Proposal for Departmental Name Change from African American Studies to Black Studies
Submitted September 28, 2022

Summary
It is proposed to change the name of the Department of African American Studies to the Department of Black Studies. The contemporary idea of Black Studies describes the interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary study of the global-local formations, structures, agencies, discourses, literatures, performances and movements of the African Diaspora in the constitution of the modern world, with critical attention to questions of class, race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, sociality, economics, histories, politics, religions, and cultures.

Proposal
To change the name of the Department of African American Studies to the Department of Black Studies in order to reflect the trajectory of the field as well as the educational and scholarly activities of the Department.

Background
The African American Studies Department has had ongoing conversations about the departmental name for the last 10 to 15 years. On several occasions during that time a Town Hall meeting has taken place on the topic (see attached Notes from Town Hall in 2013). The motivation comes from the fact that the name “African American Studies” privileges the Americas (over Africa, Europe, and other regions) and is most often read to mean the U.S., leaving out Latin America, Canada, and the Caribbean. During 2021-2022 those conversations were re-opened. A short list of readings was circulated to department faculty (see bibliography below). A brief questionnaire sent to current African American Studies majors and minors, PhD students and faculty, as well as to students enrolled in AFAM courses, solicited 151 responses. The basic finding of the questionnaire was that only 36% thought the current name represented the people, content, curriculum, and programming that they wanted to see represented in the department (see attached presentation with survey results). This was followed by an open meeting (March 30, 2022) of faculty and students to discuss the questionnaire results (see attached flyer). About 40 people attended in person and virtually. At that meeting the clear consensus for a new name was ‘Black Studies’.

Vote
The history of the name consideration, the current survey, and the Town Hall meeting were all discussed at the in-person departmental faculty meeting on April 6, 2022. It was moved and seconded to change the name of the department to the Department of Black Studies (or Black Studies Department, interchangeable). The faculty voted 7-0 in favor. Present at the meeting were Marquis Bey, John Márquez, Mary Pattillo, kihana ross, Nikki Spigner, Tracy Vaughn-Manley, Alex Weheliye. Two faculty members were on leave and did not vote, and three faculty members were not present and did not vote. The president of the Graduate Student Association was present for the vote and conveyed strong graduate student support for the name change.

Rationale for the change
The current name ‘African American Studies’ is too US-centric and far from inclusive. It fails to capture the concerns, issues, contexts, and developments globally implicated in the study of Black
populations across the world. Many of these concerns, issues, contexts, and developments were prominent globally in 2020 during the worldwide demonstrations over the police murder of George Floyd. Northwestern has had a long historical association with the idea of Black Studies, particularly since it was the focus of Black students protests in 1968 for the establishment of Black Studies (see excerpt below). Although the current name ‘African American studies’ has tended to function generically in the past as an informal synonym of Black studies, it was too easily associated with Black US studies and has now become a hinderance to signaling the expanding complexity and diversity of Black studies as global and local fields of intellectual investigation.


**Conclusion**
The proposed new name, ‘Black Studies’ captures more effectively and precisely the ongoing scholarly and educational activities of the Department. It will help foster an intellectual hub at Northwestern for global and local discussions of Black Studies. The proposed name change was announced at the department’s 50th Anniversary celebration on May 20, 2022, and was met with a standing ovation (see attached *Daily Northwestern* story).

**Bibliography**


Student Comments from African American Studies Town Hall Meeting  
Tuesday, April 23, 2013

