Building Coalitions between Women's Studies and Black Studies: What Are the Realities?

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By Ann Cathey Carver

When the idea of building coalitions between women’s studies programs and Black or Hispanic studies programs was mentioned to me, my initial reaction was, “Fantastic! Women of all races and cultures have so many things in common, there should be many areas of cooperation for the mutual benefit of both programs—especially in this period when budget cuts and the ‘back to basics’ attitude are rampant on campuses across the country.” Then I began to think seriously about the possibilities of such coalitions. To do so, I had to shift my focus from the hypothetical “what should be” to the concrete “what is.” Therefore, I focused on the two programs I know intimately, the Black Studies Program and the Women’s Studies Program on my own campus, the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (UNCC). I could think of various possibilities. I could think of a multitude of problems. And I can now name four “realities” which I think help identify both the possibilities and the problems accurately.

Reality #1: No two situations are the same.

That sounds like a cliché, but its truth is basic to all other considerations.

In most colleges, Black studies programs were established long before anyone was thinking about women’s studies. And, in most cases, Black students initiated the process. They voiced needs and made requests for relevant Black education which were denied. Then Black students and concerned faculty fought long and hard, for years in many cases, to develop and institutionalize Black studies programs. And there were many casualties in the struggle. Students were expelled. Faculty members were fired. The students who led the struggle for Black studies at UNCC paid the price of imprisonment. And many of the Black studies programs themselves did not survive. Those programs which have survived have done so because of the ongoing day-to-day struggle of dedicated staff and students, not because the academic institutions have now accepted their validity or importance.

Later, women students started the same process to gain relevant programs of women’s education. They, too, voiced needs which were rejected. Again, students and concerned faculty struggled long and hard to conceptualize and institutionalize women’s studies programs.

Because both Black and women’s studies programs grew out of struggle, and because they offer an interdisciplinary vision which does not fit the traditional academic structure, they have evolved through several approaches and into a variety of forms. There have been two basic approaches used in developing both Black studies programs and women’s studies programs. One has been the course-oriented approach, which adopts the traditional curriculum definitions: that is, a program consists of a list of courses a student should master to have sufficient knowledge to succeed in the academic world and in society at large. The second basic approach has been the process-oriented approach, which recognizes that the very structures and processes of white male learning are oppressive to women and to Black people. And it focuses on creating new forms and ways of learning which address the growth of the total person, from that person’s own perspective—the Black perspective and the female perspective.

Naturally, the programs growing out of these two approaches will be quite different. In addition, each program’s structure has been influenced by the social, political, and economic realities of its educational institution and community. As a result, for both Black studies and women’s studies, there are “programs” resembling “departments”—concentrations with autonomous core courses but with other courses being taught in traditional departments; and there are “programs” that are “centers,” offering enrichment programs and services but with all courses being taught in traditional departments. Some programs offer majors, minors, or graduate work.

All this diversity precludes a universal formula or format that would lead easily to building coalitions between Black and women’s studies programs. Rather, the degree and methods of cooperation possible will be determined by the realities of each situation.

Reality #2: All too often, the faculty and students of the Women’s Studies Program and of the Black Studies Program on the same campus are ignorant of what the other program actually offers.

This is a painful admission, but it is true on many campuses. Many women’s studies programs are predominantly white. Very few of the staff will have taken Black studies courses. Few may feel it their responsibility to be knowledgeable about the philosophy, curriculum, and scope of services and activities of the Black Studies Program on their campus. It is simply that old unintentional, unconscious racism at work. When we think of women’s concerns, we think of women who are like us. And we tend to forget the others or to feel their concerns aren’t really important to us. But we do feel our concerns should be important to them, and we’re baffled when they don’t participate in our program. And there we are, divided by that old “we”/“they” thinking.

And that same “we”/“they” attitude helps keep the faculty and students of many Black studies programs from finding out what the Women’s Studies Program on their campus actually offers. The Black faculty and students may be aware of racial bias in the Women’s Studies Program. The absence of white women students in Black studies courses focusing on Black women or on Black male-female sex roles may confirm suspicion that white women still attach no importance to the concerns or perspectives of Black women.
Obviously, no coalition is possible until each program is fully aware of the realities of the other. A first step might be a day's workshop or a weekend retreat in which the staff and representative students of each group present the history, philosophy, curriculum design, course offerings, services, and community activities of their program, followed by discussion. Such discussion may lead to the acceptance of beliefs critical to cooperation and coalition: Each program is a valid field of study in its own right. Neither program is a frill. Neither program is compensatory education. Both programs are legitimate academic endeavors. And they are equally legitimate, and they are equally important. Unless these truths are accepted by both groups, each will believe their program is really the important one and will continue to assume that the other program can be subordinated to theirs without much sacrifice.

