



“Be Your Own Man”: Student Activism and the Birth of Black Studies at Amherst College, 1965–1972

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WHEN Horace Porter '72 (Figure 1) arrived on the Amherst College campus in fall 1968, he was awestruck by this “foreign” place in the North.¹ A young African American man from a working-class family in rural Georgia, he had never traveled to New England nor had he ever lived in a predominantly white community. During Porter’s first semester, personal racial incidents coupled with larger problems of discrimination, political disenfranchisement, and class inequity divided the homosocial space of the college along racial lines. After befriending African American students on campus and at nearby liberal arts colleges such as Smith College and Mount Holyoke College, he gained a strong sense of community and “intellectual possibility.”² He became more active, more critical, and more inquisitive as he questioned the gendered construction of the Amherst College curriculum, which he deemed deficient, given its Eurocentric focus and its marginalization of the black male experience. In response, he and other student activists began a process of advocating for institutional change and renewal, first with proposals, meetings with faculty and

¹Horace Porter, *The Making of a Black Scholar: From Georgia to the Ivy League* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2003), p. 45.

²Porter, *The Making of a Black Scholar*, p. 54. The Five Colleges Consortium in western Massachusetts, established in 1965, included three liberal arts colleges, Amherst College, Smith College, and Mount Holyoke College; a fourth liberal arts college, Hampshire College, which opened in 1970; and the flagship state university, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

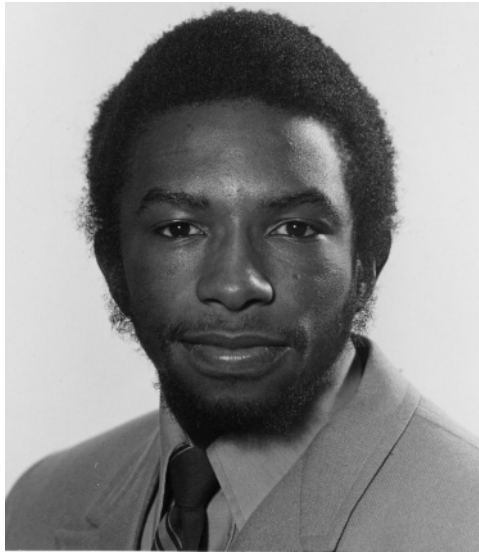


FIG. 1.—Horace Porter '72, an African American student at Amherst College, played an integral role in the development of the Department of Black Studies (1971). Courtesy of Amherst College Archives.

administrators, and rallies and moratoria, which culminated in a fourteen-hour student occupation on the Amherst College campus on 18 February 1970.

This essay traces how a group of outspoken young African American men from socioeconomically diverse backgrounds redefined the curriculum at Amherst College and how the faculty and administration reacted to this redefinition, before and during the occupation, a period that coincided with the height of the Black Student Movement from 1965 to 1972. These young men sought to reform the curriculum from its perceived state of deficiency and reinvigorate it through the institutionalization of black studies. They argued that coursework on the diversity of the black experience in the world would help to cultivate a greater sense of wholeness and inclusion across the campus and better prepare all students to live and work in a multiracial society. In their fight for black studies, these young African American men defined and defended their own learning, knowledge,

and teaching. Essentially these students started black studies by doing black studies, by which I mean that they engaged in careful intellectual scrutiny and critique to build an emerging field of study at an elite liberal arts college.

These student activists challenged the college's curriculum, but not the college's institutional mission, which they actually endorsed. For decades, Amherst College, an elite liberal arts college for men in western Massachusetts, set as its mission to educate the whole man and supply him with "intellectual competence and awareness of problems and methods" to be global citizens.³ Porter and other student activists appreciated the college's history and tradition of educating the whole man, the emphasis on student-directed learning, and the focus in the 1960s on cultural awareness and global diversity. Because they wanted Amherst College to live up to its stated mission, they seized on these liberal arts ideas of education to frame their arguments for curricular reform. In other words, African American male activists brilliantly invoked the ethos of educating the whole man to argue for the legitimacy of studying and learning about the black experience. Not only were these students educational activists, but they were also advocates for a liberal education.

The historiography on African American student activism in American higher education in the mid to late twentieth century has flourished in recent years, particularly as it relates to the Black Student Movement. Much of the scholarship has shifted from institutional case studies to a national history that centers on student activism. This shift highlights the impact of the Black Power Movement on student activists across the nation, which helped to spearhead what some historians have called a "campus revolution" or "student movement."⁴ Only a

³*Amherst College Bulletin (Catalog 1967–1968)* 57, no. 1 (Amherst, Mass.: October 1967): 29.

⁴Ibram H. Rogers refers to the rise of black studies programs and departments as the "Black Campus Movement" while Martha Biondi calls the development of black studies a "revolution." The scholarship on the Black Student Movement is vast, but the most recent studies include Rogers, *The Black Campus Movement: Black Students and the Racial Reconstitution of Higher Education, 1965–1972* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) and Biondi, *The Black Revolution on Campus* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

few scholars have considered the wide variation among types of universities and colleges in American higher education, and even fewer have examined the importance of institutional mission, perhaps because the research university dominates the scholarship.⁵ Yet the research university struggled to define its mission in the post-World War II period. As historian John Thelin argues, "universities in the United States after World War II were hard pressed to identify a central, cohesive mission."⁶ In contrast, the liberal arts college boasted a clearly defined mission. A distinctively American institution, the liberal arts college, as defined by scholar Hugh Hawkins, is a "four-year institution of higher education, focusing its attention on candidates for the B.A. degree who are generally between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one, an institution resistant to highly specific vocational preparation and insisting on a considerable breadth of studies."⁷ Just as local, regional, national and global forces shaped student protests in the 1960s and 1970s, so too did institutional missions, which were caught up with gendered and racial constructions.

The Black Student Movement was surely heterogeneous; however, the scholarship might lead one to believe that most student activists who engaged in direct action, through occupations and sit-ins, were militant or even radical. Porter and others were certainly political, but far from radical. The student occupation at Amherst College was not a sit-in, given that students refused entry to the buildings, and it was not a takeover, given the degree of light physical force involved to hold the space and the short duration of this action. These student activists engaged in an act of civil disobedience to claim space, to challenge a college's curriculum, to gain public attention, and, most importantly, to declare their presence. Interestingly, the

⁵A notable exception is Diane Brady's *Fraternity* (Spiegel & Grau, 2012), which tells the story of five African American male students who faced a myriad of challenges at the College of the Holy Cross in Massachusetts.

⁶John R. Thelin, *A History of American Higher Education*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), p. 314.

⁷Hugh Hawkins, "The Making of a Liberal Arts College Identity," *Daedalus* 128, no. 1 (Winter 1999): 23.

Amherst College faculty and administration called this action a takeover; this misnaming demonstrates how the radicalism of the period shaped the discourse and imbued student actions with a kind of militancy that just was not present, especially when compared to other campus protests during the Black Student Movement like the armed takeover by students at Cornell University in 1969.⁸

By focusing on how student activists framed their protest, this local story reveals the mediating forces at work at an elite liberal arts college. This is a story of agency and process that demonstrates how students' intellectual engagement with the politics of an educational institution as well as social movements, such as civil rights and Black Power, informed their activism. Though some of the events at Amherst College conformed to the broader Black Student Movement, African American student activists at Amherst are best characterized as moderate activists with revolutionary ideas. Porter and his peers sought neither to overthrow Amherst College nor to challenge its mission. Actually, Amherst College's distinct institutional mission gave these student activists the ground on which to set their campaign for the institutionalization of black studies. They wished to experience a more democratic and inclusive liberal arts college, and this redefinition subsequently took on revolutionary proportions through curricular innovation and changes to the campus climate.



Founded in 1821 by orthodox Congregationalists, Amherst College sought to train young men for the ministry by offering them a classical education. The college experienced a period of rapid growth, with hundreds of young men enrolled at a given time, including one or two African Americans. One of the first African American college graduates in the nation, Edward

⁸For more on student activism at Cornell University, see Donald A. Downs, *Cornell '69: Liberalism and the Crisis of the American University* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).

