

Minutes of the meeting of the Special Committee on Black Studies.

Tuesday, May 21, 1968. Lodge 6. 1:30 - 3:45 p.m.

Members present: Faculty: Charles Gilbert
Asmarom Legesse
Frank C. Pierson (Chairman)
John Shackford (Secretary)
Jon Van Til
Harrison Wright

Students: Marilyn Allman
Al Dietrich
Clinton Etheridge
Marilyn Holifield
Don Mizell

Origins of The Special Committee on Black Studies: Black students at Swarthmore felt that not enough of the academic material taught here was relevant to them, and also that the history of the black man had been neglected. As a result of this feeling SASS established a special committee to study what could be done to change this. The report of that committee made six suggestions:

- 1) the establishment of a department for black studies, with a possible major
- 2) the joint establishment of such a department by Swarthmore, Bryn Mawr, and Haverford
- 3) an Institute of Black Studies
- 4) an inter-departmental program of black studies, analagous to that in International Relations
- 5) a lecture series, with course credit
- 6) individual courses with different lecturers each semester.

The report has been sent to department chairmen and will be sent to all members of the present committee. The SASS committee met with President Smith, who then appointed the present joint student-faculty committee to study the problem. It is a new area for

Swarthmore.

Purpose of the Committee: It was felt that the first aim should be to implement some changes for next year, preferably for the fall, but if not, definitely for the spring. The committee should also consider long range changes. There was some feeling that the committee should not necessarily limit itself to the curriculum as stated in President Smith's letter ("...I will continue to encourage departments to be considering what studies can appropriately and effectively be made a part of their offering at the earliest opportunity") but should also discuss larger issues that might develop out of or involve curriculum changes as suggested by the rest of the sentence in President Smith's letter ("but it is my hope that your committee will give focus to all of our efforts and see how individual additions to our program may build into some larger and more coherent program."). (These larger issues were undefined.) The committee is not a decision-making committee but a recommending body; a body that should make strong, specific proposals that will then be implemented by other groups.

The relation of black studies to the liberal arts tradition and to the college: It would have a large appeal to the entire College; it would be relevant to the contemporary scene; it would cover neglected areas of study. The SASS Committee in discussion with President Smith reach three goals for the program:

- 1) the presentation of different perspectives (through black teachers dealing with questions of identity and identification)
- 2) broadening the base of courses in the College
- 3) lessen tension between black and white students on campus.

Certain offerings in the black studies area might meet the distribution requirement.

The relation of black studies to existing courses and departments: Negro writers should be included in courses in American literature. In the social sciences black materials would have to be treated within the larger scheme of the discipline, since the social sciences aim at generalization and away from particulars (perhaps literature and history can deal more with the particulars themselves). This brought up the question of existing black studies programs. Education is quite uniform in all colleges throughout the United States, including Negro colleges in the South (trustees are conservative). It is only recently that black materials are being included in curricula. Last year five Swarthmore students took a course in African civilization sponsored by Lincoln University and Haverford. The course tried to cover too much and was therefore superficial. The people in charge were of limited sensibility and the course was put together too quickly. The contact with the African students taking the course was very valuable because they were aware of whole areas of material neglected or misrepresented.

Discussion returned to existing departments: Black materials could be treated in economics courses, but black perspective would not be relevant--the courses would just apply established economic principles to special materials. In political science, where there are fewer established principles, and where any analytical system is fraught with implied values, black perspective is more relevant,

especially as a corrective to limitations in the value structure of the present systems. One specific course in black materials, to build the present controversy into the curriculum, seems feasible. An entire black curriculum is hard to see. In history: black subject matter from the U.S. and Africa are quite suitable and valid for study and should be taught in the College. The problem of the relation of black perspective to academic disciplines can be seen in the anthropology and history of Africa. When written from a black perspective, one learns a lot about the author but very little about the country he is supposedly describing. Max Gluckman represents the opposite extreme: he treats apartheid as a perfect example of conflict theory, but never raises the moral problems involved. In music and fine arts black studies may hardly be practical for a small college. There are, however, valid areas of study: ethno-musicology, comparative music traditional and modern African art.

This raised the question of the qualifications of teachers of black studies courses: is it more important that the teacher be black (with the black perspective) than educationally qualified? The ideal would be both, but they are rare and in great demand. There are many ways of dealing with this problem. Part-time teachers could be shared with other institutions in the area, or could commute once a week from Washington or New York (though such an arrangement does not give as much to the college as a regular teacher). Two visiting professors are brought to the campus each year, one for a semester from Europe, one for six weeks--one or both of these might be a specialist in black studies, perhaps from

Africa. Or perhaps an exchange of faculty with some other institution, on a one to one basis. Gerald McWorter at the Yale conference May 10-11 suggested, however, that small colleges should not get these rare black teachers. Instead he felt that a Federally financed black institute should be set up to centralize rather than disperse this part of the black movement. Other possibilities are that whites could serve until Negroes are trained, perhaps consulting with Negro teachers elsewhere, bringing them in occasionally, or perhaps even sharing a course.

This led to a discussion as to whether "black perspective" is necessary, relevant, or even entirely valid for courses dealing with black materials. There was strong sentiment in favor of having black teachers, even when less academically qualified than whites (perhaps conventional education--the Ph.D.--makes anyone, black or white, unfit to teach from the black perspective). There was strong sentiment that educational qualifications were more important than black perspective (full-time teachers would have to be qualified to teach introductory and perhaps other courses). "Black perspectives" is a term that means many things. There are many black perspectives. Two meanings were discussed: First, it means special sensitivities and attitudes, especially to problems of identity and identification. Secondly, it carries overtones of political perspectives--something that academics should probably try to overcome. This last point was answered: black perspective does not imply propaganda and ideology--the African civilization course at Lincoln could have been improved if the students had had more say in what it would cover.

The History Department is presently considering Professor Hershberg (white, getting his Ph.D. at Stanford, doing his research in Philadelphia, associated with the University of Pennsylvania) as a candidate to teach a course in Negro history in the U.S. next fall. Some would rather wait and find a black teacher. Some would like to find out more about Professor Hershberg. It was suggested that candidates who will teach black studies be introduced to members from SASS or perhaps meet with this committee. Such a policy is not new, some departments already do this (dramatics, philosophy). Many of the most articulate blacks have not come out of educational systems. Swarthmore College has a tradition of recognizing diverse kinds of preparation; the only firm requirement is the ability to teach and professional competence.

Planning ahead: where do we start? what are the priorities (courses, departments, types of materials, personnel)? It was suggested that the make-up of the present committee represents the priorities.

The next meeting: Tuesday, May 28, at 12 noon, in the round-table room in Sharples Dining Hall for lunch. Each member is asked to consider the area in which he is involved and to come up with practical proposals. The recommendations of the SASS special committee will be sent to the members of this committee.