Africana Studies Curriculum is More Than Classes: They Represent Political Events

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Africana Studies Curriculum is More Than Classes: They Represent Political Events

Studying Africana Studies at Connecticut College as a woman of color in a predominantly white institution (PWI) allowed me to grasp the crucial significance of African perspectives in my education. This major provided me with a deeper understanding of my cultural heritage, offered representation for underrepresented voices, equipped me with critical thinking skills in discussions about race, and empowered me to advocate for diversity and inclusion within the academic setting. The Africana Studies curriculum has highlighted various significant political events over my four years here. I've witnessed pivotal movements and correlations that have been essential to understanding the historical and political landscape. Specifically, examining the founding events at Connecticut College has shed light on the birth of the Africana Studies department. The Africana Program at Connecticut College comes out of student activism for study and celebration of the Black experience on campus during the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. This essay will explore the connection between the personal struggles of students and faculty of color at a PWI and the evolution of the Africana Program over the period between the early 1970s and the 1990s. For case studies, it will look at the Afro-American Society, the role of Dr. Jewell Plummer Cobb as the first Black Dean at Connecticut College, some of the first faculty involved in what would become the Africana Program, and the Fanning takeover movements that propelled the growth of the program.

Background of Africana Studies Nationwide: The Institutionalization of a Protest Movement
Black Studies, or Africana Studies more broadly, is a field in constant motion\(^1\). Fabio Rojas, the author of *From Black Power to Black Studies: How a Radical Social Movement Became an Academic Discipline*, uses “Black studies” because it was the term used by student activists when the field was created as it is easily recognizable and it is legible\(^2\). Black studies is also interchangeably with Africana studies or African American studies\(^3\). Black Studies understands the experiences of African people in both the continent and the diaspora\(^4\). However, the Africana Studies department was not always around nor called Africana Studies. The birth of the Africana program, generally starts in the 1960s when students nationwide protested during the Civil Rights Movement, demanding more inclusive education that accurately represented African American experiences\(^5\). On campuses across the nation during and after the Civil Rights Movement, various student groups had distinct demands, yet they shared a common goal: advocating for inclusivity and funding for programs for students of color.

![Figure 1. Proposal to President Shain. These are the proposed courses for the Black Studies major made by the Afro-American Society to President Charles Shain in 1968. Source: Afro-American Society (1969-1973)](image)

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advocating for Black studies and Black student life on campus, was heavily involved with the creation of the Africana Studies major and minor\(^7\). They proposed courses focused on Black history and culture, which were introduced in the late 1960s [see Figure 1]\(^8\) The major and minor in African Studies were initiated between 1989 and 1993\(^9\). However, to gain faculty approval for the major, the name was changed to Africana Studies to encompass the broader African diaspora\(^10\). This change was finalized in 1992\(^11\). They sent a formal proposal to President Charles Shain on December 2, 1968, urging the creation of an interdepartmental major in Black Studies, marking the beginning of student activism toward establishing the Africana Studies major [see Figure 2]\(^12\). Figure 2 describes the demands the Afro-American Society sent to President Shain in 1968\(^13\). They demanded: A greater selection of courses that increased the relevance of the Connecticut College experience for example in art history, child development, economics, history, etc.; an increase of Black professors; to have at least one Black dean and one

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\(^7\) Afro-American Society (1969-1973), Linda Lear Center for Special Collections and Archives, Connecticut College, New London, CT

\(^8\) Afro-American Society (1969-1973), Linda Lear Center for Special Collections and Archives, Connecticut College, New London, CT


\(^12\) Afro-American Society (1969-1973), Linda Lear Center for Special Collections and Archives, Connecticut College, New London, CT

black admissions officer, as well as the creation of an Interdepartmental Major in Black Studies\textsuperscript{14}.