Jones, earned his degree from Amherst College in 1826. A few decades later, student enrollment declined and the college fell on hard times, struggling with debt and student dissatisfaction among other problems. William A. Stearns, a Massachusetts native who served as college president from 1854 to 1876, looked to right the ship through capital campaigns and curricular reforms that reinforced the value of a liberal education. The college's aim, Stearns argued, was to "make *men*, full-grown, well-trained, highly educated Christian men."⁹ Amherst College enjoyed increasing popularity with this cultural ideology of manhood and paternalism as well as a conservative tradition of piety.

The changing nature of American higher education during the Civil War era, with the passage of the Morrill Act of 1862 and the rise of the American research university, stirred up questions about the purpose of a liberal education. By the end of the nineteenth century, Amherst College had begun to shift its focus away from piety toward intellectual exploration and training.¹⁰ Under the presidency of theologian George Harris, this liberal arts college set itself apart from the American research university by asserting that a liberal education distinguished "the whole man," a maxim that remained intact for decades.¹¹ By the 1940s, the era of mass education was underway as the American middle class linked higher education to upward social mobility.¹² Amherst College once again reinvented itself, introducing a revised curriculum that emphasized democratic values as well as new institutional policies, but it never veered far from what defined the liberal arts college: the intellectual and moral well-being of its male student body. Amherst's curriculum aimed to impart to "young men a sound,

⁹William A. Stearns, *A Discourse on Educated Manhood, Preached to the Students of Amherst College, August 7, 1859* . . . (Springfield: Samuel Bowles & Co., 1859), p. 3.

¹⁰Thomas Le Duc, *Piety and Intellect at Amherst College, 1865–1912* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1946), p. 138.

¹¹George E. Peterson, *The New England College during the Age of the University* (Amherst, Mass.: Amherst College Press, 1964), p. 38.

¹²David O. Levine, *The American College and the Culture of Aspiration, 1915–1940* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 107.

purposeful education for life.”¹³ African American student activists would soon use this institutional history and these foundational aims as points of contention in their support for black studies.

From the 1940s to the early 1960s, American higher education enjoyed a so-called “golden age,” characterized by rapid growth, public patronage, and government support.¹⁴ The expansion of the student population coupled with the inflow of federal grants to research universities, among other factors, turned the American research university into what economist and University of California president Clark Kerr called a “City of Intellect—a very busy place with a multiplicity of activities.” Kerr contrasted the American research university with the “village of the liberal arts college composed of close friends and colleagues.”¹⁵ A Swarthmore College graduate, Kerr was making a prescient distinction. As many colleges and universities moved toward vocational and preprofessional training in the 1960s and 1970s, scholars eulogized the liberal arts college. Others like Howard R. Bowen, former president of Grinnell College, celebrated these sites of learning, “with their emphasis on the whole person and on freedom of the mind and spirit, provid[ing] a significant link with the traditions of democracy.”¹⁶

When Calvin Plimpton (Figure 2) took the helm as the thirteenth president of Amherst College in 1960, he sought to increase the diversity of the student body while also deepening the college’s liberal arts tradition of critical investigation and discovery. Plimpton knew a lot about this tradition: he graduated from the college in 1939.¹⁷ Prior to serving as

¹³*Bulletin of Amherst College (Annual Catalogue, 1947–1948)* 37, no. 3 (December 1947): 19.

¹⁴Thelin, *Hist. of Am. Higher Education*, p. 260.

¹⁵Clark Kerr, *The Uses of the University*, 5th ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 198.

¹⁶Howard R. Bowen, “Why Preserve Liberal Arts Colleges?” *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* 7, no. 6 (1975): 72.

¹⁷Plimpton’s father, George A. Plimpton, graduated from Amherst College and chaired the Board of Trustees from 1907 to 1936. Plimpton’s brother, Francis, was also an alumnus and later served on the Board of Trustees.



FIG. 2.—Calvin H. Plimpton '39 was the thirteenth president of Amherst College from 1960–1971 (1970). Courtesy of Amherst College Archives.

president, he earned his medical degree from Harvard Medical School, and then worked as a physician and assistant dean of Columbia Medical School. His experiences in liberal arts and medical education informed his educational philosophy; he believed quite strongly in a liberal education, or, in his words, the value of teaching young men to “ask the right questions” and to help them become “balanced thinkers.”¹⁸ One early example of his educational philosophy was the introduction of the

¹⁸“Calvin Plimpton Interviewed by Charles Longworth,” DVD, (Amherst, Mass.: Friends of the Amherst College Library and Pivot Media, 2009); Frances Burns, “Dr.

“person within” admissions policy, whereby admissions officers considered various qualities to evaluate an applicant. In Plimpton’s estimation, this “person within” policy would give rise to a diverse student body, “of city boys and country boys, rich boys and average boys, athletes and physically handicapped boys, Americans and foreigners, boys of all races, of all faiths and even no faith.”¹⁹ Plimpton envisioned a community that would be enriched by diversity.

While Plimpton aimed to make Amherst College more diverse, campus protests and strikes captured media attention, with the Vietnam War as a touchstone. African American students sometimes joined these antiwar protests, particularly as the war escalated in the late 1960s. “We could end up fighting in Viet Nam,” Porter recalled, “if we dropped out of college and forfeited our deferment status.”²⁰ Still the issue of racism in American higher education prevailed among many student activists who protested at colleges and universities across the nation demanding the development of black studies departments, an increase in black student enrollment, and more black faculty and administrators.²¹ As historian Martha Biondi argues, the link between Black Power and the Black Student Movement inspired activists to stress the importance of racial solidarity and to expose the Eurocentric curricular tradition that dominated American higher education.²²

African American students welcomed the ongoing debates about the knowledge economy and the shifts in American higher education, especially as their presence at colleges and universities increased. The civil rights movement and federal legislation, such as the Higher Education Act of 1965, which

Plimpton Hopes to Create Balanced Thinkers: Amherst President-Elect Hates to Drop Medicine,” *Daily Boston Globe*, 7 February 1960.

¹⁹“President of Amherst Decries Rigidity in Admission Policies,” *New York Times*, 5 February 1962.

²⁰Email correspondence with Horace Porter, 29 January 2014.

²¹African American student activists had to negotiate the agenda of white student activists, which sometimes converged. For more on interracial student activism in the 1960s, see Stefan Bradley, *Harlem vs. Columbia University: Black Student Power in the Late 1960s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009).

²²Biondi, *The Black Revolution on Campus*, p. 4.

established financial aid programs for students, contributed to this enrollment increase. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, African Americans comprised around 8.4 percent of the college student population.²³ Many of these students enrolled, not at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) as they had done previously, but at predominantly white institutions (PWIs).²⁴ Only a small percentage of African American students attended selective colleges in the New England area: in the 1965–66 academic year, about one percent or 2,200 African Americans.²⁵ At Amherst College, African American students made up two percent of the student body of approximately 1,200 during the 1966–67 academic year. The African American student population at the college remained fairly constant between fifteen to twenty-five until the 1970s.²⁶

To some activists, the systemic exclusion of African Americans and their history and culture in American higher education, a "standardization of exclusion," as scholar Ibram Rogers calls it, was seemingly willful.²⁷ For example, student activists at San Francisco State College led a strike from November 1968 to March 1969, demanding a more inclusive curriculum that embraced racial and ethnic diversity.²⁸ As the longest

²³James R. Mingle, "The Opening of White Colleges and Universities to Black Students," in *Black Students in Higher Education: Conditions and Experiences in the 1970s*, ed. Gail E. Thomas (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1981), p. 21.

²⁴Kenneth E. Redd, "Historically Black Colleges and Universities: Making a Comeback," *New Directions for Higher Education* 102 (Summer 1998): 35–36.

²⁵S. A. Kendrick, "The Coming Segregation of Our Selective Colleges," *College Board Review* 66 (Winter 1967): 6.

²⁶Ronald D. Varney, "A History of Black Awareness at Amherst," *The Amherst Student*, 23 February 1970. The total number of African American students on campus during the years under examination in this essay is unavailable. Amherst College did not keep track of race or ethnicity in a comprehensive way until after 1974. The figures I have gathered come from newspaper articles as well as materials available in the Amherst College Archives.

