williams co-chaired the committee with Wosene Yefru. Other members included Rebecca Dixon and Zeba Khan-Thomas from the Department of Languages, Literature and Philosophy; political scientist, Shameka Scott-Cathey; Lakesha Moore from the Department of Art and Design, and Maat. Like the directives given more than thirty years ago, in March of 2021, the committee was charged with crafting a proposal for a degree granting program, which included a letter of intent and core curriculum for review, and approval, by the Tennessee State University Board of Trustees and the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC). With great assistance from the dean's office, the committee was able to complete the proposal for a thirty-six hour major within eight months; and on November 18, 2021, Tennessee State University Board of Trustees approved the reinstatement of the bachelor's degree program to begin no later than the fall of 2023. As of August 2022, the committee is waiting for the final approval from THEC.

Though the committee relied on the initial proposal written over thirty years ago, the committee rearticulated and edited the description, philosophical perspective, and core learning outcomes of the program to meet the twenty-first century goals of Africana Studies as a discipline. The current proposal reads:

Philosophical Perspective

African peoples and cultures remain today as diverse and dynamic as during ancient times. The relationship of these peoples and cultures to the broader world community is most evident in the presence of people of African descent in nation states in the Americas, such as the U.S.A and Brazil. As in the past, socio-political, and economic realities in the West and in Africa continue to influence social, economic, and political organization at both national and international levels. Consequently, a greater understanding and appreciation of the interplay between these forces can serve as a foundation for effective problem analysis and solution. A focused, collective, and centralized body of information in this area will be an invaluable resource for Tennessee State University and the State of Tennessee.

An academically based African-centered program of study will be designed to foster intellectual inquiry into the origin, evolution, and development of the peoples of Africa and the African Diaspora and the discipline of Africana Studies. The cultural, spiritual, political, social, and economic conditions of these people will be the fundamental subject matter of this program. Guided by scientific methodologies of inquiry the program will help students to develop analytical skills based in both theoretical and empirical knowledge. Program graduates will be disciplinary scholars able to conduct empirical research and apply their findings to the cultural, political, social, and economic conditions of the peoples of Africa and the African Diaspora.

Core Learning Outcomes

Students completing the B.S. in Africana Studies will be able to:

- demonstrate verbally and in writing an understanding of the nature and purpose of knowledge production and utilization, with special attention to

indigenous African and diasporic worldview, epistemologies, and systems of knowledge;

- utilize an African-informed, African-centered epistemology; appreciate the centrality of Africa in world civilization, and an understanding of the historic, cultural, linguistic, and spiritual forces that shape the place of African and Diasporan people in today's world;
- use Africana social theories, worldview and paradigms to collect, measure, organize, analyze and synthesize data on major challenges facing Africana people, and to create compelling presentations that advance reasonable solutions;
- employ self-reflection, evaluation, and ethical reasoning and action;
- pursue graduate and professional education; and
- pursue careers having substantial contact with people of African descent, such as ambassadors to African countries, translators for the United Nations, lawyers, or serving locally as public servants, policy makers, community leaders, and teachers in African American communities.²⁰

The committee also had to make certain concessions. First, as a land-grant university, TSU is one of the HBCUs that has been underfunded through the withholding of state funds over the course of decades.²¹ This has cascaded down into programs and has resulted in fewer hires, as well as lower pay and benefits. For Africana Studies, because of limited university funding, the degree program will remain in the Department of History, Geography, Political Science and Africana Studies; Africana Studies will not be reinstated as an autonomous department at this time, although administration remains positive about this possibility in the future.

Second, faculty is limited. There are currently two tenure/tenure-track faculty, Wosene Yefru and Sekhmet Maat, while Andrea Ringer and Gashaw Bekele serve as affiliate faculty; Ringer will continue to teach courses on the African Diaspora and the Caribbean, and Bekele will continue his course on African geography. History faculty

K.T. Ewing and Learotha Williams Jr., who served on the Africana Studies Committee, will become affiliate faculty, who will teach required core African American history courses for the Africana major; these courses are housed in the history program. It is important to note, however, that most of the courses for the major, unlike many Africana programs at HBCUs, remain housed within the Africana Studies program. Continuing disciplinary autonomy is consistent with the wishes of the original Africana Studies Council and the founding core faculty. Unfortunately, because of limited university funding, administration has promised to gradually hire at least two tenure-track faculty over the course of the next four academic years. Administration is confident that as the number of majors increase, more tenure track Africana faculty will be hired.

Third, the initial 1994 curriculum included a six-credit language requirement as part of the general education core. This requirement eventually became part of the major core requirements, like Introduction to Africana Studies, for instance. As mentioned above, these languages were Arabic, Kiswahili, and Yoruba. The new major will not have a language requirement because of limited funding for language instructors at this time.