In the Fall semester of 1968, there were only a couple of classes that were approved by the faculty called “Black Studies”\textsuperscript{15}. For the Academic Year 1969-1970, the courses that were offered were: English 206: Studies in Afro-American Literature, History 118: History of the Afro-American in North America, and Music 175: Black Music and its Place in Contemporary Society\textsuperscript{16}. The introduction of “Black Studies” courses focusing on Black experiences within American society presents an interesting starting point. However, the limited number of these courses led to differing opinions among the faculty at Connecticut College. Some faculty members might have questioned the necessity of expanding these courses, citing the relatively low number of Black students enrolled at the college\textsuperscript{17}. Richard mentions, “I suspect that the college will have to give more courses in Negro studies if it is to continue to recruit Negro students. I think the present request a bit excessive” [see Figure 3]\textsuperscript{18}.

The viewpoint that this need isn't necessarily reasonable due to the small population of Black students reflect a perspective on the allocation of resources. Some might argue that increasing course offerings should align with the recruitment of more Black students. The scarcity of such

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure3.png}
\caption{Department of History. Richard Birshall sent a letter to President Charles Shain regarding the one of the demands, having more courses that focus on Black experience from the Afro-American Society. Source: Afro-American Society (1969-1973)}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{14} Afro-American Society (1969-1973), Linda Lear Center for Special Collections and Archives, Connecticut College, New London, CT
\textsuperscript{15} Afro-American Society (1969-1973), Linda Lear Center for Special Collections and Archives, Connecticut College, New London, CT
\textsuperscript{16} Afro-American Society (1969-1973), Linda Lear Center for Special Collections and Archives, Connecticut College, New London, CT
\textsuperscript{17} Afro-American Society (1969-1973), Linda Lear Center for Special Collections and Archives, Connecticut College, New London, CT
\textsuperscript{18} Afro-American Society (1969-1973), Linda Lear Center for Special Collections and Archives, Connecticut College, New London, CT
courses might reflect the college's response to the demands and needs of Black students during a time when Black individuals felt unheard and unseen amidst the Civil Rights movements.

In essence, the limited availability of Black Studies courses might have been influenced by the college's response to the demographic composition of its student body, which, in turn, could reflect broader societal attitudes and responses to the Civil Rights era. Margaret Wilson suggested that students attend Black Studies courses at Wesleyan University because the Black Studies courses offered at Connecticut College were considered inappropriate or inadequate [see Figure 4]19. It may suggest a lack of regret or concern for the inconvenience caused to students who had to seek these studies elsewhere. This situation implies a failure or insufficiency on the part of Connecticut College to adequately meet the educational needs and demands of its students, especially concerning Black Studies. Instead of recruiting more Black students or creating more programs for Black Studies education within their own college, suggesting students to attend another institution for these courses reflects a disregard for the difficulties and disruptions these students face in pursuing their education. This approach neglects the need for internal efforts to create an inclusive environment and places an undue burden on students by expecting them to seek education elsewhere. Margaret Wilson's response to the request for a Black Dean of Students was perplexing. She expressed a lack of

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comprehension, stating, "I do not understand the request for a Black dean of students as I am confused if the request is for a Dean of Black Students or a Dean who is Black” [see Figure 4]. She then proceeds about the difficulty in finding "qualified Black people" for such positions reflects a troubling and inappropriate perspective, one that perpetuates racist assumptions. It is hard to pinpoint how the college responded to fining a Black Dean as Margaret mentioned that it is difficult to seek Black employees due to it being difficult to find “qualified Black people” seeking these positions. Despite this resistance and inappropriate response, the college appointed its first Black Dean of Students a year later in response to the students' demand. Wilson's comments appear to stem from a place of racial bias and lack of understanding, highlighting the challenges faced in addressing diversity and inclusivity within the college administration.

**Dr. Jewel Plummer Cobb: The First Black Dean at Connecticut College**

In 1969, Connecticut College welcomes Jewel Plummer Cobb to be the first Black Dean of the College\(^{20}\) [see Figure 5]. Jewel Plummer Cobb was a biologist, cancer researcher, professor, dean, and academic administrator. Cobb served as a professor of Zoology at Connecticut College\(^{21}\) [see Figure 6]. Upon accepting the position at Connecticut College, she expressed: “This is a college in transition, moving forward at an exciting pace. We need more black students and teachers to help us formulate and carry out our bold new plans”\(^{22}\).