²⁷Rogers, *The Black Campus Movement, Higher Education*, p. 4.

²⁸For more on this strike, see the report by William H. Orrick, *Shut It Down!: A College in Crisis: San Francisco State College, October 1968–April 1969; a Report to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence* (Washington, D.C.: Supt. of Docs., U.S. Government Print Office, 1969) and a scholarly examination in Noliwe Rooks, *White Money/Black Power: The Surprising History of African American Studies and the Crisis of Race in Higher Education* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 2006), chapter 2 and Biondi, *The Black Revolution on Campus*, chapter 2.

student strike in American history, this episode launched the first department of black studies at a four-year college.²⁹ Similarly, protestors staged dramatic occupations at liberal arts colleges including Swarthmore College in January 1969 and then Wesleyan University in February 1969. The building occupation became one way to enlighten members of the community about the problem of institutional racism and racial exclusion. Looking back on his activism as an African American student at Swarthmore College, Clinton Etheridge surmised, “What we wanted was to make the system work better, not to break the system.”³⁰ African American student activists at Amherst College even studied the 1969 documentary “San Francisco State: On Strike” and other campus occupations to understand student strategies and tactics. The issues of black enrollment, racial exclusion, and marginalization would become a few of the many challenges that Calvin Plimpton had to face during his tenure.

African American students devised various strategies, ranging from temporary social assimilation to conscious empowerment, to negotiate their presence at PWIs. For instance, African American student Junius Williams ’65 simply wished “to be accepted, to fit in” on the Amherst campus so he joined a fraternity, Alpha Delta Phi, and kept “quiet and learn[ed].”³¹ Williams’s increasing participation in demonstrations in the South began to broaden his outlook. Toward the end of his college career, he published op-eds on anti-black racism and the civil rights movement in the college’s student-run newspaper, *The Amherst Student*; he lectured about his involvement in voter registration drives; and he led the on-campus

²⁹Fabio Rojas, *From Black Power to Black Studies: How a Radical Social Movement Became an Academic Discipline* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), p. 35.

³⁰Clinton Etheridge, “The Crucible of Character: A Personal Account of Swarthmore’s Crisis of 1969,” *Swarthmore College Bulletin* (March 2005): 85.

³¹Junius Williams, *Unfinished Agenda: Urban Politics in the Era of Black Power* (Berkeley, Calif.: North Atlantic Books, 2014), p. 25. Students like Williams, who himself has gone on to become a prominent lawyer and civil rights activist, paved the way for other student activists who benefitted from a larger, conscious black college student population.

interracial student group, Students for Racial Equality. A few years later, Claudius Alex Gordon '69, an African American student, sought to enact educational reform by proposing the development of a summer program, called the Bridge Program, which targeted African American children and youth to close the educational gap between them and whites. A similar initiative, specifically a rigorous summer tutoring program for students of color, had been adopted and instituted at Dartmouth College in 1968.³² Student activists like Gordon worked directly with African American youth partly to help build a pipeline of future liberal arts college students. This burgeoning student activism, which called for stronger community ties and an increase in black student enrollment, demonstrated a sense of social awareness and black student empowerment.

Nevertheless African American student activists at Amherst College described experiencing not so much a "standardization of exclusion," but rather a standardization of marginalization wherein they felt peripheral to the college community. There was no better example of this than the virtual absence of black history and culture in the curriculum. In the early 1960s, the curriculum aimed to impart to every male student a "liberal education . . . to develop the student's power of using abstractions in a way that will enable him to deal with the great diversity of experience."³³ Yet prior to 1965, there were no courses on black history, literature, and music or even African and Asian languages. A male graduate thus completed "a minimum of one hundred and twenty-eight credit hours," including "three two-year sequence courses in natural science, social science, and English-Humanities," major requirements, and "prescribed work" in language, public speaking, and physical education.³⁴ Junius Williams '65 appreciated the interrogative learning embedded in his coursework during his first year: he took "physics, calculus, European history, humanities, French, and English,"

³²"Project ABC Dartmouth tutoring plan aids minority students," *Boston Globe*, 8 September 1968.

³³*Amherst College Bulletin (Catalog 1958-1959)* 48, no. 1 (1958): 20.

³⁴*Amherst College Bulletin (Catalog 1964-1965)* 54, no. 1 (1964): 48.

which reflected the “stated goal of preparation of the whole man.”³⁵ However, he found “the whole man” ideology to be “an uncomfortable fit,” as it was defined in the curriculum, because it “produced young men who were analytical and critical, but who believed in very little except themselves and their unchallenged position in a world of privilege created by their forefathers and mothers.”³⁶

Not only did Williams and other student activists object to this curricular absence of the black experience, but they also viewed it as an affront to their manhood. Horace Porter recalls that Dean Robert A. Ward ’57 encouraged the male student body to “be your own man.” To Porter, this mantra rang hollow given the social and racial inequalities that plagued the nation as well as the marginalization of African Americans on the Amherst campus. Porter asked rhetorically, “How could we be our own men in a system that was racially and politically rigged? How could we be our own men when the courses we took were basically the same ones taken by the men who sat in our nation’s highest councils of power?”³⁷ African American student activists were enrolled at an elite liberal arts college that privileged white men. In speeches and memos presented to the administration, Porter and his peers made no bones about calling Amherst College “a racist white man’s college.”³⁸ They argued that the curriculum and campus climate threatened their sense of self as black men, which was contrary to a liberal education and the whole man ideology.

Yet nationally the black male presence was front and center given the masculine rhetoric of the Black Power Movement. Black Power writings and ideology no doubt shaped student beliefs and actions. For instance, student activists decried the Eurocentric academic tradition, calling it an offshoot of the broader systemic condition of domestic colonialism. Coined by preeminent black studies intellectual Harold Cruse and

³⁵Williams, *Unfinished Agenda*, p. 21.

³⁶Williams, *Unfinished Agenda*, p. 91.

³⁷Porter, *The Making of a Black Scholar*, p. 67.

³⁸“Report—Part II [undated],” General Files, Department of Black Studies, Amherst College Archives.

referred to in Black Power writings, domestic colonialism was a major concept that characterized the exploitative relationship of white (domination) to black (subjugation).³⁹ These terms gave activists a vocabulary for understanding their experiences at a predominantly white liberal arts college for men. Moreover, Black Power ideology enabled some of these student activists to see themselves as autonomous black men. For instance, political activist and Black Panther Party leader Eldridge Cleaver wrote and published his 1968 memoir, *Soul on Ice*, wherein he condemned racial injustice and colonialism, and promoted black masculinist radicalism: “We shall have our manhood. We shall have it or the earth will be leveled by our attempts to gain it.”⁴⁰ Moreover, Porter recalls that James Brown’s 1968 funk song, “Say It Loud, I’m Black and Proud” became an anthem for him as it expressed the sonic idea of self-determination. African American student activists used tenets of the black freedom struggle to mount a spirited critique of white cultural domination in American higher education.

African American students aimed to build intellectual and social spaces on the Amherst College campus to discuss their critiques. In fall 1967, the Students for Racial Equality was renamed the Amherst Afro-American Society (AAAS), then an all-black student group, with Cuthbert Simpkins ’69 at the helm.⁴¹ As Ibram Rogers has outlined, one of the main functions of black student organizations at colleges and universities across the nation was “to unite and raise the consciousness of the black student body.”⁴² Members of the Amherst Afro-American

³⁹For a fuller discussion of domestic colonialism in Black Power writings, see Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (New York: Random House, 1967).

⁴⁰Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (New York: Dell, 1968), p. 66. For a wide-ranging analysis of the Black Power Movement, see the following anthologies: Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggle Outside the South, 1940–1980* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) and Peniel Joseph, *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

⁴¹Harold Wade, *Black Men of Amherst* (Amherst, Mass.: Amherst College Press, 1976), p. 86. Cuthbert Simpkins, whose father was a national leader in the civil rights movement, went on to become a noted physician and a biographer of saxophonist John Coltrane.

