From Black Power to Black Studies

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From Black Power to Black Studies: How a Radical Social Movement Became an Academic Discipline.


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Black studies’ history is remarkable because its establishment in 1968 was a sudden event. Before the 1960s, there was a substantial amount of black scholarship and intellectual work, but it was rarely taught in college courses. Since the nineteenth century, black intellectuals had developed a corpus of historical, literary, and sociological work, but few colleges and universities explicitly dedicated themselves to this body of knowledge. But during the 1960s, a number of events, such as the civil rights mobilization, encouraged students and intellectuals to demand the institutionalization of knowledge about black culture. Almost overnight, students were making demands for new academic units as they marched in picket lines and conducted sit-ins. The questions addressed in this chapter are as follows: How did the demand for black studies emerge from the turbulent 1960s? How did social trends of the mid-1960s converge to enable students to effectively shut down college campuses to demand, among other things, black studies programs? What specific tools and ideas did students obtain in 1968 that allowed them to bring a new academic discipline into existence?

To address these questions, I draw from sociological theories of how social movements emerge and press for demands. A key lesson from social movement research is that social change does not emerge from a vacuum. Even when individuals believe that society is moving in the wrong direction or that the state is oppressive or otherwise illegitimate, they do not automatically act together for social change. Instead, social movements emerge from years of planning and
debate among the aggrieved. They feel that not only is their situation unjust, it is also something that can be alleviated through struggle and sacrifice. They form organizations that have multiple functions such as collecting money, providing avenues of communication, and creating a place for people to meet. Social ties between movement participants reinforce shared identities and a commitment to change and are a valuable resource for future action. However, it is not sufficient for a movement to develop the infrastructure for action. A second lesson from movement research is that movement groups must create and exploit opportunities for social change. Even the most well organized and highly motivated groups will find it difficult to change a popular institution or social practice. Events that are beyond the movement’s control might undermine public confidence or otherwise weaken a movement target, allowing challengers to more easily assert their claims. Consider the position of the Bolsheviks in 1916. Had not the First World War completely undermined the tsarist regime and then Kerensky’s government, the Soviet state, as we now understand it, might never have been founded. Without external events disrupting the Russian state’s capacity for internal repression of dissidents, the Bolsheviks might have been completely stifled, turning out to be a small footnote in early twentieth-century Russian history. Thus, the important lesson from social movement research is that movements often need political opportunities and a substantial level of internal development.

This perspective, which emphasizes both a movement’s internal development and its political context, suggests that the demands for black studies were made possible by broader trends of desegregation in America, the rise of specific grievances leveled at colleges, and the maturation of black political organizations that black students used to launch their campaigns. The current chapter discusses these specific conditions in order to untangle the story of how black studies was made possible by the unique combination of these three trends. First, I discuss the desegregation of college campuses. Without the sudden influx of black students at predominantly white campuses in the mid-1960s, there simply would not have been enough black students to organize mass action. Thus, this chapter begins with a discussion of what college life was like for black students pre—Brown v. Board of Education. Drawing from published biographies and academic research, I discuss the court decisions that allowed black students to matriculate in white colleges in larger numbers, how that changed life for black college students, and the political groups that formed at historically black colleges.
The second part of this chapter discusses the ideological situation circa 1966. After the civil rights movement’s stunning political successes of the mid-1960s, activists and intellectuals became disillusioned with the movement and its emphasis on nonviolence and cooperation with whites. Cultural nationalism grew as a prominent alternative, urging blacks to cultivate a militant orientation and demand institutional control. This discussion leads to the chapter’s third topic, the establishment of nationalist political groups. As early as the 1950s, radical black activists were breaking with the civil rights movement to create groups and clubs in which people could discuss radical avenues for social change. By 1968, these groups had grown into powerful forces within the black community and developed strong ties with the newly formed black student clubs at universities. Together, the demographic shift within the universities, the disillusionment with the civil rights movement, and the organizational abilities of nationalist political groups made the fight for black studies a reality. If any of these three factors had been missing, black studies’ appearance might have been delayed or the field might never have begun at all. The concluding section of this chapter briefly discusses black studies’ “prehistory” to emphasize how the absence of these factors probably delayed the creation of a distinct field of study within universities.

The Foot Soldiers: Desegregation and the Black College Student

The fundamental social change that allowed the creation of black studies was the civil rights movement and the resultant desegregation. The civil rights revolution induced an important demographic change on predominantly white college campuses that set the stage for future struggles. For the first time, there were now enough black students at predominantly white colleges to organize protests. Civil rights also had a profound effect at predominantly black colleges, which became focal points of activism. The fight against segregation inspired students at schools like Howard University to join the struggle and create clubs dedicated to campus reform.

The civil rights movement’s impact on both predominantly white campuses and historically black colleges created a new class of people who were young, energetic, and, most important, well versed in protest tactics. Unsurprisingly, by the late 1960s, these students became the foot soldiers in the struggle for black studies. It would not be an exaggeration to claim that black studies needed
a cohort of black college students in the mid-1960s. Without these black students, there would have been no black student unions or strikes, and the first black studies classes would have been empty. Black nationalist politics would never have had an academic impact if it were not for student activists who brought these ideas to campus. Therefore, it is worth discussing what life was like for black college students before the 1960s and the events that converted them into a potent political force.

Before the 1960s, most black students attended predominantly black colleges. In the period after Reconstruction, American blacks were disenfranchised through legal and extralegal means. The erosion of their voting rights resulted in the nearly immediate loss of their educational opportunities. By the early 1900s, blacks were segregated into low-quality schools, with little chance for higher education.

