

# **Racial Identity Development of African American Students in Relation to Black Studies Courses**

by

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to provide understanding of the reason why African American students choose to enroll or do not enroll in Black Studies courses and to explore the relationship between racial identity development and Black Studies programs. Using a phenomenological approach, African American undergraduate students who have: (a) participated in a student organization that focuses on the advancement of Blacks, an organization that was founded with the purpose of creating an organization for Black Americans, or an organization that focuses on racial equality; or (b) be a Black Studies minor were interviewed. Students who were Black Studies minors were more likely to feel a connection with the African Diaspora while those who had not taken a Black Studies course were more likely to claim themselves as Black verses African American. Black Studies minors reported a better sense of self and reported a more positive development of their racial identity compared to many of the students who did not take a Black Studies course.

## **Introduction**

In spite of the growth of Black studies programs in colleges and universities across the United States, few African Americans enroll in courses or graduate from them (“African Americans Show Solid Gains at All Academic Degree Levels,” 2009), particularly at Northern Superior State University. Black studies programs are reported to have many benefits for African American students. Adams (2005) contends that Black studies programs have a history of assisting students with identity development. Furthermore, Black studies programs assist students in developing self-esteem that, in turn, influences their level of self-efficacy (Adams, 2005). As a result of these benefits, Black students are more likely to graduate from college. Adams (2005) adds another dimension suggesting that these programs help students survive in a racialized society like that of the United States by providing them with knowledge to know themselves and know other cultures and civilizations.

## **Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this study is twofold: (1) to provide understanding of the reason why African American students choose to enroll or do not enroll in Black studies courses; and, (2) explore the relationship between racial identity development and Black studies programs. The perceptions of students who enroll and do not enroll in Black studies courses will be compared. The research questions that guided this study were: (1) what reasons do African American students put forth to justify their choice or non-choice of Black studies courses? (2) In what ways do African American students who enroll in Black studies courses compare to those African American students who have not in relation to racial identity development?

## **Outcomes of Black Studies**

The influences ethnic studies curricula have played in student achievement has been documented by a number of researchers, specifically in relation to the students who identify with the subject matter. Carter (2008) conducted a yearlong qualitative investigation with nine high-achieving African American high school students at a predominately White high school. This study suggests that strong racial identities assisted participants in developing an achievement ideology that not only supported them in their academic achievements, but assisted them in navigating racially challenging environments. Rickford (2001) found that African American students became more engaged with the literature assigned to them that was written by African Americans and that student motivation increased when they were more familiar with the theme of the narratives.

In this qualitative study with 25 low-achieving African American middle school students, participants described enjoying the literature, partially, because they could better relate to the characters and themes of the narratives, and they could understand the vernacular tone. When these students were assessed for comprehension, they tended to perform worse with the lower level comprehension questions and better with the higher comprehension questions. The students, overall, performed better with the more complex questions. Lewis, Sullivan, and Bybee (2006) found that eighth grade students found more worth in their own heritage as a result of their African American emancipatory curriculum course compared to only discussing African and African American heritage during Black History Month and other singular recognized events (e.g., brief discussion about the Atlantic Slave Trade). Emancipatory education refers to a process of training that seeks to liberate underrepresented groups from racist social institutions and ideologies in modern-day society (Lewis, 2004).

Myrick (2002) completed a study with 21 participants that identified as African American, Nigerian, Cameroonian, Ethiopian, and Haitian with ages ranging from 17 to 44 years old. The participants were students in a 10-week college developmental reading course in a public, Southern, urban, 2-year college in the United States. At the beginning of the course, each participant was interviewed and administered the African Self-Consciousness (ASC) Scale as a means to understand their perspectives toward their African identity. During the course, students were given various books to read that were centered around the African Diaspora. At the end of this course, the perspectives of many of the students toward their African identity changed.