⁴²Rogers, *The Black Campus Movement, Higher Education*, p. 100.

Society said that they “began to recognize that there was something in Black Power for us.”⁴³ The majority of the black student body had joined the Afro-American Society where members organized lectures and cultural events, like a Black Arts Festival, and hosted soul parties. They also sought to improve race relations, transform the community, and volunteer in nearby Springfield and Holyoke, which were predominantly working- and lower-middle-class African American and Latino urban communities in western Massachusetts. Thus the activism of Amherst Afro-American Society members was off-campus and on-campus, a trend that would come to define black studies in the academy.

The social realities of the 1960s were not lost on the Amherst College administration and faculty; in response, they implemented some curricular changes and introduced new learning modules in their courses. Adopted in the fall of 1966, the new curriculum centered on providing students with “intellectual competence and awareness of problems and methods.”⁴⁴ To graduate, a student had to complete thirty-two courses, including three one-semester Problems of Inquiry seminars, which were interdisciplinary in scope and covered broad areas such as the natural sciences, social sciences, and the humanities. In addition, the American Studies program, consisting of white faculty members Allen Guttman, Leo Marx, Hugh Hawkins, and N. Gordon Levin, among others, expanded their introductory class on American civilization to include subjects like the Black Power Movement. As part of the course, a conference was held at Amherst College in April 1967, which featured lectures and symposia on African American history and folk culture by scholars and activists such as Ivanhoe Donaldson and Myles Horton.⁴⁵ This conference provided insight and knowledge to many students who reflected on the strategic

⁴³Varney, “A History of Black Awareness at Amherst.”

⁴⁴*Amherst College Bulletin (Catalog 1966–1967)* 56, no. 1 (October 1966): 29.

⁴⁵According to Guttman, Stokely Carmichael and Bayard Rustin were invited but could not attend. Carmichael sent Ivanhoe Donaldson in his place. Carmichael had lectured before at Mount Holyoke College in November 1966. See Allen Guttman, “American Studies at Amherst,” *American Quarterly* 22, no. 2 (Summer 1970): 447.

import of the Black Power Movement. The *Amherst Student* ran an article calling this class “the most relevant” at Amherst.⁴⁶

The assassination of civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. on 4 April 1968 was a pivotal moment that galvanized many African American students, creating a greater sense of urgency among them to assert their presence and define their learning. As the nation mourned, so too did many members of Amherst College community who united to honor King’s legacy and to tackle questions of civil rights and racial discrimination. Some African American students at other colleges and universities, like the University of Pennsylvania, felt even more isolated after King’s assassination.⁴⁷ But some students did not. At Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania, Clinton Etheridge recalls that he “simply believed circumstances needed to be reformed for the better.”⁴⁸ King’s assassination thus elicited a range of feelings and attitudes among students, which ultimately radicalized and empowered many of them to push for institutional reforms, such as a more racially and ethnically inclusive curriculum.

This national tragedy became a moment of reflection for the Amherst community. An observant Plimpton knew that the curriculum and campus climate were flawed, especially given the college’s mission to liberally educate its male student body. He suggested a positive learning approach characterized by careful self-study and reflection on race and American higher education. He appointed the Black and White Action Committee to “determine the ways in which the Amherst College community might most effectively respond to the call to action against racial injustice.”⁴⁹ Because liberal arts colleges often encouraged student involvement in institutional governance,

⁴⁶“American Studies: The Evolution of Amherst’s Most Relevant Course,” *The Amherst Student*, 24 April 1967.

⁴⁷Wayne C. Glasker, *Black Students in the Ivory Tower: African American Student Activism at the University of Pennsylvania, 1967–1990* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), p. 29.

⁴⁸Etheridge, *The Crucible of Character*, p. 27.

⁴⁹“A Report of the Working Committee Concerned with the Nature of Amherst’s Institutional Commitment to Providing Equal Educational Opportunity for Negro Students, 17 April 1968,” General Files, Department of Black Studies, Amherst College Archives and Special Collections, Amherst College Library, Amherst, Mass.

the committee comprised six students and six faculty, including Hugh Hawkins and African American student, Harold Wade Jr. '68 as co-chairmen, who proposed the following resolutions: the establishment of a black culture center, black student outreach and recruitment, the hiring of a black administrator, summer programs for underprivileged youth, exchange programs with other colleges, perhaps HBCUs, and curricular changes.⁵⁰ A few of these resolutions were immediately adopted, namely the establishment of the Black Culture Center in the next academic year and the implementation of summer programs. Given the timing, the fact that Amherst administration passed these resolutions relatively quickly represented their support for institutional change.

Plimpton's approach was not necessarily at odds with that of African American student activists; the key differences were temporality and scope. For instance, the administration's reliance on thoughtful self-study, with slow committee resolutions and faculty votes, unnerved some student activists, who organized to bring forth immediate curricular reform by way of a black studies department. This effort coincided with the largest incoming class of African American students. At the start of the fall 1968 semester, sixteen young African American first-year students stepped foot on the campus, a number nearly double from the previous year. Some hailed from New York, Louisiana, and Pennsylvania; six of the sixteen students hoped to pursue a career in medicine, four were interested in a teaching career, and three set law school as their goal.⁵¹ The sole student from Georgia was Horace Porter who had attended segregated black schools and received an academic scholarship to attend

⁵⁰Michael Brick and Earl J. McGrath, *Innovation in Liberal Arts Colleges* (New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1969), p. 82. The other members on the committee included students Dennis Aftergut, David E. Altschul, Frederick D. Baron, Harold Dash, Adrian F. Johnson, and faculty James Q. Denton, Benjamin DeMott, Prosser Gifford, Leo Marx, and Edwin C. Rozwenc. Early founding documents in the General Files, Department of Black Studies, Amherst College Archives refer to this center as the Black Culture Center, though later documents say Black Cultural Center. I use the former name.

⁵¹"Black Students and Amherst: A Report," 1970, box 1, folder 4, Clubs and Sororities, Amherst College Archives.

Amherst. Ever the skeptic, he chose Amherst to see “whether or not the North was truly a colorblind place of freedom and equality.”⁵²

Horace Porter, along with first-year African American students Bernard Barbour ’72 and Gill Taylor-Tyree ’72, hit the ground running by penning a proposal to create a black studies department in fall 1968. The proposal demonstrated detailed analytical research of the Amherst curriculum, which students concluded was devoid of racial and ethnic diversity. Student advocates claimed that a black studies department would correct “the deficiencies of the present curriculum.”⁵³ The executive committee introduced a two-semester black studies course on the “historical, social, and cultural development of the three major Black Communities—Africa, the United States, and Latin America.”⁵⁴ If this course was any indication, the executive committee of the Afro-American Society envisioned a black studies department with a distinctly diasporic dimension aimed at cultivating knowledge across disciplines, which fit perfectly with Amherst College’s mission and tradition. This diasporic focus further substantiates Martha Biondi’s cogent point that “the early Black Studies movement was internationalist and always deeply skeptical of the mythology of American exceptionalism.”⁵⁵ This proposed department did not negate the fact, however, that the broader Amherst curriculum needed to be revamped; the executive committee of the Afro-American Society requested that certain courses in other departments “be modified and perhaps restructured so as to incorporate the Black man’s contribution to that field of study.”⁵⁶ By defending the place of black men in the history of the world, these students sought to correct deficiencies and make Amherst College an inclusive campus.

⁵²Porter, *The Making of a Black Scholar*, p. 55.

⁵³Bernard Barbour, Horace Porter, Gill M. Tyree, “A Proposal for a Black Studies Department at Amherst College,” ca. 1968, General Files, Department of Black Studies, Amherst College Archives.

⁵⁴Barbour, et al., “A Proposal for a Black Studies Department at Amherst College.”

⁵⁵Biondi, *The Black Revolution on Campus*, p. 11.

⁵⁶Barbour, et al., “A Proposal for a Black Studies Department at Amherst College.”