Despite these obstacles, thousands of black Americans managed to enter colleges and earn degrees. The institutions that accepted them were mostly schools dedicated to serving blacks. Northern religious groups and philanthropists founded colleges such as Howard University, the Hampton Institute, and Tuskegee Institute that enrolled blacks with the goal of giving them marketable job skills. These schools offered professional degrees in law and medicine.

The predominantly black colleges were criticized at the time for their low entrance standards and limited curricula. W. E. B. DuBois was a leading critic who felt these schools should expand their curricula and raise entrance standards. He was not alone. Philanthropists interested in black education issued a 1932 report urging that predominantly black colleges should teach a rigorous curriculum of natural and social sciences, improve the training and pay of teachers, and develop more thorough vocational training. Criticisms also came from within the community of black educators. In 1942, the federal government’s Office of Education responded to calls for a review of black colleges and concluded that while these colleges were adequate, they were not comparable in quality to predominantly white institutions.

H. M. Little draws from a number of historical and biographical sources to piece together a description of student life in early black colleges, which was similar to that in white colleges. Black students participated in fraternity and sorority organizations, student clubs, and intercollegiate athletics. Charles Willie and Donald Cunnigen note that the colleges were usually located in secluded, rural areas in states with legalized segregation. This meant that the colleges had limited opportunities to provide entertainment and had to be self-
supporting. Physical and social isolation, as well as increased self-reliance, resulted in a more sophisticated sense of their political position, and organized political protest emerged on black campuses as early as the 1920s. Once the movement for civil rights formed in the late 1940s and early 1950s, students from black colleges moved from complaining about local institutional arrangements to addressing larger racial issues.

By the early 1960s, some black campuses had become focal points of social activism. Stokely Carmichael’s autobiography describes his experience at Howard University in the early 1960s. During his senior year in high school, Carmichael attended a protest in Washington, D.C. At the rally, he met James Moody, who introduced himself as a member of NAG—the Nonviolent Action Group, a Howard University group affiliated with SNCC. On the bus ride back to New York City, Carmichael resolved the question of where he would go to college. He settled on Howard because he learned that the university has a distinguished history of educating freemen’s children. More important, the university administration tolerated activism. In his autobiography, he says that by enrolling at Howard University, he was really joining NAG.

Upon arriving, Carmichael found much to admire about the campus, such as its links with African heads of state. The image of Howard as catering to the middle class, Carmichael thought, was misleading because it did not acknowledge campus activism: “Howard’s most egregious image in the African community was an elitist enclave, a ‘bougie’ school where [there were] fraternities and sororities, partying, shade consciousness, conspicuous consumption, status anxiety, and class and color snobbery. . . . Was this true? Certainly to some extent, but . . . it was by no means the whole story.” He found that administrators did not discipline or otherwise harass groups like NAG. Carmichael thought that as a federally funded campus, the administration could not afford to formally recognize a group like NAG, but “no one ever told us to stop.” He notes that previous Howard presidents established a tradition of resistance to Congress by not firing HUAC-condemned professors or expelling Howard students who had conducted a short sit-in at the congressional cafeteria in the 1940s.

An active political culture was not limited to Howard. Consider Clayborne Carson’s description of the first lunch counter sit-in at Greensboro, North Carolina. After four students from North Carolina Technical and Agricultural College—a predominantly black school—sat at the lunch counter of a local grocery store, they called for assistance from the student body president and
immediately recruited four more students. The next day, thirty more students arrived. In a few more days, the sit-in had spread to nearby black colleges and attracted the attention of the national media. This quickly led to the birth of SNCC and dozens, possibly hundreds, of other black student organizations.¹¹

Of course, there was consternation over black student organizing on college campuses. For example, in 1964, Felton Clarke, president of Baton Rouge’s Southern University, expelled all student activists, including future black power leader H. Rap Brown. However, Brown’s expulsion illustrates the flourishing of black student activism. After leaving Southern University, he moved to Washington, D.C., and joined NAG at Howard University. From there, he began his involvement in SNCC.¹²

While black political activism grew at black colleges, life was also changing at predominantly white schools.¹³ The university policies and state laws that kept black students out of these institutions were successfully challenged on numerous occasions, starting in the 1930s. Early in the civil rights movement, lawsuits used the language of *Plessy v. Ferguson* to make segregation too expensive to maintain. Plaintiffs in a number of cases argued that the state had failed to provide education equal to what whites received. For example, in 1935, Thurgood Marshall won a case lodged on behalf of Donald Murray, a black man denied admission to the University of Maryland’s law school. Recognizing the futility of directly challenging *Plessy*, Marshall argued that the University of Maryland simply failed to provide a law school for blacks that was comparable to the school for whites. The courts agreed. This led to a deliberate strategy of making it hard to maintain segregation by increasing its costs. Soon after the Murray case, a number of states opened blacks-only law schools to preempt litigation.

Cases like Murray’s created the opportunity for further legal challenges. In 1949, George W. McLaurin won entry to the graduate school of the University of Oklahoma. A year later, McLaurin won the right not to be segregated within the university’s graduate school. That same year Marshall argued that the black law school at the University of Texas was not equal to the traditional all-white law school in quantifiable aspects such as library resources and faculty quality. Marshall won that case. These victories made it possible to argue that separate educational facilities were inherently unfair, which resulted in the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision.