Educators in the discipline of ethnic studies discipline are aware of the lack of diversity in school curricula, the negative experiences students of color are forced to deal with in society and school, and the lack of support and effort provided by schools to assist students in developing a healthy racial identity (Sleeter, 2011). Despite the lack of contribution and support from schools, ethnic studies programs attempt to equip students with the tools needed to navigate spaces that may be racially hostile (Sleeter, 2011) while supporting positive racial identity development.

## **Being Black at a Predominantly White Institution**

African Americans who attend predominantly White institutions (PWIs) are more likely to perceive the campus climate more negatively compared to their White counterparts (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Ariza and Berkey (2009) conducted a qualitative, longitudinal study to examine the racial identity development of African American students at a predominantly White, liberal arts institution (PWI).

Participants of the study primarily discussed the struggles they faced with stereotype threat—a situational threat of feeling at risk of conforming to negative stereotypes about one’s social group (Steele, 1997)—and their desires to maintain their authentic selves. Individuals also discussed the struggles they encountered because of their intersecting race and gender identities. In a study of mentoring African American students at a Christian PWI, Dahlvig (2010) found that many of the participants described feelings of isolation at their institution. Each participant described a perceived difference in the interactions with their White counterparts or being pointed out in class during classroom discussions about race or after comments about race were made in class. Soló, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) studied the experiences of African American college students in relation to campus climate and racial microaggressions, or “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group” (Sue et al, 2007, p. 273). Using focus groups at three universities, they used the qualitative data to conclude that the participants did in fact have experiences with racial microaggressions, and that, in return, had a negative influence on campus climate.

## **Retention of African American Students**

African American students are less likely to complete college compared to their White counterparts (Anglin & Wade, 2007). A student’s identity and sense of belonging in a program can affect whether or not they choose to stay or leave (Danielak, Gupta, & Elby, 2014). If students feel a stronger sense of belonging, they are more likely to stay on campus and in their program. Conflicting culturally based expectations that occur in academic environments, negative stereotypes, a lack of African American role models in the curriculum, and a lack of emphasis on the positive contributions that African Americans have made are among some of factors that need to be changed to support African American academic excellence (Robinson & Biran, 2006). In a study on racial identity and development, Pope (2000) found that students with a more secure sense of Black identity were more likely to develop mature relationships with and establish a sense of purpose in college compared to their counterparts with lower levels of Black identity.

Roberts and Styron Jr. (2010) found, in their study of students’ perceptions of services, experiences, and interactions in a particular academic program located in the southern region of the United States, that students were more likely to return to their home institution in their second year of college if they did not change their majors, had higher perceptions of social connectedness, and higher satisfaction with faculty approachability.

## Research Design

A phenomenological qualitative approach was used for the purpose of understanding the ways the participants interpret their experiences (Merriam, 2009) related to Black studies and student organization involvement. Phenomenological studies in education strive to “explore and describe the world from the students’ perspective” (Collier-Reed & Ingerman, as cited in Tight Huisman, 2013, p. 243).

The criteria for this study were African American undergraduate students at Northern Superior State University (NSSU). The following criteria were employed for inclusion in the current study:

- an individual of the African Diaspora who identifies as Black/African American
- a student at Northern Superior State University
- an undergraduate student of senior academic standing as determined by credit hours attained
- Black studies minor, and/or a member of a student organization that works to build community among African Americans in some capacity

An email was sent to every student that identified as African American and was at senior standing at NSSU to recruit participants for the study if they met the criteria. Ten participants were yielded from this method. All participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity and confidentiality, and all audio recordings were destroyed after being transcribed.

## Research Site

The study was conducted at Northern Superior State University (NSSU). NSSU is a liberal arts, public, master’s comprehensive, institution. NSSU had a total enrollment of 25,325 students for the Fall 2015 academic semester. Of these 25,325 total students, 21,972 were undergraduate students and 1,142 identified as Black or African American. Of the 21,972 undergraduate students, 22 had Black studies as an academic minor for the Fall semester. There were a total of 31 students who declared Black studies as an academic minor for the 2015-2016 academic year. Of those 31 students, 71% identified as Black or African American.