The Afro-American Society's proposal also showed a thorough understanding of American higher education. Porter and others insisted on the creation of a "degree-granting department of Black Studies," as opposed to a program that would not provide full autonomy in the form of course requirements, academic advising, and the allocation of funds and resources. Furthermore, these students were aware of the challenges of building a new department: their proposal offered advice on selecting a chair, outlined the responsibilities of said chair, and discussed how to appoint qualified faculty.⁵⁷ Of course Amherst College was not the first institution to set up a black studies department, but in this growing national campaign for black studies, students did not often have a real voice in the administration of programs and departments.⁵⁸ When the faculty and administration received this proposal in the fall semester of 1968, members of the Afro-American Society had staked their claim to institutional and departmental governance. They meant to be included.

By the early spring semester of 1969, there was no clear resolution on the society's proposal and other recommendations. The slow process of curricular change and institutional adaptation angered African American student activists. On 22 February 1969, members of the Afro-American Society met with the Board of Trustees, which included William H. Hastie '25, an alumnus, the first African American federal judge, and the only African American member on the board. They issued a prepared statement, which accused the college of "constrict[ing] the very individual development it claims to promote. We consider it imperative that Amherst College accept the reality of a genuine Afro-American culture."⁵⁹ What were once recommendations for institutional change now turned into demands, which included action on the black studies proposal.

⁵⁷Barbour, et al., "A Proposal for a Black Studies Department at Amherst College."

⁵⁸"Demands for Black Studies: What Became of Them?" *Observer-Reporter*, 11 February 1970.

⁵⁹Amherst Afro-American Society, "Instruction Committee Meeting," 22 February 1969, box 1, folder 4, Clubs and Sororities, Amherst College Archives.

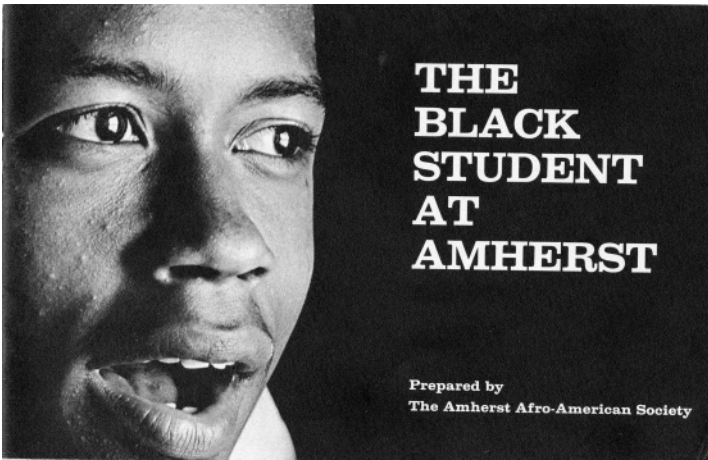


FIG. 3.—This fourteen-page booklet, “The Black Student at Amherst,” provides a window into the black student experience at Amherst College (1969). Courtesy of Amherst College Archives.

Alan Webber '70, a white student and editor of the *Amherst Student*, decried the “militant political tone” of the written demands; however, Afro-American Society members were actually moderates as far as the black studies campaign went.⁶⁰ They combined non-violent, direct action often associated with the civil rights movement with the masculine imagery of the Black Power Movement to avow that the college had fallen short of its stated mission to educate the whole man.

Members of the Afro-American Society began to construct a new narrative of the African American male student of Amherst: he was smart, outspoken, conscious and active; and he displayed an acute awareness of both Amherst’s weaknesses and strengths and his own readiness to act on behalf of his education. “The Black Student at Amherst” (Figure 3), a recruitment booklet for prospective black students, represented this new narrative. Edited by Harold Wade Jr., who hailed from Jamaica, New York, this fourteen-page booklet was more than informational. The cover depicted a young African American

⁶⁰“Afro-Am At Amherst Charges Colleges Has Reneged Promises,” *Daily Hampshire Gazette*, 26 February 1969.

man asserting his presence and voice, with his mouth open, not ready to speak but *already* speaking. The prospective applicant who thumbed through this booklet read reflections from current students about racism, inequality, and white liberalism at Amherst College. The booklet revealed what some students thought about their place at a PWI: "Am I the mental equal on white man's terms to the best brains he can find?" one question read. The answer was unequivocal: yes. "The big reason I stay at Amherst is that I know that when I graduate I'll never ever feel that my background and mind are inferior," another student confessed. Amherst College had its advantages, and members of the Afro-American Society mentioned those, including the college's history and tradition as well as the faculty and superior facilities, which was all the more reason to stay and press for curricular reform.⁶¹

Amherst College also had to deal with campus-wide student unrest over internal issues such as governance and coeducation as well as national issues like the Vietnam War. A rumor had circulated that "fifty or sixty radical students" had planned to occupy campus buildings.⁶² Perhaps the very recent cluster of occupations and sit-ins that dominated newspaper headlines had aroused student activists. In Massachusetts, for instance, thirty students from the Williams College Afro-American Society occupied a campus building in a three-day protest beginning 5 April 1969. Four days later, the Harvard University chapter of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) occupied University Hall at Harvard University. That same day, students at nearby Boston University staged a two-hour sit-in protesting the Vietnam War. Amid this turbulent campus climate, the Amherst College faculty voted to suspend classes for a two-day moratorium in April 1969, which they believed could be a "constructive period of self-appraisal."⁶³ The moratorium, not

⁶¹The Afro-American Society, "The Black Student at Amherst Booklet," p. 6, 1969, box 1, folder 4, Clubs and Sororities, Amherst College Archives.

⁶²"The Moratorium," *Amherst Alumni News* 22 (1969): 1.

⁶³Letter from College Council to the College Community, April 1969, box 1, folder 1, Moratoria Papers, Amherst College Archives.

an uncommon institutional response, was an anticipatory measure that allowed the campus community to engage in much needed dialogue.

From this moratorium emerged the real possibility that the college curriculum actually isolated white males and left them unprepared for the world in which they would enter. Jay Silverman '69, a white student, concurred with African American student activists that educational redefinition was urgent: “Do we need a student body more representative of society? That means co-education and admission of a radically larger proportion of blacks and poor students. We need a Black Studies department as well as other courses about the society we’re entering.”⁶⁴ A liberal education, then, needed to be as much about intellectual training as it did about socialization. Plimpton likely agreed, since his “person within” admissions policy highlighted the social import of diversity.

This moratorium became highly publicized after Prosser Gifford (dean of the faculty), Leo Marx, and Plimpton decided to author a letter to United States President Richard Nixon dated 29 April 1969. Written on behalf of the Amherst College community, the authors described the “turmoil among young people” which had given rise to the moratorium. They argued that the problems at Amherst College were a microcosm of the nation: “The pervasive and insistent disquiet on many campuses . . . indicates that unrest results, not from a conspiracy by a few, but from a shared sense that the nation has no adequate plans for meeting the crises of our society.”⁶⁵ They pointed out the inadequacies that plagued the Nixon administration and acknowledged that Amherst College too had a role to play in solving social, educational, and economic inequalities.

⁶⁴Letter from Jay Silverman, April 1969, box 1, folder 4, Moratoria Papers, Amherst College Archives. The Amherst College Class of 1969, which included Silverman and Frederick Hoxie, to name a few, helped to found the Amherst A-Better-Chance (ABC) program, which provided educational support to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Frederick Hoxie would go on to become a preeminent historian of Native American life and culture.

⁶⁵Letter from Calvin H. Plimpton to President Richard Nixon, 29 April 1969, box 2, folder 2, Moratoria Papers, Amherst College Archives.

The Nixon administration responded to this letter, ignoring the issues raised by Gifford, Marx, and Plimpton, and instead denouncing the use of violence that had engulfed other colleges and universities in the United States. President Nixon asked Daniel P. Moynihan, counselor and assistant to the president for urban affairs, to reply to the letter. In his response dated 9 June 1969, Moynihan discussed the ability for educational institutions to renew themselves, especially through “reasoned enquiry and social commitment”; however, he ended his letter with a telling remark: “violence solves no problems; it only creates them.”⁶⁶ Moynihan’s remark did not reflect the Amherst College situation at all: “reasoned enquiry” actually characterized student activism and the administration’s response. In fact, the numerous violent and sometimes deadly incidents that struck college campuses like Jackson State College in Mississippi did not befall Amherst College. What student protestors at Amherst did was articulate how local issues manifested in national politics, and the Amherst faculty and administration appreciated this, even if the Nixon and his aides did not.