Court victories did not immediately lead to abrupt increases in black college enrollments because many black students were unprepared for college-
level work, a gap that remains to this day. Even elite black students found it
difficult to enter many universities in the 1950s and 1960s. Until the installment
of affirmative action policies in the 1970s, elite white universities had at most a
few hundred black students out of thousands. For example, while conducting
research at the University of Illinois at Chicago (see chapter 4), I found that in
1969, only 80 out of 2,000 undergraduates were black—about 4 percent of the
population. In contrast, about 32 percent of the Chicago population was black,
which corresponds to approximately 640 students.¹⁴

Despite the limited impact of desegregation and the *Brown* decision, the rel-
atively small change in black enrollments was enough to transform black stu-
dent life on predominantly white campuses. Before segregation formally ended
in 1955, black students lived secluded, isolated lives at white campuses. Until the
1950s, many colleges required blacks to live off campus. Few in number and
isolated from each other, there was little possibility for a collective life. With de-
segregation and early affirmative action, black students trickled onto white
campuses, increasing their raw numbers from the low double digits to the hun-
dreds. It was now possible for black students to organize clubs and political
groups. There were sufficiently large numbers of black students available to
show force at a demonstration, provide emotional support for each other, and
complete the routine tasks of a political organization.

The Grievance: Limits of the Civil Rights Movement

The second factor leading to black studies was the sense that the college cur-
riculum needed reform because existing colleges and academic disciplines were
unable to meaningfully accommodate black culture. This position has a long
history, and this section examines how the idea of black studies was linked to
ideological disputes among activists about the efficacy of nonviolence and
the civil rights movement. Civil rights movement histories and periodicals of
the era show that disappointment with the pace of social change after 1964
prompted many activists to adopt a nationalist orientation. Once legal segre-
gation ended and voting rights were restored, many activists felt that African
Americans should experience immediate political and economic benefits, which
did not occur. The solution, in the minds of many, was for blacks to adopt a
more aggressive stance, demanding respect in personal interactions and more
authority over political and educational institutions. One demand was that col-
leges should institute academic programs focusing on black culture. In the rest
of this section, I describe how black intellectuals came to view American colleges as deficient and how claims for black studies came to be linked with cultural nationalism.

The critique of American colleges can be traced back to the early twentieth century, when black educators and intellectuals became frustrated with predominantly white educational institutions. Perhaps the best-known black criticism of American education is to be found in the writings of Carter G. Woodson, a prominent historian and the founder of the *Journal of Negro History*. He criticized predominantly white educational institutions because they produced subservient blacks who could not recognize their own domination. His best-known book, *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, articulated a radical and influential critique of American schools.¹⁵ Woodson argued that universities were too busy educating white students and ignored African Americans’ needs:

Northern and Western institutions, however, have had no time to deal with matters which concern the Negro especially. They must direct their attention to the problems of the majority of their constituents, and too often they have stimulated their prejudices by referring to the Negro as unworthy of consideration. Most of what these universities have to offer as language, mathematics, and science may have served a good purpose, but much of what they have taught as economics, history, literature, religion and philosophy is propaganda and cant that involved a waste of time and misdirected the Negroes thus trained.¹⁶

The belief that educational institutions were misleading blacks became a central theme in later criticisms of predominantly white educational institutions.

In “The Study of the Negro,” the last chapter of *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, Woodson makes an argument very similar to those made by black studies’ advocates almost forty years later. Woodson asserts that African Americans spend too much time learning about the history of other races because of a false belief that black history is unworthy of study. According to Woodson, this belief is used to maintain blacks’ inferior position in American society: “Let him learn to admire the Hebrew, the Greek, the Latin and the Teuton. Lead the Negro to detest the man of African blood—to hate himself. The oppressor may then conquer, exploit, oppress and even annihilate the Negro by segregation without fear or trembling.” Woodson’s scholarly organization, the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, aimed to place black history among the history of other races and to avoid disseminating “spectacular propaganda or fire-breathing agitation.”¹⁷
The desire for curricular reform had been a topic of great concern among black intellectuals since Woodson’s time, but not until the 1960s did that reform become a proposal with much chance of becoming a reality. The reason for this change was that nationalists had developed a broader critique of American society, which implied that African Americans should exert more control over schools. According to political scientist Michael Dawson, black nationalism urges “support for African-American autonomy and various degrees of cultural, social, economic, and political separation from White America.”¹⁸ This ideology reached the peak of its popularity in the 1960s and early 1970s. Not surprisingly, it was not difficult for a critique like Woodson’s to find an audience among cultural nationalists who saw education as one arena for black empowerment.

Black cultural nationalism’s development is not recounted here, as it has already been covered by others, but it is worth reviewing exchanges between nationalists and others in the civil rights movement to see how demands for black-controlled education and black studies fit into broader conceptions of black autonomy.¹⁹ One particularly useful comparison is between intellectuals who wrote for Negro Digest, the intellectual journal of Johnson Publications (owners of Jet and Ebony), and the Crisis, the official magazine of the NAACP. Not only do these journals document the growing rift between cultural nationalists and liberal reformers, they show how emerging nationalists articulated the ramifications of a new political identity, especially as they related to black higher education.

