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ARTICLE

What Is Black Studies?

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Abstract

Black studies emerged in the late 1960s from student-led activism demanding the inclusion of African American history, culture, and intellectual traditions within higher education. Initially rooted in struggles for racial justice, the field has developed into a dynamic, interdisciplinary discipline that draws from Black feminism, history, literature, sociology, psychology, the arts, and religious studies to examine Black life and thought. This article traces the historical origins of Black studies and highlights its commitment to interrogating systems of oppression while affirming cultural agency and resilience. Today, Black studies remains vibrant but faces significant challenges. Many programs have expanded to include African diaspora and global perspectives, responding to issues such as systemic racism, migration, and transnational activism. At the same time, departments often struggle with limited funding, institutional marginalization, and pressures to justify their relevance amid shifting educational priorities. The rise of digital scholarship and social media has opened new opportunities for research and community engagement, yet these advances also demand resources and adaptability. Despite these obstacles, Black studies continues to serve as a transformative space for critical inquiry and social change, fostering dialogue that connects academic study to real-world struggles for justice and equity.

Keywords: African diaspora; Black aesthetics; Black radical tradition; intersectionality; systemic inequality

Black studies emerged from the intellectual energy and political urgency of the Black freedom movement during the 1950s and 1960s, particularly the era of Black power. It did not develop as a traditional academic discipline shaped by gradual scholarly refinement or institutional planning. Instead, it was born of struggle—of student protest, community activism, and a deep dissatisfaction with the absence of Black histories, cultures, and perspectives in higher education. Across American college campuses, African American students began demanding that universities recognize their histories not as marginal additions but as central components of American and global knowledge.

At San Francisco State College, now San Francisco State University, students took the lead in 1966 in building one of the first Black studies programs, which rested on the development of experimental courses that blended academic learning with community engagement. They proclaimed "that all Black Studies courses being taught through various other departments be immediately part of the Black Studies Department and that all the instructors in this

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department receive fulltime pay" as well as that all the courses were linked to the community. This approach did not just stay in the classroom. It also helped spark the early political activism of figures like Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture) and Claude Brown, who went on to play important roles in the Black power movement. Students were very clear about what they wanted. They demanded a full Department of Black Studies, one that could offer a bachelor's degree and, just as importantly, have control over its own leadership, hiring, and direction. For them, this wasn't just about adding classes. The absence of Black voices in the curriculum reflected a much bigger issue: Universities had long overlooked and undervalued their perspectives. Through organizing, protests, and collective action, students made it clear that education should reflect who they were and what they had experienced, rooted in the concept of "Black Power," noted in Kwame Ture's 1966 "Say It Plain" speech that proclaimed "in order to get out of that oppression one must wield the group power that one has, not the individual power which this country then sets the criteria under which a man may come into it."[1]

Students were explicit in their demands: They called for a full Department of Black Studies with the authority to grant degrees, hire faculty, and determine its own academic direction. This was not merely about curricular reform. Students recognized that the exclusion of Black voices from academia reflected broader systems of racial marginalization, and they sought to transform those systems from within.[2]

1. Shaping a new field of study

Following years of student activism—including walkouts, teach-ins, and negotiations—universities began to respond.[3] What emerged was a new academic field, one that challenged traditional disciplinary boundaries and redefined what legitimate knowledge could look like. A defining feature of the field was its emphasis on lived experience.[4] Everyday life—work, family, religion, music, politics and education—became central objects of study. Early programs also grew out of real relationships with local Black communities. At the City College of New York, Leonard Jefferies joined the faculty not long after a major 1968 student protest—one led by both students and community members—that pushed for a more relevant curriculum, captured in the "Support the Five Demands" flyer, which proclaimed, "This school will be controlled by the community, students, and faculty."[5] Faculty brought community elders into the classroom to share oral histories, while students got involved in local projects and carried those experiences back into their coursework. Activism shaped what was taught far more than tradition did, and that's what made Black studies feel dynamic, responsive, and accountable from the very beginning.

2. The interdisciplinary heart of Black studies

From its inception, Black studies has been intentionally interdisciplinary, drawing from multiple fields to construct a fuller and more accurate account of Black life. History provided the foundation by recovering narratives of Africa, enslavement, resistance, and diaspora

[1] Carmichael (Kwame Ture) 1966.