Toward the end of the spring semester of 1969, the black studies campaign at Amherst had evolved as student activists began to focus more on the need to develop a relevant curriculum to serve all students. This idea was presented during a second moratorium centered on the problem of racism locally and nationally. An invigorated Porter, along with his peers, demanded that the college investigate how white male supremacy not only harmed African American students, but also deprived the entire campus community of essential knowledge. During the second moratorium, film sessions were held using the seven-part CBS series “Of Black America,” speakers like Ralph Ellison lectured on campus, and seminars were conducted on black life and culture.⁶⁷ Members of the Afro-American Society also released a scathing verbal attack on administrators, faculty,

⁶⁶Letter from Daniel Moynihan to Calvin H. Plimpton, 9 June 1969, box 2, folder 2, Moratoria Papers, Amherst College Archives.

⁶⁷The specific episodes from the CBS production included “In Search of a Past,” “Black World,” and “Portrait in Black.”

and students. Their statement began, “Amherst College, you ain’t ready.”⁶⁸ They decried the racism, ignorance, and selfishness of their fellow community members: “We just don’t have many people here who are ready. We know; we have been listening since 1826.”⁶⁹ The year 1826 was a nod to Edward Jones but also recalled the complex racist history of Amherst College, specifically, and American higher education, more broadly. On their demands, the Afro-American Society asserted:

We’ll tell you what we want and will never get. We want your minds. We want you as a community and America as a nation to be knowledgeable of the needs of Black people and the existence of Black people as *people* and to be responsive to those needs and that existence. This is what we want and this is what you and the rest of white America have failed to give.⁷⁰ (emphasis mine)

In dialogue with Amherst’s institutional history, student activists racialized former president Alexander Meiklejohn’s idea of making minds. Porter and his peers argued that the white Amherst community needed black studies too in order to understand and appreciate black humanity and to help destroy white racism.

The dialogue on racism during the second moratorium and Plimpton’s acquiescence to the Afro-American Society’s demands arguably demonstrated a high level of commitment, especially in comparison to other liberal arts colleges. For instance, during the Williams College occupation in April 1969, African American student activists there pressured the administration to accept their fifteen “nonnegotiable demands,” which included the expansion of the Afro-American Area Studies program, the establishment of an Afro-American Cultural Center, and black student participation in college governance, admissions, and advising.⁷¹ In comparison, Plimpton went on record stating Amherst College’s commitment to “bringing the black

⁶⁸ Afro-American Society to Amherst College, 1969, Moratoria Papers, box 2, folder 3, Amherst College Archives.

⁶⁹ Afro-American Society to Amherst College, 1969.

⁷⁰ Afro-American Society to Amherst College, 1969.

⁷¹ “Complete Text of AAS Demands,” *The Williams Record*, 4 April 1969.

perspective into the curriculum, which is the concern, not only of black students, but of the whole College, and in a large sense, of the whole society.”⁷² Though questions remained about the legitimacy and logistics of black studies, the faculty finally voted in April 1969 to implement a program beginning in fall 1969.⁷³

African American student activists, however, interpreted this vote and other actions as inchoate and disingenuous, partly because the administration and faculty had not moved far enough, fast enough. That is, a black studies *program* was set to be established, not a department; the budget for the Black Culture Center had not been approved; and funding for the summer programs appeared to be inadequate. Moreover, only one African American professor worked at Amherst College, statistician James Denton, and plans to increase faculty diversity were unconfirmed. To be fair, some students failed to appreciate the challenges inherent in developing these initiatives. Rather they remarked that these initiatives, in their present form, remained “in limbo as incomplete fragments of the African American experience at Amherst.”⁷⁴ Essentially they accused the administration of making only halfhearted, paltry attempts to meet their demands.

The summer months before the start of the 1969–70 academic year did not heal any wounds; if anything, the crisis worsened. Porter and others dismissed the black studies program as “fraudulent and specious” because it lacked autonomy, resources, accountability, and internal control.⁷⁵ In October 1969, the *Amherst Student* quoted student activists who referred to the black studies program as a “half-assed . . . black American Studies” program, which consisted of only two courses, the introductory course and the junior year seminar; the rest of the

⁷²Calvin H. Plimpton, “Untitled (Statement) ca. March 1969,” General Files, Department of Black Studies, Amherst College Archives; “Amherst Prexy Terms Demands Of Black Students ‘Reasonable,’” *The Springfield Union*, 28 February 1969.

⁷³“Amherst Approves Black Studies,” *Daily Hampshire Gazette*, 24 April 1969.

⁷⁴Varney, “A History of Black Awareness at Amherst.”

⁷⁵Horace Porter, “Black Studies: Why It Failed,” *The Amherst Student*, 5 February 1970.

courses were offered by other departments.⁷⁶ While George Sinkler, an African American visiting professor and scholar of race and American history, taught the introductory course, two white professors, N. Gordon Levin and Jan Dizard, co-directed the program. Members of the Afro-American Society bristled at this; they demanded the hiring of an African American professor to direct the program and to “develop a focus and perspective on the bona fide subject material.”⁷⁷ Black studies was an emerging field of study, and there were only a few specialists, but Porter, among others, expected the administration to recruit one.

Horace Porter and Wilburn Williams ’71, an African American student from Mississippi, left the confines of their liberal arts college to work with faculty, students, and staff at nearby institutions, especially the University of Massachusetts Amherst. African American student activists also pursued self-learning, as they screened documentaries, read articles by activists, debated among themselves, and organized conferences. While some student activists called for a more patient, measured approach in dealing with the new campus initiatives like the Black Studies program, others pushed for immediate action for fear of a new normal of fragmented programs and curricula. To Porter, a sense of black cultural pride “fueled a defiant outcry for more black faculty, black studies, and a general sense of African American inclusion and recognition” at colleges and universities across the nation.⁷⁸ Immediate action ultimately won out.

The participation of faculty, students, and staff within the Five Colleges, a consortium of colleges in the Amherst area, broadened the critique of student activists. It was clear to student activists in the area: the liberal arts curriculum across the Five Colleges failed to educate the whole person. This slight

⁷⁶Varney, “A History of Black Awareness at Amherst”; “Amherst College: Black Studies Courses - 1969–1970,” September 1969, folder 3, General Files, Amherst College Archives.

⁷⁷Laura Tueting, “Black Studies: A Trouble Start,” *The Amherst Student*, 2 October 1969.

⁷⁸Email correspondence with Horace Porter, 29 January 2014.

shift, from “the whole man” to the “whole person,” did not mean that Porter and his peers had moved away from their invocation of manhood; rather, this shift helped to strengthen the Five College collective and move closer to institutionalizing black studies. A few faculty members and students in the Five College area, for instance, formed the Ad Hoc Advisory Committee to explore the possibility of setting up a black studies program at each of the Five Colleges.⁷⁹ In November 1969, students, faculty, staff, and community members came together to host a Black Studies Symposium on “The Problem of Black Studies at Amherst.” Michael Thelwell called for an autonomous Five College Black Studies Department, and he was introduced as its potential director. Thelwell, a Jamaican-born novelist and essayist who played an integral role in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and other organizations, had studied and taught at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.⁸⁰ A tradition of cooperative learning programs enabled black studies advocates like Thelwell to argue that this new field could and would become a legitimate, autonomous enterprise. Defiant and determined student activists and their allies plotted that January to occupy the Amherst College campus.⁸¹ What might have been an Amherst College occupation became a Five College occupation at Amherst wherein the college became a synecdoche for institutional indifference concerning African Americans.

⁷⁹*Five College Cooperation: Directions for the Future: Report of the Five College Long Range Planning Committee* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1969), p. 47.