Furthermore, unless the truth that each program is in itself a legitimate academic endeavor informs all discussions of cooperation, the administration might gain the excuse it needs to cut back or even do away with one or both programs. There are two definitions of the word "coalition": while we are thinking of coalition as "a temporary alliance of distinct parties or programs for joint action or to achieve a common purpose," the administration may choose to use the second definition of coalition, "the union of things separate into a single body or group." Such a consolidation of the two programs, which would preserve only what they have in common, would, in my opinion, be counterproductive. Neither the specific needs of Black students nor the specific needs of women students as a whole would be met.

We must know how important the differences between the two programs are, and we must know that those differences are positive as well as problematic for coalition building. We must know why and how both programs are legitimate and necessary.

Reality #3: The student must come first.

Women's studies and Black studies definitely have one feature in common: both were created to meet the needs of students. That is their source and their strength. Both programs will survive only as long as they are effectively addressing the needs of Black and women students, no matter how large or small the budget and staff. Can the students participating in each program benefit from more cooperation?

First, the possibilities. I know from personal experience that white women students can benefit greatly from participation in Black studies. It was through my studying and teaching Afro-American history and literature at an all-Black college and then at UNCC, plus my active participation in the struggle to conceptualize and institutionalize the UNCC Black Studies Program, that I learned more about who I am as a white woman than in all my prior formal education. Through Black studies I realized I can never work for my freedom alone. I saw that the attitudes, institutions, power structures, and control mechanisms which produced and perpetuate sexism and racism are totally interrelated.

It was also through my Black studies experience that I arrived at a functioning multicultural view of life. And I do believe a multicultural vision is necessary if any genuine sisterhood is to be achieved among women of different races and heritages, and if any real coalitions for social and political change are to be sustained. Multicultural vision develops as one gains an in-depth experiential knowledge of at least one culture distinctly different from one's own. Black studies gave that to me. And it has given it to every white student I know who has become deeply involved in the UNCC Black Studies Program.

Does women's studies offer anything of particular value to Black students? Most of the Black women who have taken women's studies courses at UNCC and who have participated in other aspects of the Women's Studies Program have reported in course evaluations and in informal conversations that the major benefit for them has been the opportunity to focus on their experiences as women and to sort out the socialization and repression that are directed at them as women and as Blacks. Women's studies helps them to identify sexism within the Black community and to develop positive strategies for dealing with it, through the Black Studies Program and in their personal lives.

The second benefit consistently acknowledged has been a more accurate perception of white women's experience. As white women tend to stereotype Black women as welfare mothers in poverty, Black women tend to stereotype white women as upper-class, pampered dilettantes. Black students also found most helpful: (1) the sustained interaction and sharing among the women of the two races in classes where trust is built, and (2) the study of materials which presented an accurate picture of the experiences of women—on many economic levels, both urban and rural, young and old, past and present. Finally, some Black women who participated in the Women's Studies Program felt they learned some new techniques for gaining control of their lives.

While both Black and white women students can benefit from involvement in both programs, in reality, two problems block such interaction. First, there are differences in the students' priorities. For Black women and men, their positive cultural identity, as well as the identity by which society labels and oppresses them, is their racial identity. They are first and foremost Black. Their survival depends primarily on overcoming the obstacles imposed by institutionalized attitudes, rules, and behaviors based on race. Black women must also overcome the obstacles based on sex. But the reality is that Black students perceive their Black identity as of primary concern, and history and common sense show that, over all, they are right. This means that women's studies courses and activities will have a relatively low priority for many Black women.

For white women students, priorities are just the opposite. Their own definition of self is first and foremost as "woman," and they hardly perceive "white" as an identity at all. White is the dominant culture surrounding them. It's not unlike the way people normally are barely conscious of the air they breathe; it's their natural environment. Only when dunked under water do they consciously think, "I'm an air animal." Also, white women's survival depends on overcoming obstacles based primarily on sex. Thus, they may see no need to be involved in Black studies at all.

A second problem is endemic to both groups of students: a general lack of interest in learning about anything that does not
directly contribute to "making it" in the career of one's choice currently affects enrollments in general, not only in Black studies and women's studies. But it is a factor to be considered in coalition building. Today at UNCC, the majority of white students who take Black studies courses are (a) public school teachers returning to renew certificates, and (b) students who couldn't fit anything else into their schedules or who thought the course would be easy.

Moreover, the majority of academic advisers refuse to counsel white students to sign up for Black studies courses, even after they have been encouraged to do so. Similarly, very few faculty members will encourage any students to take women's studies courses. Some actively counsel students not to take them.

Black students' lack of interest in women's studies is additionally compounded by some perceptions, which, whether accurate or not, are real to the students. First, the perception already mentioned, that women's studies programs are geared to meet the needs of upper-class white women. Second, many Black women perceive feminism in general and women's studies in particular as "anti-man" rather than "pro-woman." This perception creates a particular barrier in the South, where the Black male is an endangered species—indeed, through prisons, law enforcement in general, the armed forces, and self-destructive behavior, in danger of extinction. Black women are intensely aware of the danger this poses to the survival of the Black race. Therefore, many Black women feel the responsibility as well as the desire to take the initiative in providing opportunities for Black women and Black men to attack sexism together and replace destructive sex role behavior with new, mutually-sustaining attitudes and relationships. Consequently, many Black women feel antipathy to what they perceive as separatist stances in women's studies programs and believe that only Black lesbians would be at home in them.