Along with the low number of African American/Black students, NSSU has a small number of African American/Black faculty members. Of the 880 regular faculty members for the 2015-2016 academic year, thirty-five identified as African American/Black. Of those 35, eight instructed at least one Black studies course. There was one faculty member who identified as White that taught one Black studies course during the 2015-2016 academic year.

## **Methods**

Data were collected through one-on-one, semi-structured face-to-face interviews. All participants were informed of their rights as a participant, confidentiality clauses, and a request to audio record the interview. Each participant was interviewed once during the 2015-2016 academic year. All participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity and confidentiality, and all audio recordings were destroyed after being transcribed. As the interviewer, I was intentional in suspending personal views and opinions to ensure participants felt comfortable to express their honest feelings and describe their experiences without feeling judged or pressured.

**Data Analysis.** To begin analyzing, I identified areas of the data that are responsive to one of the two main research questions (Merriam, 2009). This was accomplished by completing line-by-line coding. Next recurring codes were put into categories and themes were drawn. During data collection, there was a reflexive process utilized in order to spark insight and develop meaning. Srivastava and Hopwood (2009) state that a reflexive process is iterative and consists of “visiting and revisiting the data and connecting them with emerging insights, progressively leading to refined focus and understanding” (p. 77). Reflecting multiple times on the collected data assisted me, as the researcher, in taking time to process the ideas and themes that emerged from the interviews. After all data was collected, all audio recordings were transcribed. Next, transcriptions were examined for codes and concepts. From there, common themes were defined, and the research assessment was formulated accordingly.

**Findings.** All participants were asked to answer preliminary questions regarding their involvement on campus. Participants were also asked to describe their racial identity. Detailed questions about identification classifications were reserved for the interview protocol.

Table 4

*Demographic Information*

Pseudonym	Sex	Involvement	Identification
Taylor	Female	Delta Sigma Theta National Sorority, Inc.	African American
Raven	Female	Black Student Union; Black Girls Rock	African American
Linda	Female	Black Student Union, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Women of Color Mentoring	Black
Emilio	Male	Black Studies Minor	African American/Black
Megan	Female	Black Studies Minor	African American
Karen	Female	Black Student Union; African Students Rise	African American/Black
Brandy	Female	Black Studies Minor; Black Girls Rock	African American
Tami	Female	Challenging Racism; Women of Color Mentoring	Black
Dered	Male	Black Studies Minor; Black Student Union; Men of Color Support Organization	African American
Marley	Female	Black Studies Minor; Black Girls Rock; National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; Multicultural Cohort Program	American of African Decent

Participants were also asked to describe their sex identification. The need for sex identification was not because this study intends to understand race, sex, and their intersecting realities but rather to ensure respectability in describing the participants when writing the narratives.

The findings presented from this study have four themes that emerged from the participant narratives (see Table 5). The theme *choosing Black studies* was accompanied with the sub-themes (1) *focused on graduation requirements*, (2) *uninformed about program*, and (3) *learning about/reclaiming one's history*. The second theme was *sense of racial identity development*. The final theme was *impact of Black studies* which was followed by the sub-theme *Black faculty support*.

Table 5

*Emerging Themes and Sub Themes*

Theme	Sub-Theme
Choosing Black Studies	Focused on graduation requirements Uninformed about program Learning about/Reclaiming one's history
Identity Classification	
Sense of Racial Identity Development	Encounter Race salience Transformation
Impact of Black Studies	Black faculty support

## Choosing Black Studies

Part of the purpose of this study was understanding the rationale for which undergraduate students choose to register for a Black studies course. Participants described the reasons they did not take Black studies courses. They also described the reasons behind choosing to take those courses and choose it as an academic minor. Three sub-themes emerged: (1) Focused on graduation requirements; (2) Uninformed about program; and, (3) Learning about/reclaiming one's history.

**Focused on graduation requirements.** The majority of participants described not choosing to take a Black studies course because they did not directly align with the requirements for their major. Tami described wanting to “double dip,” or take one course that gives credit to two or more required subject areas. She states:

I didn't exactly look into [Black studies]. I was all about trying to graduate...The only class I took without doing the whole double dipping thing was race ethnicity. That's because [a specific professor] was teaching that class, and I really wanted her as a professor. That was about as close as it got.