Comments

- “Africana studies” invites people who want to do work on Africa. The phrase was also formulated by someone from Northwestern Univ.
- “African American and Diaspora Studies” is redundant
- There seems to be incongruity with "African American Studies" research on early modernity and Africans in Europe, the focus on one student’s work. So “African American Studies” seems too limiting.
- African Diaspora Studies" or "Black Studies" would be best
- Let’s go with “African American Studies”. Since this is what the department has been doing, then it is not limiting by virtue of the fact that the department has been carrying on its work
- "Black Diaspora" seems more universal or encompassing than “African American” and more so even than "Black Studies"
- Let’s go with “Black Diaspora Studies.” But everyone single one of the proposed terms can be read as broad or limiting. They can be read as circumscribed. “Black” is advantageous because it denotes racial and racializing. "Africa/n" does not do this. I.e., studying race and racism is central to what we do. In other words, racial blackness is key here and is signified by this. (Think of C.L.R. James’s Black Jacobins and Du Bois’s Souls of Black Folk). The past of Black Studies is political dimensions, and sedimentation of the past. “Black Diaspora Studies” captures this.
- Not Black Diaspora studies because it denotes a specific kind of scholarship. Not all of our work is diaspora-based. "Black" is black life wherever that may be, and not the same thing as Diaspora. “So, African American and Diaspora studies.”
- There is a politics of diaspora that seems to imply comparative approaches and method. This does not characterize what we do, and this becomes an issue of misrepresentation on the job market.
- Diaspora is not a static phenomenon. This term addresses people in the US and everywhere else. And it does not have to be comparative.
- Let’s go with “Black Studies or Africana studies” because Blackness is diasporic. “Black Diaspora Studies” is also redundant because Black is already Diasporic.
- This is an intellectual red herring. This field is not just about the topic of study. It is also a methodology and an intellectual framework. This field of course has an origin in the 1960s. What really matters is the intellectual framework, method, etc. that is in the execution. Asian American Studies has endured these same debates. One book entitled In Defense of Asian American Studies critiques the tendency to disidentify with Asian Americans that inheres in this move to “diaspora.” NYU has an Africana studies program and the department has suffered lots of divisions.
- I like "Black Studies" because it is one term that speaks to strengths of faculty presently and points to future possibilities. “African Diaspora” implies a hodge podge without rigor. The currency or connotations of “Black Studies” can be changed and redefined. “African Diaspora studies” would look different. “Black Diaspora studies” would seem to require more hiring lines.
We should distinguish between what we do and the name of the discipline. “Black Diaspora and African Diaspora studies” “Black Studies” because it is broad enough to encompass more than the African diaspora.

I like “Black Studies” or “Africana Studies” = because I always wondered what is African's role in Black Studies. I like the purposeful connection between the continent and the diaspora.

“African American Studies” is too limiting. Maybe “Black Studies” and “Black Diaspora” studies. “Black Studies” conjures up a time period of robust political engagement and spirited critiques of power.

Considering the centrality of racial blackness to what we do, I prefer "Black Studies". “Black Diaspora Studies” is redundant because Black is already diasporic

I like “Black studies.”

I think “Africana” or “Black Studies” make us more marketable

“Black Studies” will get read negatively as a throwback to earlier time.

I like “Black Studies” because Black is already a diaspora term.

We all don't have the same audience, so when we think about the issue of marketability and hiring, we should not assume we have the same audience in mind.

I like “Africana studies” and think it works well. I do not like "diaspora" in the name because it implies comparative studies. Also, “Black Studies” will not immediately be read legibly with complexity.

Branding is not what we should be trying to do. Branding implies marketing. We should be concerned with intellectual work.

Most of us are here to get jobs, so it actually does matter that we attend to issues of marketing. We cannot disentangle issues of "branding" from our intellectual projects.

Regarding marketing and hiring issues, the departmental name is not such a big deal because the degree is a NU degree.

These names have changed so much! We need staying power. We should not change the name because of every new disciplinary trend.

Diaspora implies knowing a lot about Blacks everywhere.

“African American Studies” does not imply a global purview.

The best description is “Black Studies” but most marketable is “African American and Diaspora Studies.”

So, I think we should consider African American and Diaspora Studies because of its legibility on the market. [That's the one I objected to at first.] Obviously, due to our own personal preferences and politics the name game will go on forever, but if the point is really about marketability, then “African American and Diaspora Studies” captures that regardless of our own personal identities.
AFAM DEPARTMENT NAME SURVEY

Winter 2022
### Survey Responses by Affiliation

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**Takeaway:**

Undergraduate course takers were the largest response group.
Does the department name “African American Studies” represent the people, content, curriculum, and programming as the department currently exists?

Takeaway:
Pretty even split on current fit of African American Studies.
DOES THE DEPARTMENT NAME “AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDIES” REPRESENT THE PEOPLE, CONTENT, CURRICULUM, AND PROGRAMMING THAT YOU WANT TO SEE?

Takeaway:
More respondents see lack of fit between current name and what they want to see, but still not > 50%.

![Bar Chart]

- YES: 36%
- NO: 48%
- DK: 16%
Takeaway:
Undergraduates are more likely than faculty or graduate students to see fit between current name and what they want to see.
**Mean Ranking of Name “You Think Is Best for the Department.”**

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<td>African American Studies</td>
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**Takeaway:**

Black Studies is on average the preferred name.
**Ranking by Means of Name “You Think is Best for the Department,” by Affiliation**

**Takeaway:**

The preferred name rankings are similar across affiliations, with the exception of undergraduate course takers.