The starting point for many of these debates was that nonviolence, and by implication the entire civil rights movement, had not been completely effective as a tool for black liberation. Nathan Hare, a key figure in the Third World Strike, argued that nonviolence had been misused by civil rights leaders and would have a limited place in future black struggles. The problem was that nonviolence failed to achieve equality for blacks in housing and work. At best, nonviolence humiliated employers into awarding jobs to a few blacks, while allowing those employers to continue excluding most blacks. Hare also argued that residential segregation had not decreased at all during the 1950s. Concluding his remarks on the failure of nonviolence, he noted that many Southern blacks were unwilling to employ nonviolence in response to white aggression, and they felt abandoned when Martin Luther King took his campaign to the North in 1964. While never explicitly advocating violence, Hare noted that advocates of violence were still willing to consider nonviolence, but if they were
to encounter violence, then “let the chips fall where they may.” For other writers, black violence was the “safeguard” of democracy.²⁰ Without real confrontation, blacks might never fully obtain the equality that they had been promised. There was always the possibility that whites would resist and violent action would become necessary.

Among contributors to the Negro Digest, the critique of nonviolence coincided with the emergence of a new intellectual agenda. This agenda included arguments for a militant stance and a renewed emphasis on the needs of the black community. Militancy was motivated by the alleged failures of the civil rights movement and the feeling that whites simply did not take blacks seriously, despite their sympathy with blacks. An article titled “The Social Value of Black Indignation” praised the value of a confrontational stance in daily life.²¹ For too long, blacks had been without their own identity. They had lived in a world defined by white values and institutions. The consequence of such an existence was that blacks were expected to be submissive in their dealings with whites, always kind and polite, and constantly restraining their anger. What blacks really needed was a public demonstration of anger so that existing hierarchies could be challenged, and that meant the use of indignation as a tool for dealing with whites.

Other writers urged black intellectuals to turn to the community. In the May 1967 issue of Negro Digest, Stanford A. Cameron called on black intellectuals to stop being inferior copies of white intellectuals. The job of the black intellectual should be reconstructing pride in the black community; eradicating racism was a goal that would never be achieved. In the same issue, Negro Digest published an extensive interview with Leopold Senghor, Senegalese president and “negritude” philosopher. He praised black American artists because they had retained their “Negro enthusiasm,” while many African artists were enthralled with Europe. He also made an argument closely resembling later nationalist criticisms of the academy. Responding to a question about the role of European thinking for Africans, he claimed that it was necessary for Africans to employ analytical thinking characterizing French culture, but it was also necessary to use intuitive thinking characterizing African culture. Senghor explicitly criticized the efforts of sociologists such as Northwestern University’s Melvin Herskovitz because they used statistics that could not capture the lived experiences of blacks. Senghor implicitly argued that black experiences could not be the sole purview of traditional European modes of inquiry but required a synthesis of indigenous and European thinking.²²
The articulation of black nationalism in prominent journals was also accompanied by a criticism of existing black higher education. While liberals were defending historically black colleges because of their service to blacks, some nationalists started to wonder whether the mostly black campus was useful at all for black liberation. Clemment Vontress thought that the historically black campus encouraged apathy. Students at these colleges were too concerned with their careers and lived protected lives in “black suburbia.” Professors at these schools were even worse. They allegedly sent students to counseling centers when they challenged the professors’ views, and instructors were unable to respond to critical black scholars such as E. Franklin Frazier. The worst offenders, in Vontress’s view, were presidents of black colleges, because they urged students to give up their ethnic identification so that they could live in an integrated white society. Vontress also wrote that those college presidents frequently interacted with students and could enforce this abandonment of black identity through sermons delivered at campus church services and in face-to-face meetings. Apathy’s consequence was nonparticipation in crucial civil rights struggles. If apathy continued on black campuses, the movement would be coopted by whites more willing to leave college and work for freedom.

Disappointment with the civil rights movement, as well as the shift toward nationalism, prompted proposals for new types of black educational institutions. Perhaps the most radical proposal to appear in the pages of the Negro Digest was a demand for the black university. In the words of activist and sociologist Gerald McWhorter: “What is the Black University idea about? What are its goals? And what might it look like? The university focusing on the particular needs of the Afro-American community will be a center of learning. . . . It must be grounded on an educational ideology in an uncompromising goal of psychological independence from the oppressor (and his oppressive system). The goal of the university must be one of service to the community.” McWorter then proposed a university that mixed traditional elements of the university (e.g., a college of liberal arts and a university press) and instructional units inspired by nationalist arguments, such as the College of Community Life and the College of Afro-American Studies.

Proposals for black-oriented education included defenses of cultural nationalism. In a review of the proceedings of the 1968 Yale Black Studies Conference, Preston Wilcox said that black studies had become defined around both integrationist and nationalist visions and that future work in black studies must reconcile these two, not exclude one over the other. Later in the black studies
debate, Wilcox argued that an interdisciplinary foundation for black studies allowed for extended white control over the field. Independence of thought could be guaranteed only through the cultivation of independent black thinking. Interdisciplinary black studies meant dependence on existing academic disciplines; teachers were indoctrinated through intensive doctoral education and were unable to recognize the black experience. Accordingly, white educational institutions must recognize their inability to accredit black studies programs because existing academic disciplines could not recognize the authenticity of blacks as authors of their own history. Making black studies an extension of existing discipline would serve only to make “Black studies into White studies.”

As nationalism attracted advocates on college campuses, black liberals were quick to criticize it. New York judge Francis Rivers wrote in the *Crisis*, the official organ of the NAACP, that nationalism on campus was a natural response to the black experience, and he compared the search for black identity to W. E. B. DuBois’s search for identity in *The Souls of Black Folk*. However, he felt that proposals for all-black colleges and black studies were fundamentally misguided. Rivers agreed with the nationalists that such projects would improve students’ self-esteem, but he thought they would hamper black students’ ability to cultivate critical thinking. Because black identity was an inherently extracurricular concern, pursuing it could only distract students from honing their critical thinking skills and seeking job opportunities.