Tami discusses her interest in race and ethnicity, but her priority to graduate in a specific timeframe prevented her from taking more electives despite a present interest in the subject matter. She took one course related to race and ethnicity that was not in the Black Studies department simply because she wanted to take a specific professor.



This was a similar case for Taylor. Taylor described wanting to take a Black studies course but the Black studies electives were not a priority. She stated:

I really did want to take one, but I never did only because...when I tried to take them they were full; and I was just the type of student that was trying to make sure my other classes were taken care of. And you know, the way people talk about them, I wish I would have, but, yeah, that's the only reason I didn't.

Taylor found courses that were of interest to her, but the class sections were always full when she attempted to enroll in a course. She also explained that while taking a Black studies course was an interest, it was not a priority. She was focused on completing her required courses for her major and graduating in a specific timeframe.

In the Fall semester of 2015, NSSU had a total of 14 courses with 7 different course topics that were specifically Black Studies courses. These are courses that were housed in the department and did not have any other discipline titles (History, Anthropology, etc.), and these do not include practicum courses, independent reading courses, or independent study courses. The student capacity for these courses ranged from 10-33 available seats. Six of these courses were at or beyond capacity, and the majority of the remaining sections were near capacity.

In the case of both Taylor and Tami, they had an interest in race, or Black studies specifically, but they prioritized their major requirements and graduation timeline. In the case of four of the five participants who did not take a Black studies course, graduating within a certain timeframe was their main priority. While Black studies courses at NSSU are available to meet general education requirements, participants chose the general education courses that not only met their general education requirements but also their core requirements for their major. As a result, they did not take any Black studies courses because it was not a part of their academic programs.

**Uninformed about program.** A lack of knowledge about the Black studies program at NSSU was also a reason participants did not take a course in the program. Raven describes her experiences with learning about the Black studies program:

I didn't think [Northern Superior] had any [Black studies courses] until it was like a little too late. I had already set up all my classes and things like that. It was never really promoted.

Raven may have been more likely to take a Black studies course had she been informed about the program earlier in her academic career. She had a slight interest in the subject due to familial influences. Had she known about the NSSU Black Studies program during her freshman or sophomore year, the probability of taking a course would have been greater. Raven was focused on graduating when she found out about the Black studies program at NSSU. When she did learn of it, she was not willing to reschedule her courses because she was determined to meet the requirements of her academic program in a certain timeframe. Her interest in the Black studies courses did not supersede her desire to complete her required courses first.

**Learning about/reclaiming one's history.** For those students who were Black studies minors, they described their choice to take the course as a way to learn more about the history of their ancestors. Brandy described:

I took a Black studies course because I was interested in knowing the history of African Americans. I also think that I took that course to get the perspective differently. I think a lot of classes teach it from the master narrative, so hearing it from a Black professor in a more predominantly Black class, they expose that master narrative.

Brandy's sentiments were echoed by Marley and Emilio who stated:

I saw investigation into my culture as not only as...having a self-fulfilling purpose to it too. But I also saw it as like an intellectual legitimate endeavor. (Emilio)

Well, I took Black studies courses because I felt like I lacked history. When I say I lacked history, I mean me personally. I didn't know where I fit in in the context of the US, I didn't really know that much. The majority of what I learned was just like, "Oh yeah, slaves, freedom, civil rights." But it's so much in between that. And I felt like my parents [were] always pushing us to try to know more about Africa, our African roots, just kind of the history of it all...It was my way of reclaiming my history. (Marley)

Brandy, Emilio, and Marley described their interest in exploring the history of African Americans and the African diaspora that went beyond what they learned in high school or other educational outlets. They described their grade school experiences with Black studies being slim and limited to only specific people, brief glimpses of African American history, and limited in time spent on the subject.