New Directions

The new iteration of the Africana Studies major at TSU is responsive to the current political and social environment of HBCUs and the uniqueness of its students despite these curricular limitations and faculty adjustments. Like other tenured/tenure track faculty in the College of Liberal Arts at TSU, core Africana faculty teach a 4/4 course load and offer year-round courses to students during the summer. Courses are also offered during TSU's designated "extreme break" courses; these sessions run for one week during Spring Break and Winter Break. Given the varied offerings, students will have timely access to courses comprising the new thirty-six credit major that builds upon the expertise of existing Africana core and affiliated faculty at TSU. Faculty also anticipate new directions in scholarship as the program expands. Therefore, pulling from the dynamic courses created by the initial Africana Studies Council and courses created by core faculty between 1994 and 2017, the proposed twenty-one credit major core courses include:

AFAS 2010: Introduction to Africana Studies
 AFAS 2020: Survey of Africa or AFAS 4120: Classical African Civilizations
 AFAS 2030: African Diaspora
 HIST 2700: The African American Experience or
 HIST 4910: Afro-American History I or HIST 4920: Afro-American
 History II
 AFAS 4500: Research Methods
 AFAS 4510: Africana Studies Internship
 AFAS 4900: Senior Project

As mentioned above, the initial degree program did not have concentrations. Students will now be able to complete the remaining fifteen credits from the following new concentrations that were constructed from existing courses:

- *Africana Community and Family Studies*- This concentration offers a holistic approach to studying Africana societies, particularly within family units. Students will examine expansive approaches to family and community, including a new course on the connective histories of food, health, and medicine and a new course on Africana genders and sexualities. This concentration will pair well with several minor concentrations offered at TSU and students are furthermore prepared for graduate studies in Africana Studies, Women, Genders and Sexualities Studies, Sociology, Public Health, Urban Studies, and Social Work. Courses already available include:

AFAS 3000: African Male: Identity, Culture, and Expressions
 AFAS 3050: African Female: Identity, Socialization, and Status
 AFAS 3600: African Extended Family
 AFAS 3620: The African American Family
 AFAS 3650: The African American Community

- *African Cosmology, Ontology, and Psychology*- Students in this concentration will be immersed in African-centered critical thinking, with an emphasis on African spiritual philosophy and African psychology. Several new courses in this concentration will provide a more expansive study than the previous

iteration of the major and aligns with students who wish to minor in Psychology, Philosophy, or Social Work. The purpose of this concentration is for students learn about African people's contributions to civilization and master African approaches to knowledge. One of the major questions that this concentration seek to address is: what role can a student's understanding of African cosmology, ontology, and ways of knowing, play in one's ability to think critically about oneself, community, and healing modalities? Courses already available include:

AFAS 4120: Classical African Civilization

AFAS 3100: Psychological Impact of Enslavement and Colonization

AFAS 3400: African Spiritual Philosophy I

AFAS 3800: African Spiritual Philosophy II

AFAS 4320: Spiritual Empowerment and Transformation

- *African Political Thought and Social Justice*- This concentration offers students several new course options that respond to issues of inequity and injustice. It grounds students in historical analysis of the Black radical tradition, Black nationalism, and pan Africanism, and introduces students to regional studies of spaces in the Diaspora like the Caribbean, and African-centered analyses of connective political economies. It draws on existing service-learning courses at TSU, including the creation of new courses on the prison industrial complex, the Black Lives Matter movement and Africana queer politics. This concentration prepares students for a minor and professional and graduate training in law, political science, journalism and for other social justice and political career paths. Courses already available include:

AFAS 3860: Caribbean Societies and Modernization

AFAS 3900: Black Nationalism

AFAS 3920: Post Independent Africa

AFAS 4000: Political Economy of African Nations

AFAS 4070: Political Economy of the African American Community

AFAS 4200: Media, Social Change and Mass Empowerment

The reinvented major will continue to require the creation of several new courses. As mentioned above, the original department in the 1990s offered several African languages for students, including Yoruba and Kiswahili. Within the next few years, we hope to provide similar offerings that can prepare students for careers in the state department and other government positions. We will also build upon the existing research methods course from the original program by offering digital humanities and eBlack studies projects for students. Several students in the current Africana program have already worked on the previously mentioned grant-funded projects. These opportunities allow students to get hands-on experience with community engagement during the course of their degree. Currently used books in the program, including Wosene Yefru's third publication, *The Social Accounting Matrix for Reparations: College Handbook for Students for Social Justice and Reparation*, have provided current Africana Studies minors with foundational knowledge to pursue social justice projects and engage with communities in equitable ways. Currently, there is not an efficient way to double major or double minor at TSU. We would anticipate that the development of these options for students would potentially increase the number of Africana Studies majors.

Conclusion

The revived Africana Studies major at TSU is part of a longer history of struggle for recognition as a distinct academic discipline. While still situated in a larger academic department, the program offers critical African-centered pedagogy to students and African-centered methodology to larger collaborative projects. Moreover, it's critical to the university's mission to both its students and the larger communities in which it is situated. The program's long history, from an origin begun through protest, a restructuring that managed to get an increase in student interest, and the eventual revival demonstrates that Africana programs can and should be dynamic and responsive.

The reemergence of the major also offers a blueprint for how Africana programs can retain their core philosophy, curriculum, and methodologies and still evolve to meet student needs. But that blueprint is one that cannot be completely replicated in the current moment at other schools. Instead, the concentrations and course offerings in the revived program are uniquely situated at an HBCU campus,

where most of the students in Africana Studies, as well as on campus, are of African descent. Even more so, they are uniquely created for TSU's needs. Expanding the Africana political and social justice concentration, for example, offers a new and needed option for students given both the national climate as well as TSU's physical location in the zip code with one of the highest incarceration rates. As the program begins with its first cohort of majors, TSU will once again work toward graduating students with a social justice consciousness grounded in the experience of Africana people.

Notes

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