When black student protest increased, sharper criticisms emerged. One college student argued that the “ghetto” had followed students to the campus. Students could be either “black,” meaning that they identified themselves in opposition to “whitey,” or “Negro,” which meant accepting social integration and economic advancement as the primary goals of a college education.

Harvard government professor Martin Kilson, who was advising the Ford Foundation on its grant-making to black studies, wrote the most detailed criticism of the black studies movement. Calling the movement a fad, Kilson reminded readers that there was nothing new in the demand for black-centered education and research. Citing scholars such as Carter G. Woodson, John Hope Franklin, and E. Franklin Frazier, Kilson argued that black studies already existed and could be conducted with the detachment appropriate to scholarship. Black studies advocates were mistaken in their belief that genuine black scholarship did not exist. They were also mistaken in their belief that black studies should automatically encourage pride among blacks. Any honest academic research
would uncover black history’s good and bad episodes, and militants were not willing to recognize that.²⁸

Kilson made an argument for black studies as a grounded, interdisciplinary enterprise. Dilettantism could be avoided by making students work in a traditional discipline. Like others, he thought that students should take courses in traditional fields such as economics or literature and with extra courses in black topics. Any deviation from this approach would doom black studies: “Nothing less than this should be required of any student, black or white—especially any Negro student—who would want to major in an Afro-American studies program. Indeed, anything less than this will be a colossal waste of time and resources.”²⁹ He concluded by warning readers against too many black studies majors. Economic advancement depended on the mastery of technical skills that were prerequisites for the medical and engineering professions. Black studies’ psychological appeal, if unchecked, could undermine black economic progress.³⁰

Black intellectuals and college students had serious grievances with American colleges. The civil rights movement failed to generate a new culture in which mainstream institutions recognized black identity and achievements. Black intellectuals felt that colleges were unable to incorporate black topics or to provide a useful education to blacks. A renewed emphasis on ethnic pride, cultural autonomy, and institutional control was highly compatible with black studies and other forms of black-oriented education. Of course, not everyone agreed on the solution. Those who strongly identified with civil rights as it had been articulated until the 1960s believed that integration would solve these problems. Forcing white and black students into the same colleges would give black students the opportunity to obtain the job skills they needed to have equal footing with whites. In contrast, more radical black intellectuals felt this approach worked at the expense of the specific needs of the black community, which included a cultivation of black history and identity. Despite these disagreements, a critical mass of students and intellectuals felt that black studies was worth fighting for. The question was how the struggle for black studies would be carried out in American colleges.

The Tools: Nationalist Political Organizations

As social movement researchers frequently point out, political action does not automatically happen when individuals develop an ideology identifying political problems. It is not enough that black intellectuals inveighed against
American educational institutions or that colleges now housed substantial numbers of politically engaged black students. An important and often crucial factor is mobilization, that is, social movements need to develop organizations so they can recruit members, publicize their message, train members in tactics, and raise funds.\textsuperscript{31} Social movement researchers note that successful movements often have formal organizations that wage legal battles, transmit messages through the media, and coordinate protests on behalf of a cause.

The black studies movement is no exception to this general tendency. Black student protest was staged by a variety of black campus political organizations. It was from these groups that black studies emerged. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, black students participated in civil rights campaigns and quickly created their own organizations such as the DuBois Clubs, SNCC, NAG, the Revolutionary Action Movement, and college chapters of the Black Panther Party. Black college students also participated in campus chapters of the NAACP, the Students for a Democratic Society, and other groups not primarily associated with black students. In addition to these groups, black students created black student unions (BSUs), which became focal points for student politics in the late 1960s and continue to exist today.

A cursory examination of prominent black student protests shows that these kinds of groups were usually present. The Third World Strike of 1968 was initiated by the San Francisco State College BSU. This episode receives extensive treatment in chapter 3, but it suffices to note here that the strike resulted in the first Department of Black Studies and influenced student groups at other campuses. A partial list of other schools where black student political organizations staged strikes includes many branches of the California State College system and the University of California;\textsuperscript{32} Ivy League schools such as Harvard, Yale, Cornell, and Columbia; Howard University; and liberal arts colleges such as Amherst College and Gustavus College.\textsuperscript{33} There also were movements for black studies at community colleges such as Merritt College in Oakland, the college attended by Bobby Seale and Huey Newton.\textsuperscript{34} A common theme in these episodes is the presence of a united black student organization and the participation of activists with a history of involvement in the civil rights and black power movements.

This section discusses how these student groups were connected to nationalist organizations, which had been developing since the 1950s. Like the civil rights movement, cultural nationalism had its own organizational infrastructure, which played a crucial role in the subsequent development of black stud-
ies. Nationalist groups provided important resources to black students, encouraged them to demand control over educational decisions, and offered alternatives to predominantly white institutions.

Most discussions of black nationalist organizations start with the Nation of Islam because it produced influential leaders, such as Malcolm X and Louis Farrakhan, who inspired black students and militants. What is interesting about the Nation of Islam is that it provided a model for a self-contained black community. The Nation of Islam owned its places of worship, newspapers, real estate, and small businesses such as bakeries and farms. To this day, the Nation of Islam is one of the largest, most influential black nationalist groups. It is one of the few groups that can plausibly claim that it has successfully created a durable, self-sustaining black community.³⁵

While the Nation of Islam provided a religious model for what a self-sustaining black community might look like, other African Americans opted for a secular model—the revolutionary vanguard. Inspired by Maoists and national liberation movements in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, black militants founded a number of organizations based on small, tightly knit cells aimed at creating radical change in American society.