They wanted their histories to be central within the classroom and more than a simple topic that was briefly discussed. Like the other students who were Black studies minors, they wanted Black studies and not just a short history of African American contributions to the United States.

## **Sense of Racial Identity Development**

Participants described how they perceive their racial identity transformation compared to their freshman year. Since all of the participants were traditional students and seniors, they were all discussing their transformation over the last 4-5 years while in college. Megan expressed how she has a lower tolerance level of social and racial inequalities compared to her senior year:

My patience is like zero. I have found that I've taken more pride in being African American. Not that I ever not, but subconsciously, things that I did or thought that I had to do... Pushing aside those things or ways we speak culturally as African Americans when you're in front of other people or other races; I don't do it anymore because I had to come to those conclusions through my [Black] studies classes that it doesn't make me any less intelligent or that's not something that I have to do. That's just something conditioned in our minds that we have to do to be accepted, and that's not it. You know that's not what should be done based on whether someone accepts me. It's ok to wear my natural hair or to speak in Ebonics or African American vernacular English or whatever they want to call it. It's ok to express my thoughts in a way that I know from growing up where I grew up. It's ok just to be African American. I don't have to put some of those cultural things aside to fit in.

Megan is no longer tolerant of racial discrimination or stereotypes. She feels more confident in expressing her culture. Brandy described how she had a limited and singular ideal of what the definition of being Black was. She has since changed that ideology from her freshman year:

My freshman year I limited what Blackness should look like. Basically saying if you were Black but you were more into the white community or into the white culture, I didn't identify you as Black to me. As I got older and I realized you are just as Black as me, even if I'm in touch with Black culture or not, we're still two Black people dealing with a lot of oppression still, dealing with injustices that are set up to be against us. That's the changes for me. I also realized that one gender, mostly male, cannot speak for the whole culture of Black people or the whole African American community...I take more pride into being Black.

All of the participants recognized some level of growth, but the area in which that growth was attributed to and the reasons why varied. Megan and Brandy both describe how they have grown from having a shallow view of what it meant to be Black and what was appropriate conduct of African Americans to realizing that there is no mold for Blackness. They have become more intentional with not only considering what race is and appropriateness is, but they have become less tolerant with shallow worldviews and confined ideologies of what it means to be Black and Black in America.

## **Impact of Black Studies**

Participants who were Black studies minors were asked to describe how their courses have impacted them. The question was open ended in an effort to ensure participants described what they felt was important to them. Support ranged from social support to academic support. Megan began by saying:

I feel like it's taught me to make sure I always have facts and backup what I say. Because you know you can argue with someone all day up and down, but having those facts to back up what you say and make your points valid when you're trying to get your point across to someone who really could care less about what you have to say. That's been a really big thing.

Megan described feeling more confident in her ability to answer questions from a scholarly point-of-view. Emilio also discussed feeling a sense of legitimacy as a result of his studies. He also discussed a better sense of belonging as a result of his studies:

I felt...that I belonged here as a result of that. I saw myself as more intelligent too and I associated that with Blackness. So it was like, Blackness and studying Black history and African American history, is not only something that helps me see my people and myself as something that's vast and robust. But, I also saw the...Diving into it at an academic level as something as legitimate as studying any other subject. So, it made me feel empowered and I could articulate things about Blackness, and Black culture, and Black experience better to my friends who were either Black, or who were not Black. So, I saw Blackness as something more full...I guess [Black] studies helped me see that I really see Blackness as something that's central to who I am.

Emilio's sentiments of a better sense of self are mirrored by Brandy. She stated:

It's changed a lot. I didn't understand my identity, of course I knew I was Black, of course I knew I was African American, but I didn't really understand what it meant to be Black or what does Blackness look like. I'm not saying that Blackness has one way it should look, but what does history say about my Blackness? How should I go about that in society? It just taught me a lot about organization and how Blacks came together. It expanded my knowledge and it made me feel like I had a worth, and that I was worth it, and that my Blackness should not be excused. You should still pay attention to other things besides my Blackness, because I'm Black does not mean I am any less than anybody. That's why I did that.