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\(^{20}\) "College Staff Has Many New Faces", *The Day*, September 23 1969

\(^{21}\) "College Staff Has Many New Faces", *The Day*, September 23 1969

\(^{22}\) Jewel Plummer Cobb,” Wikipedia, September 11, 2023
Within a short period after assuming her role as the Dean of the College at Connecticut College, Cobb made significant efforts to create a more inclusive environment for Black students and students of color on campus. She actively engaged with the Afro-American Society, collaborating closely with them to address their demands and ensure their voices were heard and respected\(^{23}\) [see Figure 6]. Under Cobb's leadership, the Afro-American Society successfully advocated for and obtained a Multicultural Center, known today as Unity House [see Figure 7]. This establishment became a crucial hub for multiethnic students, providing a sense of belonging and solidarity on campus. Despite the positive intentions behind creating a space for students of color to feel at home, there was controversy surrounding the implementation of the Multicultural Center due to potential segregation implications specifically for students of color. Nevertheless, the Multicultural Center, now known as Unity House, stood as a significant political statement for Connecticut College. It symbolized a dedicated space for students of various ethnic backgrounds to gather, support each other, and foster a sense of community and identity, contributing to the college's commitment to inclusivity and diversity.

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The students of color at Connecticut College encountered challenges in engaging with the broader New London community due to limited access to transportation, notably lacking a car. They wanted to travel around campus like the other students who were wealthier or to even visit other Black students in the area to find a community.

In response to this barrier, a donor names Steve, stepped forward and generously donated a car to the Afro-American Society [see Figure 8]. This donation was a significant gesture that aimed to alleviate the transportation constraints faced by students of color, enabling them to overcome the hurdle of limited mobility. By providing access to a vehicle, the donor's contribution facilitated greater participation and interaction of these students within the New London community. While the students were grateful for the car, they had to adhere to a set of rules to guarantee both inclusivity and longevity of its use [see Figure 9]. It exemplifies how acts of generosity and support can directly address practical barriers and enhance the inclusivity and integration of marginalized groups into the broader community.

Figure 8. Car Donation to Connecticut College. President Charles Shain expresses his gratitude to Steve, who donated the car to the Afro-American Society in 1970. Source: Afro-American Society (1969-1973)


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Cobb recognized the financial needs of students of color and took action by implementing a Black Scholarship program that provided financial assistance to 40 Black undergraduates [see Figure 10]25. The scholarship was intended to increase financial assistance needs for students of color. Such scholarship programs play a pivotal role in promoting diversity and inclusivity within educational institutions by reducing financial barriers that might otherwise hinder students from marginalized communities in pursuing their academic aspirations. Cobb's implementation of this Black Scholarship program demonstrates a commitment to fostering a more diverse and equitable campus environment by supporting students of color in their educational pursuits.

It's evident that Cobb wore multiple hats during her role as the Dean of the College at Connecticut College, actively addressing the low representation and status of students of color on campus. Recognizing the need for increased diversity, Cobb initiated a fundraising drive aimed at recruiting more students of color to the college26. Dean Cobb mentions “Black students are dead

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25 “College’s $25,000 Grant Market to Aid Black Undergraduates,” Hartford Courant, February 1 1970.
26 “Conn Coll Blacks Launching Fund Drive,” The Day, May 24 1971
serious about their college opportunity” [see Figure 11]. Collaborating with the Afro-American Society, Cobb and the student organization worked together towards a specific goal of enrolling 71 Black students on campus by the fall of 1971. Among their demands was a call for stronger recruitment efforts known as the “Spirit of ’71” — that there be at least 71 Black students on campus by 1971. This initiative followed the First Fanning Takeover in 1971.