Third, some Black women believe that, intentionally or not, the women's movement is a mechanism for causing fragmentation in the Black liberation movement, by siphoning off the creative energies of Black women. They believe Black women and men can solve their own problems within their own movement and community, without getting bogged down in "white folks' problems."

Reality #4: The programs are in danger.

All programs need students, staff, and money. What, then, are possible areas for joint action and cooperation between women's studies and Black studies programs that can meet these common needs?

Area #1: Full Time Enrollment.

The primary way to justify budgetary and staff requests on most campuses is through Full Time Enrollments. Black studies and women's studies programs may be able to take joint action to encourage student enrollment in both programs.

At UNCC, for example, one strategy developed by Black Studies has been adopted by Women's Studies. Both programs offer training sessions for all faculty, peer counselors, and students active in the programs before preregistration week. These faculty and students may then knowledgeably counsel and recruit new students for courses being offered the following semester by both programs. The training session helps them see how courses from the two programs can fulfill general degree requirements and support a variety of majors, as well as how the courses are of intellectual and personal value. A seemingly minor technicality has been important: making sure that scheduling of offerings in the two programs avoids conflicts.

A third technique has been to schedule a presentation by each program during orientation week in which not only do faculty and (most important) students outline the courses and services offered, but the students also give "testimonials" and introduce the faculty to the other students.

Area #2: Course Offerings.

Cooperation can be very important in placing new courses. For example, some Black studies programs have not previously offered such courses as The Black Woman or Sex Roles in Black America. On our campus, the courses were developed and are taught in the Black Studies Department by the Director of Black Studies, Dr. Bertha Maxwell. On campuses with Black studies programs, this may be more appropriate than a women's studies program unilaterally deciding to put such courses under the women's studies rubric. Both programs can benefit from joint strategies to effect university approval of new additions to their curriculum and joint strategies to head off potential cuts in their existing course offerings.

Area #3: Faculty/Staff.

Both Black studies and women's studies have, from the beginning, had to struggle with the "Joint Appointment Syndrome." Few in academe believe that Black studies and women's studies are full-fledged academic endeavors which deserve or need full-time faculty appointments. Administrations may fight to deny all requests for a new faculty position and finally, grudgingly, allow only a half-time position. Thus, we are left with joint appointments and with programs trying to function...
with mere bits and pieces of faculty's energy and attention. Therefore, combined action to win new full-time positions for both programs can be important. There also need to be consistent combined strategies to fight all moves to terminate faculty in either program.

Area #4: Resources and Services.

Most women's studies and Black studies programs offer learning experiences and services beyond the classroom and, often, beyond the campus. At UNCC, one of the most fruitful areas of cooperation has been joint sponsorship of films, lectures, concerts, minicourses, and special events which are open to the entire university and community. The two programs have shared the costs, the credit, and the benefits. For example, each year at UNCC, the Women's Studies Program, the Black Studies Program, and the International Studies Program cosponsor UNCC's Women's Week. The three programs work together at every stage—planning, paying, publicizing, participating, and, as a result, getting more students, recognition, and community support. The Women's Studies and Black Studies programs also jointly sponsor a series of "Bag Lunch" miniseminars in the student union. These have been consistently well attended. We also cosponsor a variety of such other activities as poetry readings and art exhibits.

Area #5: Money.

On many campuses the Black Studies budget and the Women's Studies budget will not be equal. The Black Studies budget may be larger because the program may be better established. Two cautions: (1) if the coalition is to work at all, the sharing of money must not become one-sided, even accidentally, or the coalition will dissolve, leaving bad feelings and greater isolation than before; (2) beware of tampering with established program budgets—don't give anyone an excuse to maim or kill either program or both.

On the other hand, the two programs can very effectively combine efforts to get additional money, especially through grants, both for work on campus and for work in the community. For example, it may be useful to assess, neighborhood by neighborhood, the educational needs of Black and white women who are not being touched by formal education, and who might respond to courses offered in their neighborhoods. A grant may also be attainable jointly for a series of workshops and a retreat for Black Studies and Women's Studies staff and students to assess the realities of their situation and to formulate workable strategies for coalition building on their campus.

Coalition building? Yes, there are possibilities. There are also problems. And there are dangers. The important thing is that we find out what the realities are for our own campuses: (1) What does each program really offer? (2) What are the students' needs, and can the students benefit from more joint action? (3) Are there areas of combined action which can equally benefit both programs? (4) Are the staff and students of both programs willing to make the commitment to spend the time and energy and hard work it will take to deal with differences between the two perspectives positively and to develop workable strategies for equally beneficial cooperation? If the answer is "Yes," the faculty and students of both programs will grow (which sometimes hurts) and will learn a great deal about themselves and others with whom they share this little globe. If the answer is "No," then each program's following its separate path with only limited contact will be less destructive than superficial coalition building based on assumptions and hypothetical ideas of needs which may have no basis in reality.

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