Each participant described a better sense of self both socially and academically. They better understood the racial constructs of their society, and, as a result, felt more confident and comfortable addressing those issues. They described being more confident with who they were, and, as a result, spent less time trying to fit stereotypes and placed more focus on reaching their goals. Their Black studies courses not only taught them history, but assisted them in being more self-confident whether this was directly the intentions of the program or indirectly.

**Black faculty support.** Faculty members serve a vital role in institutions of higher education. The impact faculty members have on the lives of students can be positive or negative. Some participants described a feeling of hostility in their courses with their faculty members or fellow students. They described microaggressions from both faculty and students in core classes and personal interactions. Participants also described how their Black professors in the Black studies program provided a unique type of support inside and outside of the classroom.

Dered described his experiences with his Black studies professors compared to his professors in his major by stating:

And to compare [my Black studies professors] to my [communication] professors...my Com professors care too, but my [Black studies] professors act like they're my momma and daddy. They're like, "If you need help, call me. Here's my personal line, email me whenever, if you have any problems or questions let me know. We're gonna work this out." I was like, "ok." ... Like another support group.

Dered explained that he had relationships with his Black faculty members that felt more familial. He felt that his Black professors took a personal investment in his life. Brandy expressed similar sentiments:

I'm not saying that White professors don't care, or that they haven't helped me because some have, but the Black [professors] took more of a personal interest within me. They are the main reason why I am still at [NSSU]. They push me, they see the potential. I really enjoy creating, outside of the classroom, relationships with them. Being able to just go sit in their office and just talk... we just go to [Dr. Evans] and just talk about life, not even about school, just talk about what is going on on campus with campus activism, or what's going on in the world, having them uplift me and helping me not give up, they push me...They really changed my life.

The impact of NSSU's Black Studies programs ranged from students having a stronger desire to be knowledgeable in their academic disciplines to feeling more comfortable with who they are and having higher self-esteem. Black studies gave participants more than a deeper academic understanding of global history, American history, race relations in the United States, and other topics. Black studies gave them more confidence in their abilities to communicate effectively and to stand strong to defend themselves in the racial society that is the United States of America. Black studies also helped participants develop relationships that went deeper than they ever imagined. The faculty of the NSSU Black Studies program supported students in more meaningful ways than that of their counterparts in other departments.

## Summary

When choosing to take or not take a Black studies course, the reasons for the participants were similar. Most of the students who did not take a Black studies course did not enroll due to their focus on graduating within a certain timeframe. One participant did express her lack of interest in the subject, but every other participant expressed some type of interest in the discipline. Students may have been more inclined to complete a Black studies course had they 1) been informed of the program earlier in their academic career and/or 2) been able to easily transfer the credits to fit their program.

Being around other students who were Black through student organization involvement and in Black studies courses was refreshing for participants because they felt as though they were with people who understood them and they did not feel the need to have to validate their existence. Participants described feeling more comfortable when with other Black NSSU community members compared to White community members. They expressed a feeling of being able to be their authentic selves in a space without judgment.

The students who were Black studies minors were more likely to express a perceived difference in their racial awareness and sense of self. Those who had never taken a Black studies course were less likely to express a change in their racial awareness and identity development.

## Discussion

Each participant expressed difficulties, socially and psychologically, with being Black at a PWI, and being involved with other Black community members provided support for student engagement and sense of belonging on campus. While each participant described support from Black NSSU community members, those who were Black studies minors expressed that learning about the extensive history and current events surrounding the African Diaspora provided an internal support that was not found in any other campus resources.

Participants who were Black studies minors reported higher levels of race salience and less tolerance with White American ideologies on how Black people should conduct themselves. They reported feeling more comfortable with their Blackness as a result of their studies and a sense of liberation from trying to fit into Eurocentric frameworks. The influence Black studies courses have on student racial identity development is different from that of other courses because African peoples are central to the subject matter. As a result, students are immersed into African history, politics, and culture.

