I first became aware of black studies as an undergraduate at the University of California at Berkeley in the early 1990s. At the time, students were pushing for a multiculturalism requirement. The purpose was to instill in undergraduates a working knowledge of the history and culture of various American ethnic groups. In response to student activism, Berkeley became one of the first major universities to require undergraduates to take a course addressing multiple American ethnic groups. Students could take ethnic studies courses to satisfy the requirement, which drew my attention to the fact that Berkeley had had programs such as black studies for decades.

Black studies did not cross my mind again for years, until I enrolled in the sociology doctoral program at the University of Chicago. During my second year, I joined a small group study course headed by Charles Bidwell and Robert Dreeben, two sociologists of education who have spent decades thinking about how schools and colleges are organized. One of the readings was Bourdieu and Passeron’s *Reproduction in Education, Culture, and Society*. Their main point is simple: an educational institution’s role is to re-create the status order or class structure that already characterizes society. This perspective has a long pedigree in the Western intellectual tradition, going back to Paolo Freire, Emile Durkheim, and Karl Marx.

This analysis struck me as wrong, or at the very least seriously incomplete, and Berkeley provided a great counterexample. Rather than just being a place where elites came to study and reinforce their position, Berkeley attracted a great deal of conflict. It is true that schools certify social elites, but it is also true that schools are the focus of political disputes. Simply walk through Berkeley’s Sproul Plaza on a busy day early in the fall semester. A dozen groups of all stripes can be seen complaining about some issue or another. Many of them want new courses taught and new professors hired. Students frequently organize protests for ethnic studies.

I came to realize that many political movements target institutions of higher
education. Conservative Christians want creationism taught; multiculturalists want ethnic studies; homosexual activists want gay and lesbian studies; progressives want social work training; and evangelicals have opened their own colleges. In the post-9/11 era, we have become acutely aware that radical Islamists target college students in Europe and run their own religious colleges in Afghanistan and Iran. Higher education does not seem to be completely about reinforcing the status quo. In fact, the highly visible and public position of universities invites dissent and conflict.

My view is that American higher education goes through phases of conflict and consensus, as does any social institution. Much of the time, schools reproduce the status quo, just as Bourdieu and Passeron said. Colleges, by themselves, do not change fundamental social and economic realities. The wealthiest families are the ones most able to take advantage of America’s outstanding colleges and universities. As a wistful Bill Murray tells a chapel full of wealthy private school boys in the film *Rushmore*, “You were born rich, and you’re going to stay rich.” But talented people of humble origins often scramble their way up to good colleges and graduate schools; an ambitious Bill Clinton made it to Georgetown and Oxford. America’s relatively open higher education system means that the talented and the wealthy will be concentrated in a relatively few schools, creating a future society with leaders who started their careers in the same institutions.

At the same time, the openness of America’s colleges encourages them to be the focus of political struggles and social change. People can complain and demand things. Every university executive knows that part of the job is fending off political attacks. This is not to say that complainers will always be heard, but outsiders can affect university agendas in many ways. People can literally show up and protest. They can influence students and professors. They can lobby trustees and the political appointees who govern public universities. They can give money to a university so that a new research center will be opened or a chair in their favorite subject will be established. Universities can even become involved in electoral politics, such as when Ward Connerly targeted the University of California through an anti-affirmative action referendum. All the direct and indirect opportunities for influence mean that the university becomes a place where interests clash and politics comes to the forefront. Rather than just a rubber stamp for people on the way to success, the university is often the stage for intense political struggle.

That is how I came back to thinking about black studies. I realized that much
more could be said about black studies and how it emerged from the movements of the 1960s. One could thoroughly explore how politics permeates the university and disrupts the status quo. There are important questions about how bureaucracies respond to social movements that need answers. There were quite a few historical accounts of ethnic studies, and black studies in particular, but few researchers had considered how black studies was the outcome of movement politics and how the field was assimilated into the higher education system. I was surprised to find that, aside from occasional essays by professors about the state of black studies programs and occasional policy reports by the National Council for Black Studies, very little writing had a sustained focus on black studies’ development as an educational institution. In short, black studies provided an opportunity to examine how universities responded to serious political challenges and developed new academic disciplines. This book should be considered a very skeptical response to Bourdieu and Passeron.

This leads to my reasons for selecting black studies as my professional concern. It is said that one’s dissertation topic determines one’s academic identity, so it is best to pick wisely. This is surely an exaggeration, but it contains a kernel of truth. The dissertation is the first serious, long-term research project for most academics. Job placement and initial publication records depend on having an interesting and competently executed dissertation. So why did I choose this topic?

From a professional standpoint, I felt that a university’s response to political movements was a topic that needed more attention, and I believed I had the right temperament and skills for the job. I am patient enough to search through archives and find obscure data sets. One of my virtues is believing that something lost can be found. The project would require statistical analysis and attention to historical narrative, skills that I wished to develop as a social scientist.

The project’s other attraction is intellectual and political. I do not mean that I selected this project because I am African American, which I am not, or that I have close personal connections to the civil rights or black power movements; I do not. Instead, I felt compelled to work on this project because contemporary sociology too often focuses on the sources and consequences of an ethnic minority’s inferior status. Rarely does an article appear in a major sociological journal in which ethnic minorities build institutions and act as the primary authors of their lives. Often, sociological discourse depicts people of color as victims of discrimination, punishment, and misunderstanding.

This book starts from a different point of view. It is about African Ameri-
cans demanding education on their own terms. It is about talented and intel-
ligent people of all races struggling over ethnic identity in the academy. It is
about African Americans with Ph.D.’s, Ivy League degrees, and even a Nobel
Prize. Black students and intellectuals have engaged in an amazing enterprise,
the construction of an entirely new academic discipline. This struggle deserves
sustained analysis and dispassionate inquiry.

That is the story of why this book was written, and it reflects my personal
view. Please read this book and develop your own opinions. Except for inter-
views and survey data that I collected, most of the sources used are in the pub-
lic domain, and they deserve more analysis. There is a great deal about the soci-
ology and history of black studies that I do not cover because my main concern
is the institutional development of the field. To mention just a few of the major
topics deserving more attention: recruitment into the black studies major, the
distinctive features of black studies students, the curriculum, gender in black
studies, classroom dynamics, the effects of the black studies major on students’
lives, sociological analyses of varying schools of thought within black studies
such as black Marxism and Afrocentrism, and the distinctive role of black stud-
ies at liberal arts colleges. There is already much good work on these topics, but
more can be done. I hope future researchers can fill the holes in my study and
find new ways of looking at things. So thank you, dear reader, for getting to this
point, and may you enjoy the rest of the book.