⁸⁰Thelwell would later go on to become the founding chairman, alongside African American literary scholar Bernard Bell, of the Department of Afro-American Studies at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. For more on the early years of the W. E. B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, see Bernard W. Bell, “Passing on the Radical Legacy of Black Studies at the University of Massachusetts: The W. E. B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies, 1968–1971,” *Journal of African American Studies* 16, no. 1 (March 2012): 89–110; Ekwueme Michael Thelwell, “History and Memory: The Tyranny and Prejudice of Experience,” *Journal of African American Studies* 16, no. 1 (March 2012): 111–20; and *Look Back and Wonder: The Genesis of Afro-American Studies at the University of Massachusetts* (2008), directed by Ernest Allen, Jr.

⁸¹“Original Statement,” *The Amherst Student*, 18 February 1970.



FIG. 4.—A group of African American students present their demands at a press conference during the occupation of four buildings on the Amherst College campus (1970). Courtesy of Amherst College Archives.

Early Wednesday morning on 18 February 1970, over 200 African American student activists, both men and women (Figure 4), from the Five Colleges displayed strength and union by occupying four academic buildings on the Amherst College campus: Converse Hall, Amherst Science Center, College Hall, and the Robert Frost Library. According to Porter, students seized the buildings with ease. In Converse Hall and College Hall, student activists had remained hidden inside until campus police locked them. As part of the occupation, some activists removed books from Frost Library, an ironic action meant to “focus attention upon the unresponsiveness of the white community to the needs of black folk.”⁸² A year earlier, the college had promised to establish a library in the Black Culture Center filled with material authored by or focused on African Americans. The removal of books from the library, which student activists renamed Malcolm X Library, highlighted students’ intellectual hunger and the need for a relevant education.

⁸²“Blacks Take Book from Frost,” *The Amherst Student*, 18 February 1970.

Instead of overturning the liberal arts college mission, student activists wished to support it by redefining liberal education through the inclusion of black studies. That meant challenging, as anthropologist and educator Johnnetta Cole puts it, “*what* is taught . . . *to whom* and *by whom* it is taught; *how* it is taught; and *why* it is taught.”⁸³ As part of the occupation, Amherst College student activists issued a mix of complaints and demands, which resembled the ones put forth years earlier. Even at Mount Holyoke College, which boasted a relatively sizable black female student population, student activists called for an end to tokenism and demanded support for the Five College Black Studies Program, an increase in black student enrollment as well as financial aid, and assistance for summer programs. Though activists outlined specific demands for each institution, their approach was collective. “The outstanding feature of this action,” one statement read, “is that it represents an ideological and physical commitment to the concept of a Five College Black Community.”⁸⁴ To student activists, the Amherst College administration in particular had failed to commit, so they made a commitment to themselves and for themselves to act collectively—in this case, to occupy.

Some students, not directly involved in the occupation, supported both the cause of curricular and campus climate reform as well as the act of occupation. A group of white students, from the White Radical Caucus at Amherst College, reasoned: “To continue to live in this community while effectively ignoring the problems of its black students is to be intellectually and morally irresponsible to ourselves and to them.”⁸⁵ Because student activists had seized academic buildings, faculty could not really hold classes. Obstructing teaching and learning might, at first, appear counterproductive, but protestors across the nation who occupied campus buildings issued an ultimatum when they chanted, “Open it up or shut it down!” African American

⁸³Johnnetta B. Cole, “Black Studies in Liberal Arts Education,” in *The Black Studies Reader* ed. Jacqueline Bobo et al. (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 23.

⁸⁴“Original Statement,” *The Amherst Student*, 18 February 1970.

⁸⁵“White Radical Strike,” *The Amherst Student*, 18 February 1970.

student activists at the Five Colleges slightly inverted this chant by reasoning that they first had to shut down the campus in order to open it up. Not all students in the Five College area, however, sympathized. A few expressed “caution” while a very small group resented the special attention that African American students had been given.⁸⁶ In any case, student demands elicited deliberation on behalf of the entire Five College community, especially the faculty.

That Amherst College faculty called this bold act of student protest a “takeover” highlights the interpretative evolution of student protest in the early 1970s. The faculty issued a resolution, which read in part: “Because the ideals of an academic institution are built on reason and persuasion, the faculty condemns the takeover of buildings and rejects the use of force by any member of Amherst College.”⁸⁷ The student activists who occupied Amherst College had not employed a *new* protest tactic; occupations were part and parcel of the labor movement as well as the civil rights movement. Porter and other activists repeatedly referred to their act of protest as an occupation. This resolution demonstrated some uneasiness among the faculty about the link between black studies and Black Power. As Johnnetta Cole asserts, “Black Studies [was] the intellectual arm of the Black Power Movement.”⁸⁸ Horace Porter took umbrage at the faculty’s remarks and reprimanded the administration for responding to earlier student attempts at reason and persuasion “with the rallies, committees, proposals, moratoria, symposia, individual conversation with individual administrators and faculty members, and so on,” anything but direct action. Certainly the Black Power Movement influenced student activists, but so too did Amherst College’s institutional mission and supposed inaction.

⁸⁶“Black Seize Buildings,” *The Amherst Student*, 18 February 1970; Email correspondence with Hugh Hawkins, 28 May 2012.

⁸⁷“College Meeting in Chapel Conveys Faculty Sentiment,” *The Amherst Student*, 18 February 1970. According to Hugh Hawkins, some faculty objected to the language contained in this resolution, particularly the word “condemn,” but the majority still approved it.

⁸⁸Cole, “Black Studies in Liberal Arts Education,” p. 26.

Plimpton took a measured approach in response to the occupation. Unlike Harvard's president, Nathan Marsh Pusey, who called in the police to disperse student protestors in April 1969, Plimpton did not resort to the use of force or legal remedies, as Colby College president Robert E.L. Strider did. One month after the Amherst College occupation, eighteen students at Colby College in Maine occupied Lorimer Chapel for a week, demanding an increase in black student enrollment and the development of a black studies program. In conjunction with law enforcement, Strider sought a court order to remove the students, who later complied with the court order.⁸⁹ Rather, Plimpton acknowledged that the occupation culminated in a "series of events" made more difficult due to "misunderstandings," the same word that Williams College president John Sawyer used during the occupation there.⁹⁰ Plimpton and Prosser Gifford pledged "renewed energy at a higher level of tension and commitment."⁹¹ A few administrators and faculty were hurt by the students' actions. Wilburn Williams recalled that an administrator asked him, "How could you do this to us?"⁹² As Gifford later realized, the occupation "was not personal; it was institutional and symbolic."⁹³ Fourteen hours later, after this "symbolic" action, 200 African American student activists who occupied four buildings on the Amherst College campus voluntarily left.

The strong and unified Five College black community pressured each administration within the Five Colleges to act on their demands immediately, and all did except Mount Holyoke College. Ten days after the Amherst College occupation ended, nearly 200 African American student activists, many of whom

⁸⁹"Blacks at Maine Colleges Are Unusually Self-Reliant," *The Lewiston Daily Sun*, 23 March 1970.

⁹⁰"Open College Meeting," *The Amherst Student*, 19 February 1970.

⁹¹"College Meeting in Chapel Conveys Faculty Sentiment," *The Amherst Student*, 19 February 1970.

⁹²Wilburn Williams, "My Life and Hard Times At Amherst: A View of History from the Bottom Up," *The Amherst Student*, 3 June 1971.

⁹³"Prosser Gifford interviewed by Robert C. Townsend," DVD, (Amherst, Mass.: Friends of the Amherst College Library and Pivot Media, 2011).

had participated in the earlier protest, occupied seven buildings for fourteen hours, this time at Mount Holyoke College. They complained that college president David Truman had failed to act favorably on their demands, including the development of a black studies department. Wilburn Williams described Truman as “cold-hearted” and “mean,” remarks partly based on his controversial handling of student unrest as vice president at Columbia University a year earlier.⁹⁴ Like Plimpton, Truman denounced the occupation, called the situation a “misunderstanding,” and eventually agreed to the demands.⁹⁵ Nearby, a group of African American students occupied Mills House, a residence hall on the University of Massachusetts Amherst campus, after multiple physical altercations between black and white students. These subsequent occupations, or what I call aftershocks, demonstrate the continued vigilance and seriousness of student activists. In other words, the Five College occupation at Amherst was not a singular event; it was part of the *process* of African American student activists fighting for self-determination, self-definition, and awareness of the power of knowledge.