[2] Black Student Union and Third World Liberation Front 1968; Carmichael 1966; City College of New York Student Coalition 1968; Jackson 2023, 3–5, 18; The Five Demands: The Student Protest and Takeover of 1969 2026.

[3] Franklin 2003; Rogers 2012.

[4] Ransby 2008.

[5] City College of New York Student Coalition 1968; The Five Demands: The Student Protest and Takeover of 1969 2026.

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communities that had been ignored or distorted, including stories that did not make it into the usual textbooks, such as Phillis Wheatley's poem "To the Right Honorable William, Earl of Dartmouth," where she writes, "No longer shall thou dread the iron chain...," a powerful reminder of both oppression and the longing for freedom. Sociology and political science examined systems of inequality and power, revealing how institutions shape racial hierarchies, showing the bigger structures at work, examining how racism was built into policies, institutions, and everyday decisions, and how identity and community took shape within those realities. Literature, music, and cultural studies elevated Black expressive culture as a legitimate and vital form of knowledge production. Philosophy, religion, and intellectual history explored questions of ethics, belief, identity, worldview, and eventually Black feminism, while fields such as economics, education, and health examined the material conditions shaping Black communities.[6] Black studies does not only critique systems of power. It also celebrates creativity, resilience, and cultural achievement. It acknowledges struggle while also honoring joy, beauty, and survival. This balance between critique and celebration is essential to its intellectual identity.[7]

3. Expanding beyond the United States

As Black studies developed, it expanded beyond a national framework to embrace a global perspective. Scholars began tracing connections across the African diaspora, linking Black communities in Africa, the Caribbean, Latin America, Europe, and beyond. This shift revealed shared histories of migration, resistance, cultural exchange, and political struggle. This global orientation enriched the field rather than diluting it. It demonstrated that Black identity is not monolithic but shaped by diverse cultural, linguistic, and historical contexts. Figures such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Paul Robeson, Harriet Jacobs, Angela Davis, and Toni Morrison illustrate the transnational dimensions of Black intellectual life. Their work reflects both local struggles and global solidarities.

Diasporic perspectives emphasize the fluidity of identity and the interconnectedness of Black experiences worldwide. As W.E.B. DuBois stated in his 1900 Westminster, London, speech, "Let the nations of the world respect the integrity and independence of the free Negro states of Abyssinia, Liberia, Haiti, and the rest, and let the inhabitants of these states, the independent tribes of Africa, the Negroes of the West Indies and America." This same sentiment was echoed by activist and actor Paul Robeson about fifty years later, when he proclaimed that for people of color "history is just one tool to sharpen our understanding of our world." Together, DuBois and Robeson highlight how ideas, art, and political movements travel across borders, creating networks of solidarity that transcend geography. In doing so, Black studies offers a more comprehensive understanding of belonging and global interdependence.[8]

4. The challenges facing Black studies today

Despite its intellectual contributions, Black studies continues to face institutional challenges. Many programs remain underfunded, understaffed, or marginalized within

[6] San Francisco State Strike Collection; Additionally, here some of the most recent and comprehensive books on the topic of Black Studies: Aldridge and Young 2000; Anderson 1993; Black Student Union and Third World Liberation Front 1968; Davidson 2021; Jackson 2023; Karenga 2000.

[7] Bracey and Sinha 2004, 52; Jackson 2023, 3–9; 20–25.

[8] For example, see Du Bois 1900; Hurston 1935; Jackson 2023, 20–27; Robeson 1949.

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universities. Faculty often find themselves in the position of having to justify the legitimacy of their field to administrators who may not fully understand its significance.

Broader trends in higher education have also contributed to these challenges. The increasing emphasis on vocational training and market-driven disciplines often sidelines humanities and social justice-oriented fields. Yet this framing overlooks the essential skills Black studies develops: critical thinking, ethical reasoning, communication, and civic engagement.

Political misunderstandings further complicate the field's position. Black studies is sometimes mischaracterized as divisive, when in fact its purpose is to foster understanding, dialogue, and critical engagement with history and society or, as Malcolm X noted in his April 1964 speech titled "The Ballot or the Bullet," one must take a political perspective where one understands "the politics of our community, and we must know what politics is supposed to produce." Thus, Black studies must continue to respond to these challenges by producing rigorous scholarship and demonstrating the value of inclusive and historically grounded education.[9]

5. The digital landscape: New tools, new possibilities

The digital age has opened new possibilities for Black studies. Online archives provide unprecedented access to historical documents, while digital storytelling tools allow for innovative forms of scholarship that combine text, audio, and visual media. Virtual classrooms and global collaborations expand the reach of Black studies beyond physical campuses. For example, online archives such as the Schomburg Center Digital Collections, the Library of Congress, and projects like *Documenting the American South* provide students and researchers with immediate access to photographs, oral histories, newspapers, slave narratives, and manuscripts that once required extensive travel to consult.