Historian Robin G. Kelley describes these groups in the 1950s. He reports that the Cuban revolution was a formative experience for black nationalists.³⁶ Castro’s visit to New York in the 1950s showed black America a revolutionary socialist who was willing to support anticolonial struggles around the world. Castro’s success signaled to others that socialist struggle could be successful. In 1962, Harold Cruse wrote that American blacks looked to postcolonial leaders like Castro: “They dared to look the white community in the face and say ‘we don’t think your civilization is worth the effort of any black man to try to integrate into.’ This to many Afro-Americans is an act of defiance that is truly revolutionary.”³⁷ The ability of Chinese and Cuban revolutionaries to seize power by force of arms suggested to many blacks that nonviolence was not the only option.

Kelley identifies Robert F. Williams as a central figure in the emergence of black nationalist politics. Williams was important as an outspoken, radical critic of Jim Crow and American capitalism. He was accused of kidnapping and fled to Cuba, where he continued to write and speak against segregation and the capitalist system. He was also important because he operated the Crusader, a mimeographed newsletter articulating a key element of the black nationalist
political ideology: the idea that colonized peoples of the world were united in the fight for self-determination.\textsuperscript{38}

Williams’s anticolonial thesis and his flight to Cuba deeply impressed young black militants in the early 1960s. Black students avidly read the \textit{Crusader} and responded strongly to his writing and his pronouncements from Cuba. Donald Freeman, a student at Case Western Reserve in Ohio, and a handful of students at nearby Central State College were impressed with Williams’s militancy. Persuaded by Williams’s analysis of black America as a colony inside the United States with much in common with Cuba, China, and other nations, these students founded the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM).

RAM’s formation was a critical moment in black nationalism’s organizational development.\textsuperscript{39} Although some individuals abandoned mainstream civil rights groups and others formed self-defense organizations, such as the Deacons of Defense, there were not many well-known or successful nationalist organizations aside from the Nation of Islam. With the founding of RAM, black nationalists had a vehicle for spreading their ideas and lobbying for policy changes. The organization had a newsletter. Meetings became a place where the nationalist ideology could be honed. RAM members allied themselves with existing civil rights groups, such as the Cleveland chapter of CORE (Council of Racial Equality) and the Afro-American Institute, which fought for more equitable housing, medical treatment, and education. Kelley discusses their efforts in detail. In 1962, RAM and the Afro-American Institute fought for better medical treatment for blacks in Ohio hospitals and for the release from prison of an associate of Robert Williams. With respect to black studies, RAM and the Afro-American Institute demanded that the Ohio public school system teach black history in its curriculum.

Aside from being an organizational base for black nationalists, RAM had one very important consequence: the establishment of a Northern California branch, the immediate predecessor to the Black Panther Party.\textsuperscript{40} RAM had branches in Oakland, California, that drew members from the local Afro-American Association, a group of students and intellectuals. According to Kelley, the association was the continuation of the Bay Area’s “soapbox tradition,” showing that a “highly visible militant intellectual culture could exist.” The two major California RAM branches and their recruits evolved into the two major nationalist organizations, the Oakland-based Panthers and the Los Angeles–based US organization. The leaders of both groups (Bobby Seale and Huey
Newton for the Panthers and Ron Everett for US) were RAM members or interacted with RAM members.\textsuperscript{41}

The black studies idea emerged from these nationalist organizations. In Bobby Seale’s 1968 description of the push for black studies at Oakland’s Merritt College during the school year 1966–1967, he refers to the influence of cultural nationalism and RAM. After associating with members of RAM, Seale met Huey Newton at Merritt College, and they began reading revolutionary texts such as Franz Fanon’s \textit{Wretched of the Earth}.\textsuperscript{42} Inspired by Fanon’s demand for a genuine national culture that shed the mantle of colonialism, Seale and Newton organized a student group called the Soul Students Advisory Council, whose goals were to “serve the community in a revolutionary fashion.”\textsuperscript{43} The council mobilized students for black studies courses and sponsored Afro-American cultural programs.

After promoting black studies courses, Newton and Seale founded the Black Panther Party (originally called the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense). Party members would go to nearby campuses to mobilize the black student population. At least two Black Panthers—Jimmy Garrett and George Murray—were key participants in the Third World Strike at San Francisco State College (see chapter 3).

Founding the Black Panthers required that Newton and Seale break with RAM. In Seale’s view, the nationalists were cowardly, afraid to fight. This was not surprising, given RAM’s tendency to work through less radical groups such as the Afro-American Institute. The only RAM branch to work publicly was the Philadelphia branch, run by the group’s leader and founder. Other RAM members often worked clandestinely to spread their nationalist ideology. Much of the time was spent avoiding police.

Newton and Seale’s organization took a very different approach. Instead of a secretive, cell-based revolutionary group, the Black Panther Party chose to be a highly visible organization with a wide following. In contrast with RAM, which Robin G. Kelley described as a group of college-educated intellectuals, the Black Panthers recruited from America’s poor urban centers.\textsuperscript{44} Within two years of the party’s founding, the Panther organization had its own newspaper, its own office, branches in most major American cities, some international branches, a branch in Jerusalem, and a number of homes where dedicated Panthers pursued an Afro-communal lifestyle.

