



Alive and Well: A Nationwide Study of Black Literature Courses and Teachers in American Colleges and Universities

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*Alive and Well: A Nationwide Study
of Black Literature Courses and Teachers
in American Colleges and Universities*

BECAUSE OF MY INTEREST in the field of black American literature and my feeling that many others share that interest, I decided last year to gather some information about the discipline—to inquire of individual English Departments throughout the United States whether they offered courses in black literature, and how many, and what the titles of the courses are; how their courses originated, and how the English faculty reacted to their introduction; what authors and works are studied in the courses, and what the guiding critical perspectives appear to be; which faculty teach the courses, and what their qualifications are for such assignments; and, finally, how many students the courses are currently attracting, and whether the number of students is increasing, decreasing, or holding stable.

I then designed a two-page questionnaire which would solicit this desired information, and sent the questionnaire to the English Department Chairman at 305 two-year colleges and 790 senior colleges and universities. Of the 1,095 questionnaires sent out, 648 (or 59.2%) were returned—136 from 2-year colleges, 312 from private colleges and universities, 141 from public colleges and universities with an enrollment under 12,000, and 59 from public colleges and universities with an enrollment over 12,000.

The study reveals, first of all, that the prevalence of availability of black literature courses increases in direct proportion to the increasing size of the institutions. Only 37% of the 2-year colleges responding, for example, offer specific courses in black literature, whereas 59% of the private colleges and universities, 70% of the public colleges and universities under 12,000, and 93% of the public colleges and universities over 12,000 offer such courses.¹ A total, then, of 387, or 59.7%, of the 648 schools offer black literature courses. The “conventional wisdom” notion, incidentally, that the increased availability of such courses at the larger schools is the result of more intense student pressures at such schools is simply not borne out by the study. While more of the largest schools indicated the existence of student pressure, the other three kinds of schools actually

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¹The relationship between the number of schools offering black literature courses and the number of schools offering “black studies” program is a somewhat “loose” one. For purposes of comparison, 30% of the two-year colleges offer interdisciplinary “black studies” programs, and 40% of the private colleges and universities, 32% of the public colleges and universities under 12,000, and 82% of the public colleges and universities over 12,000 offer such programs.

show an inverse relationship between the availability of black literature courses and the application of student pressure. For when asked to list the *principal* reason for the introduction of black literature courses (and, obviously, there would have been some overlapping of reasons), the responses were as follows:

	<i>routine faculty proposal</i>	<i>routine adminis- trative proposal</i>	<i>student pressure</i>
2-year	69%	7%	24%
private	70%	10%	20%
public (under 12,000)	73%	10%	17%
public (over 12,000)	67%	2%	31%

Another “conventional wisdom” notion that the study refutes is that English Department faculties were generally reluctant, if not frequently hostile, about the approval of black literature courses. For the responses to the inquiry about the “manner of department approval” showed the following:

	<i>with little or no faculty opposition</i>	<i>with “some” faculty opposition</i>	<i>with considerable faculty opposition</i>
2-year	89%	8%	3%
private	89%	11%	—
public (under 12,000)	85%	14%	1%
public (over 12,000)	80%	20%	—

Of further interest on the matter of the availability of study in black literature are the results of the inquiry into which of the colleges and universities that do *not* offer courses specifically in black literature nonetheless do offer the study of black authors and works in other kinds of literature courses. An additional 54% of the 2-year colleges use such an arrangement, along with an additional 34% of the private colleges and universities, an additional 30% of the public colleges and universities under 12,000, and an additional 7% of the public colleges and universities over 12,000—for an additional 34.6% of the 648 schools responding. *Altogether, then, of the 648 schools reporting, 94.3% offer, in some manner, study in the literature of black Americans.* (Please note that 100% of the public institutions in both categories offer such study.)

While the study clearly bears out what, I suppose, is the common knowledge that most of the existing courses in black literature were introduced in the late 1960’s and the early 1970’s, it seems to me useful to understand that, in addition to the fact that such courses are still being introduced, four of the private schools report the introduction of such courses during the 1940’s and 1950’s, and three of the public schools under 12,000 report the introduction of such courses during the 1930’s and 1940’s. The complete results of the inquiry about the date of course introduction at individual institutions are as follows:

	<i>before 1968</i>	<i>1968</i>	<i>1969</i>	<i>1970</i>	<i>1971</i>	<i>1972</i>	<i>1973</i>
2-year		21%	30%	28%	6%	9%	6%
private	13%	20%	25%	17%	13%	7%	5%
public (under 12,000)	12%	16%	33%	21%	8%	6%	4%
public (over 12,000)	6%	34%	30%	24%	6%		