Social media has become a big part of this shift, too. It is a powerful way to connect scholarship with activism in real time, amplify Black voices, and share ideas far beyond academic journals. A single video post can spark conversations, reading groups, or community activism. For instance, platforms such as X, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube allow ideas developed within Black studies to circulate far beyond academic journals and conference rooms. Historians, sociologists, legal scholars, and activists share research findings, historical documents, and educational videos with audiences numbering in the millions. Without question, during movements such as Black Lives Matter, social media provided spaces where scholarship and activism intersected in real time.

The field also fosters imagination. It encourages students and scholars to envision new futures grounded in knowledge, empathy, and collaboration. The field also fosters imagination. It encourages students and scholars to envision new futures grounded in knowledge, empathy, and collaboration. Yet, as Kimberlé Crenshaw reminds us, the ability to imagine just futures depends upon how we define present challenges, and understanding the structures that produce inequality is therefore essential to envisioning meaningful and lasting change.[10]

[9] Jackson 2023, 20–27; Malcolm 1964.
[10] Crenshaw 1989, 139–67, 2026.

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6. Why Black studies still matters deeply

At its core, Black studies is about connecting academic ideas to real life. It gives students the tools to think about identity, justice, and community, not just in theory but in the choices that they make every day. It encourages them to really look at the world around them, ask deeper questions, and recognize how the past is always present in what we see and experience now.

It is also a field that affirms cultural agency and resilience. It highlights creativity, music that heals, art that challenges, spirituality that sustains, and stories that carry wisdom across generations. At the same time, it makes clear that there is no single Black experience. That range and diversity matter, especially for students who may not often see their own lives and communities reflected in the classroom. For many, that recognition can be powerful, even transformative.

And maybe most importantly, Black studies creates space to imagine new futures. It invites people to dream—but to do so responsibly, grounding those dreams in knowledge, empathy, and collaboration. Whether it's in seminars, community projects, or those late-night conversations that keep going, students come to see that imagination is not just abstract—it's something you practice. And when people practice it together, it can open up new possibilities for change. At the end of the day, the field is also about tracing the history of its many disciplines and understanding how they have helped empower African Americans to challenge the status quo and fight for rights that others often take for granted. More importantly, as scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, whose words remind us, "When we don't frame the problem correctly, we don't frame the solution correctly."[11]

7. The future of the field

Looking ahead, the future of Black Studies depends on sustained institutional support and meaningful investment. This includes funding, faculty development, interdisciplinary collaboration, and strong community partnerships. Equally important is recognizing mentorship and advising as central components of the field's success.

Ultimately, Black studies will continue to thrive as long as it remains connected to the communities that shaped it. Additionally, the institutional presence of Black Studies today is not incidental. It is the result of an organized student struggle that demanded permanence rather than inclusion alone—echoing their insistence that Black and Brown students who argued that we "will know our heroes and culture that has been denied by the present racist society."[12]

Dr. **Eric Jackson** is a distinguished historian, scholar, and academic leader with nearly thirty-five years of experience in higher education. As Professor of History and Black Studies, as well as former Associate Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Northern Kentucky University, he is recognized for his scholarship in African American history, Black Studies, and public history. The award-winning author of more than fifty scholarly publications and several influential books, Dr. Jackson has advanced historical understanding through research, teaching, and community engagement. His expertise extends to documentaries, podcasts, and public lectures, bringing history to broad audiences. Through leadership roles, editorial service, and civic involvement, he continues to promote educational access, cultural preservation, and meaningful dialogue, while expanding the impact and relevance of African American history and Black Studies, as well as the history of Black Americans in Cincinnati.

[11] Crenshaw 1989, 139–67; Jackson 2023, 8–9.

[12] City College of New York Student Coalition 1968; National Council for Black Studies 2025/2026; The Five Demands: The Student Protest and Takeover of 1969, 2026; Wallach 2024.

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