The Five College Black Studies Committee drew up a blueprint to structure black studies as a cooperative and intellectually robust field of study. On 24 February 1970, two weeks after the occupation, the committee, consisting of eighteen members and chaired by African American faculty member at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, William J. Wilson, submitted its report to all five colleges recommending that each establish a Black Studies Department and that the “Black Studies offerings in the five college area have coherence and be informed by a unified black perspective.”⁹⁶ To accomplish this objective, the committee recommended creating a Five College Black Studies Executive Committee, with

⁹⁴Williams, “My Life and Hard Times At Amherst.”

⁹⁵Jean Caldwell, “150 blacks hold 7 Mt. Holyoke buildings 14 hrs.,” *Boston Globe*, 28 February 1970.

⁹⁶“Five College Committee On Black Studies: A Recommendation for the Development of a Five College Cooperative Program of Black Studies,” 24 February 1970, General Files, Department of Black Studies, Amherst College Archives.

ten members, including at least one faculty member and one student from each institution, who together would shape curricular offerings and recruit qualified faculty.⁹⁷ While the new committee was consistent with past Five College academic collaborations, this new model was linked with African American student activists. Amherst College faculty voted on 6 March 1970 to establish a black studies department, as part of the Five College cooperative plan.⁹⁸

In its early years, black studies scholars pondered how to institutionalize this new field of study while reestablishing trust among students. Early founders and scholars in black studies, according to Martha Biondi, “faced administrative opposition, student pressure, and professional obligations.”⁹⁹ Amherst was only somewhat different. Asa Davis (Figure 5) became the founding director of the Black Studies Department in fall 1970. Born in Nashville, Tennessee and educated at schools in New York City, Davis attended Wilberforce University and completed his graduate work in African history and religion at Harvard University. He, like other scholars in this emerging field, stressed student activism as a unique “innovation” and declared it a tradition to follow. Moreover, given his scholarly background in African history, he believed in interdisciplinary learning and teaching. A host of courses were proposed and eventually offered, and while the department enjoyed high student enrollment, the department itself was tiny. Davis could not actually hire permanent, tenure-track faculty; in his first few years, he depended on distinguished, though visiting, faculty such as Johnnetta Cole, later the first African American female president of Spelman College, and Okon Edet Uya, a prolific historian and Nigerian ambassador.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷The committee would also help to organize cooperative projects and specialized programming, an objective that followed a tradition of academic cooperation among the Five Colleges.

⁹⁸“Amherst College To Create Black Studies Department,” *Daily Hampshire Gazette*, 6 March 1970.

⁹⁹Biondi, *The Black Revolution on Campus*, pp. 209–10.

¹⁰⁰Steve Klugman, “Professor Asa Davis,” *The Amherst Student*, 28 September 1970.



FIG. 5.—Asa Davis, the first director of the Department of Black Studies at Amherst College (date unknown). Courtesy of Amherst College Archives.

TABLE 1
AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENT MATRICULATION
RECORDS, 1975–1980

Year	Applicants	Accepted Students	Matriculated Students
1975	143	56	29
1976	172	73	41
1977	175	65	37
1978	178	58	29
1979	130	55	24
1980	158	58	13

While the occupation was dramatic and a sign of the black student influence on the curriculum, the actual event and its aftermath did not herald complete optimism among students. As black student enrollment fluctuated during the 1970s (Table 1),

the Afro-American Society worked to achieve two related goals: to raise funds for summer tutorial programs for disadvantaged students and to grow the Five College black community. African American student activists also vowed to help make it “sound and secure,” but their focus on off-campus initiatives combined with activist fatigue hampered them in the early 1970s.¹⁰¹ The occupation, though regenerative at first, left at least a few of the most outspoken African American leaders feeling weary. Horace Porter had to escape, “to forget Amherst altogether—for a few months, at least,” so he participated in a domestic student exchange, one of the demands for which he campaigned, that brought him closer to home at Morehouse College.¹⁰² “There were days when the reality of being [at Amherst] seemed but a tawdry imitation of the dream.”¹⁰³ Just before his college graduation in 1971, Wilburn Williams lamented activism’s psychological and physical toll: “It’s been hell.”¹⁰⁴

Plimpton’s presidency ended in 1971. In his eleven-year tenure, he organized multiple fundraising campaigns that raised over \$20 million, grew the student body, helped to establish Hampshire College, and moved Amherst College closer to coeducation.¹⁰⁵ And, largely thanks to African American student activism, Plimpton could count an increase in black student enrollment and curricular innovation as part of his legacy. Plimpton never lost sight of the Amherst College mission to educate the whole man and its tradition of student development, investigation, and discovery. Neither did African American student activists. The struggle for institutional change would continue. When Plimpton accepted a position

¹⁰¹Sandy Rosenberg, “Issues of Black Takeover Remain to be Realized,” *The Amherst Student*, 12 October 1970.

¹⁰²Horace Porter, “Porter on Life at Morehead (sic) College,” *The Amherst Student*, 25 February 1971.

¹⁰³Porter, *The Making of a Black Scholar*, p. 67.

¹⁰⁴Williams, “My Life and Hard Times At Amherst.”

¹⁰⁵E. G. B., “In Memoriam: Calvin H. Plimpton ’39,” Amherst College, http://www.amherst.edu/aboutamherst/magazine/issues/2007_winter/college_row/plimpton (accessed 12 January 2013).

as president of the State University of New York, Downstate Medical Center in 1971, he reflected: “Universities are our most helpful and hopeful instruments for change, but they have failed to accept changes themselves.”¹⁰⁶

Plimpton’s successor at Amherst, John William Ward, an American cultural and intellectual historian already on the faculty, had witnessed firsthand what the Plimpton administration experienced, and perhaps as a result, valued the discipline of black studies.¹⁰⁷ Ward’s career was marked by his determination to find real practical value in a liberal education, to wit, his own activism in political reform causes. Ward supported curricular change at Amherst, including the expansion of the Black Studies Department. He surmised that “at the forefront of black studies . . . [is] this whole matter of the relation of intellectual life to the conduct of life, to social and political action.”¹⁰⁸ At Amherst College, African American student activists had lived the belief that intellectual life and sociopolitical action were inextricably linked. Some colleges and universities later concurred.



During the 1960s and 1970s, student activists and their allies across the nation critiqued American higher education. At Amherst College, Horace Porter and other students became outspoken activists who denounced the Eurocentric curriculum, white male supremacy, and the marginalization of the black experience; they defined and defended their own education by promoting the inclusion of black people, their history and culture. Within various departments and programs,

¹⁰⁶“Dr. Plimpton Accepts Position in New York,” *The Springfield Union*, 1 July 1971.

¹⁰⁷M. S. Handler, “Plimpton Resigning as President of Amherst in 1971,” *The New York Times*, 4 June 1970. For more on John William Ward’s life and career, see Kim Townsend, *John William Ward: An American Idealist* (Amherst, Mass.: Amherst College Press, 2014).

¹⁰⁸“Prof. John William Ward: The President as Educator,” *The Amherst Student*, 3 June 1971.

especially American studies, and at nearby institutions, like the University of Massachusetts Amherst, these student activists found allies and began to organize, write proposals, and record their demands. Inspired by the civil rights movement and Black Power tactics and ideology, African American student activists framed their demands for full manhood and inclusion within the ethos of the college's whole man ideology. They pushed for the addition of black studies, a field that they argued could bring about much needed change to the curriculum and campus climate and ultimately prepare students for world citizenship.

In this struggle for institutional reform, the matter was urgent. Plimpton had his ear to the ground the entire time, attempting to forestall conflicts through committees and rallies, but it backfired. Admittedly restive African American student activists wanted immediate action; they argued that African Americans had waited long enough, dating back to 1826. Thus student activists not only led the way in bringing about institutional renewal, but they successfully argued for the importance of black studies for students at a liberal arts college. The path to the institutionalization of black studies at Amherst College and the inclusion of African American students was very much a process, a challenging one that remains ongoing.

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