On the number of black literature courses offered by individual colleges and universities there seems to be no relationship between the size of the school and the number of courses offered—except, probably not surprisingly, as the following results show, that considerably more public schools over 12,000 offer five or more black literature courses than schools in any other category:²

	<i>1 course</i>	<i>2 courses</i>	<i>3 courses</i>	<i>4 courses</i>	<i>5 or more courses</i>
2-year	69%	25%		3%	3%
private	55%	23%	9%	6%	7%
public (under 12,000)	56%	28%	9%	6%	1%
public (over 12,000)	33%	21%	13%	17%	16%

The titles of the courses in black literature presently being taught, and the frequency with which individual titles were listed, are instructive for several reasons. They reveal, for example, the ways in which the course designers break down the historical periods. Some divide at 1890 and 1940; others, rather strangely it seems to me, divide at the dates frequently used in general American literature courses, at 1914, or 1945, or 1950. The course titles reveal also the most commonly treated period (“modern” or “contemporary”) and the relative popularity of the genres (with fiction clearly the most popular), as well as the authors thought important enough to warrant courses specifically in their names—Richard Wright is the most common, closely followed by James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Imamu Baraka, and Langston Hughes. The twenty-five most frequently listed course titles, in descending order, are:

Afro-American Literature
 Black Literature
 Black American Literature
 Contemporary Black American Literature
 Literature of Black America
 Introduction to Afro-American Literature
 Black American Writers
 Black Literature in America
 Survey in Black Literature
 Survey of Black American Literature
 Black American Novel
 Black Poetry
 Harlem Renaissance
 Black Novel
 Black Drama
 Introduction to Black Literature
 Literature of American Minorities
 Special Studies: Black Literature
 Studies in Black Literature
 Black Fiction
 Afro-American Novel

²In addition, thirty-six schools report that from one to five master's theses have been completed under their auspices; one school reports the completion of sixteen, and one school reports the completion of twenty-two such theses. Also twenty-one universities report the completion of from one to six doctoral dissertations in black literature.

Modern Afro-American Literature
Major Black American Writers
Afro-American Authors
Twentieth Century Black Literature

The five authors mentioned as those felt to be deserving of courses which deal specifically with their work are, not surprisingly, the five authors most frequently listed among those regularly studied in black literature courses. Richard Wright proved to be the single most popular author (listed by nearly 300 schools), followed by Ralph Ellison (some 270), James Baldwin (some 250), Imamu Baraka and Langston Hughes (some 200), Jean Toomer (some 170), W.E.B. Dubois (some 150), Gwendolyn Brooks and James Weldon Johnson (some 140), and Claude McKay (some 130). The entire list of the thirty-five most widely studied authors, in descending order, is as follows:

Richard Wright
Ralph Ellison
James Baldwin
Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones)
Langston Hughes
Jean Toomer
W.E.B. DuBois
Gwendolyn Brooks
James Weldon Johnson
Claude McKay
Charles W. Chesnutt
Paul Laurence Dunbar
Frederick Douglass
Malcolm X
Countee Cullen
Eldridge Cleaver
Arna Bontemps
Lorraine Hansberry
Margaret Walker
William Melvin Kelley
Ishmael Reed
Booker T. Washington
John A. Williams
Don L. Lee
Ernest J. Gaines
Robert Hayden
Nikki Giovanni
William Wells Brown
Ed Bullins
Zora Neale Hurston
Chester Himes
Phillis Wheatley
Mari Evans
Ann Petry
William Demby

Of interest to teachers of black literature and American literature generally will, no doubt, be the results of the study which bear upon the classroom

materials currently being used for exploring the writing of black Americans. The two anthologies most widely used are Abraham Chapman's *Black Voices* and James Emanuel and Theodore Gross's *Dark Symphony* (though, of the two, nearly twice as many schools, wisely, I think, listed *Black Voices*), both originally 1968 publications which were part of the first large production wave of black literary classroom materials. Both anthologies, perhaps significantly, are available in relatively inexpensive paperback editions. Further down the list (both listed approximately one-fourth as often as *Black Voices* and half as often as *Dark Symphony*), and still available only in rather expensive hardcover volumes, are probably the two most outstanding anthologies of black literature yet compiled, Arthur P. Davis and Saunders Redding's *Cavalcade* (1971) and Richard Barksdale and Keneth Kinnamon's *Black Writers of America* (1972). The complete list of the fifteen most widely used anthologies of black literature, in descending order, is as follows:

Black Voices
Dark Symphony
Three Negro Classics
New Plays from the Black Theatre
Black Poets
Best Short Stories by Negro Writers
Cavalcade: Negro American Writing from 1760 to the Present
American Negro Poetry
Blackamerican Literature
From the Roots
Black Literature in America
Black Writers in America
Dices and Black Bones
New Black Voices
Black Drama: An Anthology

The most frequently listed primary literary works bear out the self-declared "guiding critical perspectives" present at individual schools in the study of black literature. Overwhelmingly, the schools responded that the main critical thrust of their courses is not "political," or even historical, but either socio-literary or formally literary:

	<i>mostly historical</i>	<i>mostly socio-political</i>	<i>mostly socio-literary</i>	<i>mostly formally literary</i>
2-year	8%	8%	54%	30%
private	10%	8%	53%	29%
public (under 12,000)	9%	8%	66%	17%
public (over 12,000)	15%	7%	61%	17%

The list of most frequently studied primary works is headed, in fact, by one of the most outstanding literary documents of the last generation, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, followed closely by Richard Wright's *Native Son*, Jean Toomer's *Cane*, James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, and Imamu Baraka's *Dutchman*—all literary documents of the first order. The thirty most widely studied primary works of black literature, in descending order, are:

Invisible Man
Native Son
Cane
Go Tell It on the Mountain
Dutchman
The Autobiography of Malcolm X
Black Boy
Souls of Black Folk
The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man
Soul on Ice
A Raisin in the Sun
The Slave
Uncle Tom's Children
Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass
The Man Who Cried I Am
Another Country
Clotel
The Fire Next Time
Their Eyes Were Watching God
A Different Drummer
The Best of Simple
The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman
Manchild in the Promised Land
Black Thunder
Selected Poems of Gwendolyn Brooks
The Free-Lance Pallbearers
Blues for Mister Charlie
Up from Slavery
Dem
Jubilee

One of the widespread assumptions about black literature, namely that it is not commonly taught in the South, is at least partly confirmed by the study. Based on a tabulation of the number of schools responding which offer black literature courses, the South, in fact, does not “show” as well as most of the other geographical regions—but, interestingly enough, it does “show” better than the Southwest, as the following list of percentages of schools, by region, offering black literature courses illustrates:

East	67%
Midwest	66%
West	57%
Plains	56%
South	49%
Southwest	47%

There has been, in many instances, almost as much conjecture about the teachers of black literature as about the discipline itself—with assumptions about their ages (presumably mostly “young”), about their preparation for teaching such material (presumably meager or non-existent), about their status in the academic world (presumably among lowest ranks), and about their racial identity (mixed attitudes here). The study confirms the widespread notion that

most teachers of black literature are “young,” inasmuch as less than 10% of them are more than fifty years old. The responses indicate, though, that, except for the largest public universities, the greatest percentage of black literature teachers are in their “middle” professional years (35-50 years old) rather than in their “early” professional years (under 35 years old). The largest public universities show, however, slightly more teachers in the under-35 age range than in the other two age ranges combined, as the following results demonstrate:

	<i>under 35</i>	<i>35-50</i>	<i>over 50</i>
2-year	40%	52%	8%
private	41%	49%	10%
public (under 12,000)	43%	47%	10%
public (over 12,000)	53%	41%	6%

To me one of the most surprising conclusions to be drawn from this study is that a far larger number of black literature teachers have had formal preparation in black literature than many people realize. It is noteworthy, too, that the percentage of such teachers drops dramatically in direct proportion to the increasing size of the institutions in which they teach—with 79% of the two-year-college black literature teachers listed as having “formally studied black literature at either the undergraduate or graduate level,” as compared with 58% of the teachers in private colleges and universities, 56% of the teachers in public colleges and universities under 12,000, and only 49% of the teachers in public colleges and universities over 12,000. One might explain these results by suggesting that two-year colleges are somewhat more likely to have faculty who only recently finished graduate school or who, because most of them do not hold the doctorate, have continued to take graduate courses during the summers and in the evenings. (As the “faculty age” results show, however, it does not necessarily mean that two-year schools have younger black literature teachers *per se*.) In either case, these faculty would have been exposed to graduate programs, many of which—unlike the situation only a few years ago—routinely offer study in black literature.