**Fanning Takeovers: Activism on Campus for Marginalized Students**

The First Fanning Takeover occurred on May 5th, 1971 where approximately 25 members of the Afro-American Society staged a sit-in at Fanning Hall [see Figure 12]. They refused to leave the building until their demands were met.

Under the pressure of the sit-in and the demands put forward, Charles E. Shain, the President of the College at the time, agreed to fulfill these demands around 6 AM on the morning of May 6th. This event marked a significant turning point, demonstrating the power of student activism and the institution's response to the call for increased diversity and representation of Black students at Connecticut College.

Despite the significant advancements and changes brought about by the demands and activism of marginalized students, there were still unmet needs and ongoing challenges for minority individuals on campus. As a response to these persisting issues, the Minority Student

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27 “Conn Coll Blacks Launching Fund Drive,” *The Day*, May 24, 1971
28 “Connecticut College,” Reunion 2022 Agenda, 2022
29 “Connecticut College,” Reunion 2022 Agenda, 2022
30 SOPHIE MULVIHILL, “A History of the Fanning Uprisings,”
31 SOPHIE MULVIHILL, “A History of the Fanning Uprisings,”
Steering Committee was established in the mid-1980s. The formation of this committee highlights the ongoing efforts by marginalized students to address the continuing challenges they faced within the college environment. This committee likely aimed to advocate for the needs and concerns of minority students, working towards fostering a more inclusive and supportive campus atmosphere for all marginalized individuals attending Connecticut College [see Figure 13]. The structure of the Minority Student Steering Committee (MSSC) involved representation from various affinity groups on campus. Each of these affinity groups designated a single representative to participate in the MSSC. This representative acted as a voice for their respective affinity group within the committee, contributing perspectives and concerns on behalf of their community.

The formation of the MSSC was a result of the Second Fanning Takeover on April 30, 1986 when 54 students entered Fanning at 4:30am. This takeover was
a significant demonstration or protest action by marginalized and a direct response to ongoing unresolved issues and unmet needs. The demands put forth by the protesting students were more extensive and specific compared to the initial takeover in 1971[see Figure 14]. By 11:20PM that same night, an agreement was signed by the students and senior staff that “established several specific goals and timetables.” Yet again, groups were made and goals were set. The “Minority Affairs Committee” was working on reaching many of these. In a progress report written the next year they said a lot of things were changing for the better, but “The College must continue to address the content and quality of the curriculum, its faculty and staff recruitment procedures, programs to insure ethnic diversity in the student body, and support programs for non-majority students. This will require an ongoing systematic proactive approach.” By showing up with specific goals and refusing to step down, students effectively made change. Until the 1990s, Connecticut College faced ongoing student protests advocating for unmet needs. These protests centered on the same issues, and it wasn't until the late 1980s that the college responded by implementing the African minor.

From African to Africana Studies: The Development and Implementation of the Africana Studies Major

By 1989-1990 academic year, Connecticut College implemented the African Studies Minor, three years after the second Fanning Takeover. When Connecticut College implemented the African Studies minor, they had little requirements to be considered.

36 SOPHIE MULVIHILL, “A History of the Fanning Uprisings,”
37 SOPHIE MULVIHILL, “A History of the Fanning Uprisings,”
38 SOPHIE MULVIHILL, “A History of the Fanning Uprisings,”
39 Fall 1992 Catalog, Linda Lear Center for Special Collections and Archives, Connecticut College, New London, CT
40 Fall 1989 Catalog, Linda Lear Center for Special Collections and Archives, Connecticut College, New London, CT
Only five courses, and be cross listed with history and classes in different departments like Anthropology, Economics, and Government courses\textsuperscript{41} [see Figure 15]. These courses were taught by the director of the African minor program, John W. Burton.