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**Takeaway:**

Black Studies is most likely to be ranked #1, but not by a majority of respondents.
Takeaway:

Black Studies is most likely to be ranked #1 by AFAM PhD students and least likely by undergraduate course takers.
• “I have long felt that African American studies is fraught in that it only articulates one element of global black thought, history, culture and struggle. I have also been affiliated with an Africana Studies department in the past and found it to be equally fraught. Of all the iterations I have heard the one that most resonates with my own way of thinking is Black and African Diaspora Studies.” – AFAM Faculty/Affiliate

• “Any effort to decenter the curriculum and its name from the Euro-American context to make it wholistic of blackness around the world will be appreciated” – Graduate Course Taker

• “…I feel Black Studies is more representative of the scope of Blackness both in the US and globally and allows Black students to feel a more personal connection to the program as a whole.” – Undergrad major/minor

• “Critical Black Studies” – AFAM PhD Student
“I really don't like the last four options at all; they are dated (black studies, Africana studies) or confusing (African diaspora studies vs African Studies). I also think that renaming is so annoying. The name is meaningless if the work isn't being done. The work imbues the name with meaning. We also have to think about where and how our PhD students will be placed in the job market. Why is this a conversation now? Is this the most important conversation we could be having right now?” --AFAM Core/Affiliate Faculty

“Unless the Department is planning to merge with the African Studies Department, don't change the name.” – Undergrad Course Taker

“Should prolly just leave it” – Undergrad major/minor
Join the African American Studies Department for a

*Groundings* Session:

What Should We Be Named?

**March 30, 2022 5:00 PM**

*(with dinner served)*

The African American Studies Department has had ongoing conversations about the departmental name and if it represents the work we do and the work we want to do. Recent survey results, which will be used for discussion at the event, show that the decision is not so straightforward. Changing the department name is a big deal, so being slow, deliberative, and in community is a good thing. Join us for a "groundings" session as we continue that dialogue. In 1969, the Caribbean scholar/activist Walter Rodney published *The Groundings with My Brothers*. He wrote: "Because that is Black Power, that is one of the elements, a sitting-down together to reason, to 'ground' as the brothers say. We have to 'ground together'" (p. 67). So, let's sit down to ground about our department name, what (and who) it represents and if and why it matters.

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In-Person Registration


Zoom Registration

African American Studies faculty vote to rename department Black Studies, pending University approval

Maia Pandey, Campus Editor

African American Studies faculty voted unanimously on April 6 to change the department’s name to Black Studies, department chair Mary Pattillo told The Daily Monday.

In accordance with Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences rules for renaming a department, the change could take about a year to be finalized, Pattillo said in an email to The Daily. The department must first submit a formal proposal to Weinberg Dean Adrian Randolph, who will review it and put it on the college’s faculty meeting agenda for readings and a vote. If the dean and faculty support the proposal, it will be submitted to the University provost and president.

Pattillo said conversations about a renaming have been ongoing for the past 10 to 15 years, with the department hosting a town hall every couple of years on the topic. She added that when the department announced the plans for a name change at its 50th anniversary celebration Friday, attendees responded with a standing ovation.

“The motivation comes from the fact that the name ‘African American Studies’ privileges the Americas (over Africa, Europe, and other regions) and is most often read to mean the U.S., leaving out Latin America, Canada, and the Caribbean,” Pattillo said in the email.

To gauge community input, Pattillo said she sent out a survey this year to current African American Studies majors and minors, graduate students, faculty and students enrolled in the department’s courses. Of 151 respondents, only 36% thought the current name represented the people, content and curriculum of the department, Pattillo said.

The department hosted a session on March 30 to discuss these survey results, attended by about 40 people in-person and virtually, Pattillo said.

“At that meeting the clear consensus for a new name was Black Studies,” she said. “This name better reflects what many Black people call ourselves, and it encompasses the entirety of the Black Diaspora.”

The name is also more reflective of the 1968 demands of student activists for “a Black Studies course,” Pattillo said. These demands, issued in the aftermath of the Bursar’s Office Takeover, led to the creation of the department.

Email: maiapandey@u.northwestern.edu

Twitter: @maiapandey

Related Stories:
— African American Studies department commemorates 50th anniversary