Another means of measuring faculty “preparation” is to study the percentages of degrees attained. Again perhaps surprising to some are the findings that less than 5% of the current teachers of black literature in American colleges and universities do not hold at least a master’s degree, and that, in the senior institutions where the doctorate or substantial work toward the doctorate is commonly required of most faculty, nearly 90% of the black literature teachers are in the “master’s-plus” or doctorate categories. The complete results on academic preparation are as follows:

	<i>doctorate</i>	<i>master’s-plus</i>	<i>master’s</i>	<i>bachelor’s</i>	<i>other</i>
2-year	7%	53%	33%	7%	
private	44%	38%	14%	4%	1 undergrad.
public (under 12,000)	52%	38%	9%	1%	
public (over 12,000)	62%	31%	5%	2%	

The “academic rank” inquiry reveals, happily, practically none of those “special” titles given to token black administrators, as well as to teachers in some of the

“black studies” disciplines during the late 1960’s and very early 1970’s—titles like “Special Dean of . . .,” or “Associate Administrator of . . .,” or “Adjunct Teacher of . . .,” or “Community Associate Teacher of” Indeed less than 3% of the black literature teachers whose status is revealed in the study hold titles which fall outside the “mainstream” academic rank designations. In addition, among the senior institutions, where a comparison of the designations is more meaningful, nearly 40% of the current teachers of black literature hold the ranks of either associate professor or full professor—a significant percentage, considering that most of these teachers are still relatively young. The complete results on academic rank are:

	<i>prof.</i>	<i>assoc. prof.</i>	<i>asst. prof.</i>	<i>instructor</i>	<i>lecturer</i>	<i>other</i>
2-year	12%	15%	28%	43%	2%	—
private	16%	25%	35%	18%	4%	2%
public (under 12,000)	18%	20%	41%	18%	1%	2%
public (over 12,000)	11%	22%	37%	20%	5%	5%

The results of the last area of inquiry about the black literature teachers, that dealing with their racial identity, indicates that only in the two-year colleges are there more black teachers than white—and there a very sizeable 74%, explainable, in part no doubt, by the fact that many of the large two-year college systems are located in urban areas with large concentrations of black students, as well as relatively large numbers of black faculty. In all three categories of senior institutions, however, the teaching of black literature is handled more often by white faculty than by black, though by no means preponderantly so, as the following results show:

	<i>black</i>	<i>white</i>
2-year	74%	26%
private	42%	58%
public (under 12,000)	35%	65%
public (over 12,000)	46%	54%

When I began this study, I was interested in “taking the pulse” of the field of black literature in an effort to determine what the future appears to hold for this extremely important and exciting area of academic inquiry. In addition to concluding that, in my judgment, the classroom materials and authors studied are excellent, that the courses are firmly a part of many of the department and university programs around the country, and that the discipline is being taught by persons who are academically well prepared for their teaching assignments, I must also conclude that, based on the numbers of students demonstrating interest in the courses, the field is healthy indeed. The inquiry about the “number of students, by percentage, enrolled in black literature courses each academic year at individual schools,” for example, shows that some 50% of the schools have 50 or more students enrolled each year, that nearly 20% enroll 100 or more students each year, and that 8% of the largest public colleges and universities enroll more than 300 students each year. The complete results are as follows:

	<i>under 20</i>	<i>20-49</i>	<i>50-99</i>	<i>100-300</i>	<i>over 300</i>
2-year	26%	26%	36%	12%	—
private	24%	45%	22%	8%	1%
public (under 12,000)	12%	38%	28%	20%	2%
public (over 12,000)	2%	12%	38%	40%	8%

Of particular importance at this time of rapid college and university enrollment decline on a national scale is the result of the inquiry about whether enrollments in black literature courses are presently “increasing,” “decreasing,” or “holding stable.” The rather heartening results of that inquiry are:

	<i>increasing</i>	<i>decreasing</i>	<i>holding stable</i>
2-year	9%	41%	50%
private	16%	24%	60%
public (under 12,000)	20%	24%	56%
public (over 12,000)	20%	16%	64%

At a time, then, when especially senior college and university enrollment has declined more than ten per cent nationwide, as it has during the last three years, and when, during the same period of time, the number of English majors, the largest group of students traditionally enrolled in literature courses, has declined nearly fifty per cent at most colleges and universities, the fact that at almost 80 per cent of the senior institutions enrollments in black literature courses are either holding stable or actually continuing to increase indicates clearly that black literature in America is very much “alive and well.”