John W. Burton's started his career at Connecticut College as an Anthropology professor in 1983 and spanned an impressive thirty-year career\textsuperscript{42} [see Figure 16]. Throughout his time as a professor, Burton taught a wide array of courses covering diverse subject matter within the field of anthropology. He taught courses on diverse subject matter as ritual, language, human evolution, ethnographic writing and ethnographic film\textsuperscript{43}. John W. Burton's continued involvement in teaching African Studies allowed him to recognize the importance of inclusivity, particularly regarding the African Diaspora\textsuperscript{44} [see Figure 17]. This realization prompted a shift in perspective towards a more comprehensive understanding of the field. Consequently, the name of the program changed from African Studies to Africana Studies in 1991 to reflect a broader scope that encompassed not only Africa but also the wider African Diaspora\textsuperscript{45}. While the major in Africana Studies was approved in 1991, it was

\textsuperscript{41} Fall 1989 Catalog, Linda Lear Center for Special Collections and Archives, Connecticut College, New London, CT
\textsuperscript{42} TIM HARTSHORN, “Remembering Professor John Burton: 1952-2013,”
\textsuperscript{43} TIM HARTSHORN, “Remembering Professor John Burton: 1952-2013,”
\textsuperscript{44} Fall Catalog 1992-1993, Linda Lear Center for Special Collections and Archives, Connecticut College, New London, CT
\textsuperscript{45} Fall Catalog 1992-1993, Linda Lear Center for Special Collections and Archives, Connecticut College, New London, CT
officially offered in the academic year of 1992-1993 [see Figure 18]. This transition reflected the evolution of the program to embrace a more expansive and holistic examination of the African experience, encompassing both the continent and its global diasporic communities.

Connecticut College initially responded to student demands by implementing the Africana major, there are ongoing challenges in sustaining the program. The recent concern expressed by students regarding the absence of Professor Vincent B Thompson, who is on sabbatical, underscores a critical issue within the program's structure [see Figure 19]. The reliance on a single professor for teaching courses within the Africana major poses a significant threat to the program's sustainability. Students rightly point out that Connecticut College needs to prioritize multiple professors is essential for the long-term viability and effectiveness of the Africana major [see Figure 19]. Without a diverse team of educators who can offer various perspectives, the program risks instability and limitations in course offerings. Establishing a department or faculty team that can collectively contribute to teaching and sustaining the program will not only alleviate the dependency on individual professors but also provide students with a more comprehensive and enduring academic experience in Africana studies. This step is crucial in
maintaining the program's integrity and meeting the educational needs and expectations of the students. As an Africana Studies major myself, it's disheartening to acknowledge that the issue of limited faculty representation within our program persists even after 31 years.

Africana Studies is crucial as it offers a lens through which to understand the diverse experiences, histories, and cultures of people of African descent. Embracing Africana Studies enriches education, promotes inclusivity, and fosters a deeper appreciation for the richness and complexities of our interconnected world. Connecticut College has witnessed numerous instances of student activism aimed at enhancing the experiences of Black and marginalized identities on campus. This activism through the Fanning Takeovers, mirrors the strategies during the Civil Rights Movement, serving as significant social and political changes. Through sit-ins, marches, and challenging policies, students have sought to amplify their voices, reflecting a legacy of collective action that continues to evolve.

While progress has been made, there remains ongoing work to be done on campus. Even after 31 years later of the implementation of the Africana major [see Figure 20], we are still experiencing similar issues to the concern of the stability of the Africana major. The efforts of past students in groups like the Afro-American Society, MSSC, and pioneers such as Dean Jewel Plummer Cobb have laid a strong foundation for us. We must draw inspiration from their work and use it as motivation to persist in advocating for change on our campus. Their efforts serve as a guiding light, urging us to continue the fight for progress and inclusivity in our academic community. Connecticut College is on a journey towards fostering a more inclusive community.

![Figure 20. The Birth of the Africana Major. The Africana Major Timeline. Source: Tavarez, Kayla ’24](image)
that embraces all identities. Vocalizing demands, as seen in previous student activism, remains crucial. By actively listening to and addressing these demands, the college can work towards creating a better, safer, and more welcoming environment for everyone involved. This ongoing dialogue and action are essential steps in advancing towards a more equitable and inclusive future at the institution.