The Panthers’ strategy was the opposite of RAM’s. Instead of cultivating a small group of dedicated followers who worked through more mainstream
groups, the Panthers confronted the police in order to attract attention and establish their credibility as a group that would not back down from white power. One of Newton and Seale’s tactics was to openly carry firearms. A nineteenth-century California law stated that citizens could carry unloaded guns if they did so openly and the gun’s barrels pointed upward. Newton and the Panthers used the law to taunt the police. Not surprisingly, this resulted in shoot-outs with the police and arrests. This tactic culminated when Seale, Newton, and other Panthers appeared in the California state legislature carrying guns. The incident attracted national attention and made the Black Panthers notorious.⁴⁵ Throughout the late 1960s, the Panthers maintained “patrols” in black neighborhoods.⁴⁶ These actions were designed to counter a history of police brutality in black communities.

The Panthers also did something that was equally important but less commented on: they tried to develop a self-sustaining community, similar to what the Nation of Islam created. Instead of building a community centered on Islam, key members of the Panther leadership wanted to create a nationalist community.⁴⁷ Although they were unsuccessful in the long term, the Panthers established many of the elements that a self-sustaining collective would need. They managed their own properties, had formalized membership, instituted their own quasi-formal courts and newspaper, and even regulated the daily lives of their members.⁴⁸ The effort to generate a self-sustaining community occurred along with other programs aimed at confronting racism and capitalism in a revolutionary fashion, which included attempts to reach multiethnic constituencies.

The diary of New York Black Panther Cheryl Foster shows how thoroughly organized the Panthers were in the late 1960s and how well regulated some of their branches were. Foster’s diary describes a typical day as a Panther activist:

Seize the Time Schedule
Monday–Friday
6:00 am exercise, clean up and eat
7:00 breakfast program
7:30 sell papers at busy train and bus stops
9:00 Sign in
10:00 Section work
12–1 Paper selling
1:30–2:15 lunch, P.E. (political education) class
2:30–3:30 section work
3:45–6:30 Progressive paper selling
7:00 sign-in
7–8:00 dinner
8:30–10:30 community work, office work, P.E. class. 49

Foster’s diary also records the mundane chores of running an organization—paying utility bills, collecting money from sales of the Panther newspaper, and dealing with the logistics of feeding the Panthers. 50

The purpose behind organizing the Panthers’ daily lives was not just to develop the black community internally, but also to acquire political power. For example, in 1970 the Black Panthers supported a candidate for mayor of Oakland. They also helped Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm conduct her campaign for president during the 1972 Democratic primary in California. In 1973, Bobby Seale himself ran for mayor of Oakland and won 40 percent of the vote. Panther Party leaders had hoped that positive relationships between the party and the downtrodden black urban populations could be converted into political clout, which would then be used to institute socialist economic reforms. The cultivation of dedicated activists and a committed rank and file was one tool that could be used in these political campaigns. 51

What is most pertinent for black studies is that the Panthers tried to create autonomous black educational programs. These efforts included the Panther breakfast programs and the establishment of a Black Panther elementary school. Very little academic research exists on the Panther elementary school in Oakland, called the Oakland Community School, but it was featured prominently in the party’s internal newspaper. Students at the Panther school wore child-size Panther uniforms and learned history from a black nationalist perspective. The idea of black nationalist education was easily transplanted to the college context, and functional organizations such as the Panthers were the launching pad for future actions. 52

Nationalist demands for new educational institutions were not limited to Oakland and the Panthers. Rather, they were quite common wherever there were politically mobilized black communities. For example, black nationalists in Chicago made the same demands as their counterparts in Oakland. Publications and statements made by Chicago-area black activists illustrate the nationalist criticism of educational institutions, as well as calls for action and proposals for wholesale reform of Chicago schools and universities. These pro-
posals included calls for more African American material in schools and more community service. Educational institutions were to be tools for ending racial hierarchy.

The *Black Liberator*, a black radical newspaper in Chicago in the late 1960s, published many articles that articulated this radical educational vision and showed how black radicals could assert control over educational institutions. For example, Bobby Wright, self-identified member of the Black Teachers Caucus and a founder of the school of black psychology, argued that African Americans ought to seize control of their educational institutions because these institutions perpetuated existing social hierarchies:

Black people must create their own educational system. *All* systems of education are set up for a specific purpose: to perpetuate the system that sets it up. Since a White European racist system exists in the United States . . . then the public school systems are designed to turn out White European racists, who will in turn sustain the same system that produced them. This leaves Black people in an untenable position. . . . The only alternative to this racist European system is a Black Nationalistic ideology and the vehicle is a Black educational system. . . . Only when Black people create or control an educational system with a Black Nationalistic frame of reference will freedom for Black people approach realization.⁵³

In addition to calling for an end to racial hierarchy, contributors to the *Black Liberator* also developed a radical approach to the subjects taught in schools and colleges. The entire curriculum would be reorganized around black material. History, for example, should explicitly reject the idea of African American inferiority. The teaching of history “has conveyed a picture of Black people as being docile and imitative, stupid and parasitic children, primitives and buffoons.” The proposed reconstruction of academic disciplines was not limited to history, but included the social sciences as well. Joseph Pentecoste of the Association of Black Psychologists proposed a “Black psychology.” The psychology taught in colleges and universities was “irrelevant to the Black condition and has always been irrelevant to Blacks.”⁵⁴ This new black psychology would focus on the reaction to slavery and the desire for freedom. Much of what psychologists labeled as pathology was in fact a set of mechanisms designed to cope with the conditions of bondage.

