

[Black Student Activists and the Hunger for History](#)

Blog Post published by Shawn Leigh Alexander on Tuesday, November 17, 2015

Black Student Activists and the Hunger for History

By Ibram X. Kendi

Mizzou activists unabashedly planted their struggle in history this semester. They termed their activist group the Concerned Student 1950, a collective of Black students “dedicated to eradicating forces that keep black students systematically oppressed.” And they unabashedly planted their list of eight demands in history. Their third demand read, “We demand that the University of Missouri meets the Legion of Black Collegians’ demands that were presented in 1969 for the betterment of the black community.”

For me, the historical purview of these activists was both thrilling and tragic. It was thrilling for me to see Mizzou students and their activist peers at other institutions over the last week recognize that their current campus debates, slights, and demands of change were simultaneously new and old. These Black students and their allies seem to be seeking out the racist old to make better sense of the racist new. It is thrilling these Black students are looking into the racial history of their campuses, into the Black campus movement (BCM).

But what’s tragic is I suspect many of these students cannot find any comprehensive accounts of the BCM on their own campuses to inform their present struggles. And so, as much as I’ve been thrilled about our national looks back at the Black campus movement, I have been horrified. I have been horrified because there is still not much to see.

The historical literature on the Black Campus Movement has burst onto the scene over the last thirteen years since Wayne Glasker’s *Black Students in the Ivory Tower* (2002) on the BCM at UPENN and Joy Williamson-Lott’s *Black Power on Campus* (2003) on the BCM at University of Illinois. In 2009, Stefan Bradley released *Harlem vs. Columbia*. The next year Fabio Rojas’s *From Black Power to Black Studies* appeared and Jeffrey Turner’s *Sitting In and Speaking Out* shared some stories of the BCM in the South. In 2012, three more studies hit libraries, Martha Biondi’s *The Black Revolution on Campus*, my own, *The Black Campus Movement*, and the special issue in the *Journal of African American Studies* on the origins of Black studies, edited by Jonathan Fenderson, James B. Stewart, and Kabria Baumgartner. Richard D. Benson’s *Fighting for Our Place in the Sun* came out last year, giving us a better picture of Malcolm X’s influence on Black student activism in North Carolina. Shirletta Kinchen’s fascinating *Black Power in the Bluff City*, on youth activism in Memphis, is [due out](#) in a few months. And there are a couple more major studies in the pipeline, most notably Bradley’s account of BCM throughout the Ivy League.

Despite this recent burst in books on the subject, we still have merely scratched the surfaced on this massive Black campus movement. We have yet to detail what happened on the vast majority of the more than 500 campuses in 49 states that Black students activists rocked towards diversifying from 1965 to 1972. Even at Mizzou, there is no major history on the BCM. The story of those amazing Legions of Black Collegians, founded in 1968, has yet to be told.

The lack of research on the BCM after all these years remains an absolute travesty. We have scholars sitting in African American Studies departments and programs that were founded during the BCM nearly five decades ago, and they have yet to pay homage through their pens. We have Black and antiracist scholars sitting in faculty lines that were forged during the BCM—myself included—and we have yet to walk over to our college and university archives and start mass producing that all-important history on our campus's BCM. The story of Black student activists old must be told, and told in careful detail on every campus to feed the Black student activists of today. And it does not necessarily have to be a monograph, nor do scholars have to do it alone. Recently, Swarthmore historian Allison Dorsey taught a class that put together a remarkably comprehensive [online](#) documentary exhibit of the BCM at Swarthmore.

But the work, in some form, must be done on the Black Campus Movement. Our students are hungry. They are hungry for their history as they continue to make history.

[Ibram X. Kendi](#) is an assistant professor of African-American history at the University of Florida and the author of *The Black Campus Movement*. His second book, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*, will be published by Nation Books in April. Follow on [Twitter](#).

Posted in:

[Of the Study of Race and Culture in America](#)