This immersion can be part of the influence of the higher levels of racial identity development for the students involved in these programs. The purpose of a comprehensive Black studies program, similar to the NSSU program, is to move beyond the general, brief discussions of African Americans and truly grasp an understanding of the impacts of African peoples across the globe. These programs also explore culture in an empowering way which, often times, is a new experience for students. African American students are in a space where their cultural backgrounds are respected and not questioned which, sadly, is often times the social norm on college campuses (Ray, 1976) and in the United States.

Campbell and Campbell (1997) found that positive relationships with faculty mentors played a positive role in student academic success and retention. Students who were Black studies minors were the only participants who expressed having deeper relationships with faculty members, and those faculty members were all from the Black Studies department. Mentorship with faculty members was not part interview protocol, but participants still discussed how important their Black studies faculty members were and how important their relationships with Black faculty members were in relation to retention and feeling accepted on campus.

## **Recommendations for Practice**

Although Black studies programs provide documented academic and psychosocial support for students, many institutions of higher education do not offer Black studies programs, and if they do, enrollment is likely to be low for declared majors and/or minors. The recommendations for practice of this study relate to administration of institutions of higher education and student affairs practitioners.

First, institutions of higher education need to place more of an emphasis on ethnic studies programs, and Black studies in particular. Black studies programs lack of financial resources and faculty members are likely to be housed in multiple departments (Phillips, 2010). Financial support for Black studies programs will allow departments to not only support their students in a larger variety of ways (i.e. community service learning, study abroad opportunities, etc.), but will allow departments to hire full time faculty specifically in Black studies. Ethnic studies programs should be as included as other disciplines such as history, sociology, psychology, etc., creating an inclusive academic culture.



Second, student affairs practitioners (i.e., academic advisors, counselors, etc.) should work to support these programs when assisting students with scheduling their courses and when promoting campus events. Reviewing what many participants expressed, a lack of knowledge about the courses available to them is one reason many students did not enroll in any Black studies courses. If these courses were promoted campus wide as much as the other courses in more traditional disciplines, there could be a different outcome that results in higher enrollment levels and, as a result, students having more positive experiences on their campus.

Finally, Black student affairs practitioners, students, and faculty members should collaborate to support Black students on campus. Student organizations have a faculty or staff advisor at NSSU. While students involved in organizations found support from being with other individuals who understood their lived experiences, those students who were in Black studies courses felt the same sense of support with the added benefit of building a stronger sense of racial identity. This shows that while the two areas offer some type of support for students, the academic coursework adds an extra value that cannot be duplicated elsewhere. The value of formal education must be recognized and encouraged. The co-curricular activities brought students a sense of belonging and a place where they felt comfortable. The co-curricular activities provided a safe space for students to be themselves and not fear the need to code switch or worry about stereotype threat. Academic programs provide a different type of empowerment and support. Combining curriculum and co-curriculum can add a new type of support for students that combines the social and educational support the institutions offer.

## **Recommendations for Research**

This study focused on college African American, undergraduate students. Further research should be conducted understand how ethnic studies programs support students at the collegiate level. When discussing racial identity development, there is not one model that totally encompasses the phenomena of identity development. Future research should include multiple models to gather a better understanding of the phenomenon of identity, racial identity, and racial identity development. Further, future research should examine how multiple identities (i.e. race, gender, etc.) intersect and develop in relation to ethnic studies curriculum.

## Conclusion

This study gathered qualitative data from students at one Midwestern PWI, and as a result, more research needs to be conducted on the impact of Black studies in relation to racial identity at other PWIs and HBCUs. For example, longitudinal studies capturing the identity development and academic achievements of students over an extended period of time are warranted. This type of study might validate the need for more ethnic studies programs and provide data for lead administrators to advocate for such programs due to the variety of positive contributions such programs make.

Black students and students of color face issues on college campuses every day that may not be recognized by their peers or administration. Students or marginalized groups find social support in a variety of ways that include organization involvement, but academic involvement can also play a vital role in the ways in which students find support matriculate at their institution. Black studies programs provide a type of support for students that are unparalleled to other programs on college campuses.

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