The theory of black-controlled education was not idle speculation in Chicago. These critiques were not abstract complaints but blueprints for change. As in Oakland, San Francisco, New York, and other cities, students and teach-
ers mobilized within the Chicago school system and confronted administrators. For example, the *Black Liberator* reported that junior college students organized to demand the appointment of African Americans as presidents of some of the Chicago City College campuses. Phil Hardimon, a contributor to the *Liberator*, described the confrontation between African American students and college administrators leading to the appointment of Charles G. Hunt as president of Crane College. Hardimon admonished those who thought the appointment of an African American was the end of the struggle over education: “The mere fact that these two colleges are now headed by Black men does not at all guarantee immediate relevance in education. Nor does it mean that a new day has dawned for Blacks in Chicago’s junior college system. . . . For now, the Presidents and the Black Students at Crane and Wilson, by establishing a curriculum which will prepare them to provide technical assistance to the Black community for its development, have the opportunity to delve into the real meaning of Blackness. Only then will the colleges be meaningful to the Black community.”

This quote is not only a demand for educational institutions to have African American leaders and students, but also a call to sustain a radical critique and confrontation with the higher education system.

The calls for black courses and black knowledge quickly spread throughout the black nationalist movement. By the late 1960s, many nationalist organizations offered their own versions of “black studies.” The Nation of Islam, based in Chicago, set up its own nascent university offering courses on Islam in America, African history, “survival,” and political economy. The Free School in New York offered courses on black/white conflict, black poetry, and the arts. A College for Struggle offered similar courses in San Francisco. All that was left was for somebody to push these ideas on college campuses.

These and other similar groups provided the infrastructure for future institutional change such as the push for black studies. They were incubators for new ideas and regular meeting places for people interested in radical politics. Charismatic leaders, such as Huey Newton and Stokely Carmichael, encouraged students to act on their convictions. These groups had internal newspapers in which individuals could articulate criticisms of existing society and argue for new institutional arrangements. Social alternatives were developed that included black schools and courses of study that could be models for new academic programs within predominantly white colleges. When one looks closely at black student protests, one finds examples of prominent individuals who had one foot in the university and another in the burgeoning nationalist movement.
Setting the Stage for Black Studies

Three conditions facilitated the emergence of black studies: (1) disappointment with civil rights and an unwillingness to wait for white assistance, which was linked to calls for militancy and black-controlled education; (2) the rise of groups such as the Black Panthers, in which individuals could learn the intricacies of movement tactics and forge strong identifications with nationalist values; and (3) the creation of foot soldiers, the newly admitted black students, who were willing to fight on college campuses. These conditions correspond to the factors that social scientists believe encourage social movements: the cognitive framework for understanding what is wrong with society coupled with a corresponding solution, an organizational infrastructure that can be used for collective action, and a demographic change that creates a pool of individuals who can be recruited for the cause.

The importance of these three processes is clear when we consider the early history of black studies. For example, historians have documented that African American historical and cultural research goes back to the eighteenth century. Historian Lawrence Crouchett reports that Quakers educated freedmen about black Africa as early as 1713. During the nineteenth century, abolitionists argued that blacks were not inferior and compiled histories of talented black men and women. Crouchett also notes that a number of colleges (white and black) hosted lectures on the oral traditions of African Americans in geography classes. The Reconstruction era witnessed an increased interest in “Negro history,” and many historians wrote multivolume treatments of the subject. By 1900, there were numerous black historical societies whose mission it was to teach children about black Africa and the accomplishments of prominent African Americans. What is notable about this early form of black studies is that it was not institutionalized widely in colleges and universities, aside from occasional lectures and publications. There was no effort to create research centers or degree programs centered on black culture.

This began to change in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, although nothing self-identified as “black studies” emerged. The modern research university was established in America by the 1880s and created new possibilities for black-conscious research. The nation’s colleges opened social science and humanities departments and abandoned the classical curricula of the nineteenth century. After the first black men and women earned their bach-
elor’s and doctoral degrees from these departments, they created research centers focused primarily on the black community and wrote important scholarly monographs. Scholars such as W. E. B. DuBois, St. Clair Drake, and E. Franklin Frazier were all affiliated with major research universities. These scholars can be viewed as the predecessors to black studies. DuBois’s works such as The Philadelphia Negro and the reports issued by his research center at Atlanta University all discuss the African American community and show the intrinsic worthiness of studying African American institutions. During this era, there were successful attempts to institutionalize black research in organizations such as DuBois’s research center, but once again, there was no demand for a distinct academic field.

By the 1950s, the elements of black studies as an intellectual enterprise were present. There were many academic treatises on the black community. There were a significant, although small, number of black Ph.D.’s and college professors. Black intellectual organizations, such as the Association for Study of Negro Life and History, were publishing journals. Historians such as Lerone Bennett contributed much to the development of African American history as an important area of inquiry. There were even intellectuals, such as Cheikh Anta Diop, who argued that the black experience undermined classical theories of civilization. Diop not only insisted on Afrocentric interpretations of classical civilization, but also helped create intellectual organizations such as the Pan-African Student Congress and the First and Second Congresses of African Writers and Artists.

The elements of black studies were present in mid-twentieth-century intellectual circles, but they did not have a wide-ranging impact within American universities. There was a substantial level of black research and academic organization, but in general, universities did not formalize this knowledge in courses, curricula, or degree programs. This would happen only when nationalist politics prompted black students to demand new academic units and to stage strikes pushing for their creation.