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1 message

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Becoming a Black Studies Scholar

Advice & News | by Bertin M. Louis Jr., Ph.D.
Thursday, October 22, 2020



Booker T. Washington, who wrote an autobiography, "Up from Slavery" (Photo: Everett Collection/Shutterstock)

In light of current societal upheaval in response to the normative killing of unarmed Black men, women, and children by the police and white vigilantes in the United States during the coronavirus pandemic, the ideas and work of Black Studies scholars have come to the attention of larger audiences. During the summer of 2020, academics and lay folk were attending webinars to learn **how to be an antiracist** or **what it means to defund or abolish the police**. Activism and protests at several colleges and universities have led to renewed focus on, and investment in, **Black Studies** (also known as **Africana Studies**, **African American**

Studies, **African and African American Studies**, **African & African Diaspora Studies**, **Africology & African American Studies**, and **Pan-African Studies**. Black Studies **centers**, departments, interdisciplinary programs, and institutes **are being funded** with a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion at predominantly white colleges and universities, and **scholars are moving to new institutions**. This also means that more Black Studies positions are on the horizon for this academic year and the next.

If you are a scholar who centers your research on Black people and the Black experience but were not trained in Black Studies -- meaning you did not major or minor in Black Studies as an undergraduate and/or earn your master's degree or doctorate in Black Studies -- there are ways to become a stronger Black Studies scholar. Becoming a better-versed Black Studies scholar is not only important for your career but will make you a more effective teacher that positively influences students and surrounding communities. Here I offer four tips that will help you improve areas of your Black Studies scholarship where you might be lacking.

Read Black Studies

According to Dr. Maulana Karenga, [professor and chair of Africana Studies at California State University, Long Beach](#) and the creator and founder of [Kwanzaa](#), Black Studies emerged from the Black Power movement and other power struggles of the 1960s. The discipline deals with "[the critical and systematic study of the thought and practice of African people in their current and historical unfolding](#)" and concerns itself with a need to solve the pressing problems of the Black community and the struggle to end racist oppression and transform society and the world.

One must read the foundational works of Black Studies in order to familiarize yourself with the discipline's purpose and epistemological traditions and address these lofty goals. This includes the works of [Molefi Kete Asante](#), [Chinua Achebe](#), [Horace G. Campbell](#), [Patricia Hill Collins](#), [Anna Julia Cooper](#), [W.E.B. Du Bois](#), [Antenor Firmin](#), [E. Franklin Frazer](#), [Henry Louis Gates, Jr.](#), [C.L.R. James](#), [Robin D.G. Kelley](#), [Audre Lorde](#), [Ama Mazama](#), [Imani Perry](#), [William L. Patterson](#), [Booker T. Washington](#), [Carter G. Woodson](#) as well as a host of others. You also need to read from Black Studies journals such as [the Journal of African American Studies](#), [the Journal of Black Studies](#), [the Black Scholar](#), and [Souls](#).

Teach Black Studies

After I earned my PhD in Anthropology from Washington University in Saint Louis, my first academic appointment was as a lecturer in Africana Studies at the [University of Tennessee, Knoxville](#) where I taught four classes of 'Introduction to African American Studies' per semester. Within the class, I taught African prehistory, discussed Egyptian, Nubian, and West African civilizations, the transatlantic slave trade, the Haitian Revolution, chattel slavery in the United States, the Abolitionist movement, the Civil War period, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, the World War Two era, the Civil Rights movement, and the contemporary African American experience. Teaching these topics and fusing them with my anthropological training helped me realize how much I enjoy teaching Black Studies. From that point, I resolved to teach Black Studies in future positions and I later got a joint tenure track position at the same institution to teach both Anthropology and Africana Studies classes.

Join Black Studies Organizations

There are numerous Black Studies organizations you can join to learn more about the discipline. When you attend their annual conferences, you are able to sit in on panels to learn about the latest research, follow scholarly debates, and network with academics who are housed in or affiliated with Africana Studies centers, departments, institutes, and programs (and may be privy to upcoming hires). I have participated in conferences for the [National Council for Black Studies](#), the [Association for the Study of African American Life and History \(ASALH\)](#), the [Association for the Study of the Worldwide African Diaspora \(ASWAD\)](#), and the [African American Intellectual History Society \(AAIHS\)](#) and maintain active membership in most of them.

Follow Black Studies Scholars on Social Media

There are numerous Black Studies professors who use social media to promote themselves, their scholarship, and display their scholarly acuity through their erudite responses to real-world events and issues affecting people of African descent. I follow Dr. [Greg Carr](#), Associate Professor of Africana Studies and Chair of the Afro American Studies Department at [Howard University](#), on Twitter. I recently watched an episode from Dr. [Jared Ball's i MiX WHAT i LiKE](#) website, a "multimedia hub of emancipatory journalism and revolutionary beat reporting," featuring Dr. Carr from 2016. I learned more about the parallel developments of Dr. [Cheikh Anta Diop](#) and Dr. [John Henrik Clarke](#) and their contributions to Black Studies. I would not have learned about this, as well as other fascinating Black Studies facts if I had not followed Drs. Carr and Ball on social media in the first place.

I hope these tips help. If you plan to be on the job market, be sure to refer to this essay if you are fortunate enough to get an interview. In the meantime, continue to practice social distancing, wear a mask when out in public, wash your hands regularly and frequently, and take breaks from the constant news about COVID-19 so you can stay physically and mentally healthy to end the pandemic.

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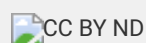
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Racial and Ethnic Differences in College Major Choice

03.31.15

There are large differences in the average earnings of people who choose different college majors. Majors in computer science, mathematics, and in a variety of engineering fields are associated with high earnings, while majors such as counseling psychology, early childhood education, and social work are associated with low earnings. A recent report finds the median annual earnings for full-time, full-year workers with a terminal bachelor's degree in petroleum engineering are \$120,000, whereas the comparable figure for those who had majored in counseling psychology is only \$29,000 ([What's It Worth? The Economic Value of College Majors](#)).

It is not clear to what extent these earnings disparities reflect a true causal effect of college major on earnings and to what extent they reflect differences in the characteristics of students who choose to major in different subjects. But it seems safe to say that the choice of a college major has at least some effect on economic outcomes for students. And if college majors affect outcomes for individuals, they may also affect differences in outcomes across demographic groups, such as the lower incomes of blacks and Hispanics relative to whites and Asians. If this is the case, then studying differences in college major choice across groups may help in understanding economic disparities between groups. Much attention has been paid, for example, to gender differences in the propensity to major in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) subjects. Here I consider differences in college major choice by race and ethnicity.

The data come from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), a survey conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics in the US Department of Education. Completing the IPEDS survey is required of all colleges and universities that participate in federal financial aid programs. The survey can thus roughly be thought of as a census of institutions of higher education. I use information on the number of bachelor's degrees received by members of four

mutually exclusive groups, Asians, blacks, Hispanics, and whites, in different majors between July 1, 2012, and June 30, 2013. IPEDS categorizes majors using six-digit codes from the Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP), which standardizes majors across institutions but still allows for fine detail on majors.

Looking at the most popular majors by racial and ethnic group, one feature that is apparent is the great deal of similarity across groups. For example, business administration, psychology, nursing, and biology are four of the top five majors for all four of the groups shown. There are some differences, however. For example, economics, finance, and electrical engineering appear on the top-ten list only for Asian students, whereas social work appears on the list only for black students. Elementary education, history, and marketing are unique to the top-ten list for white students.

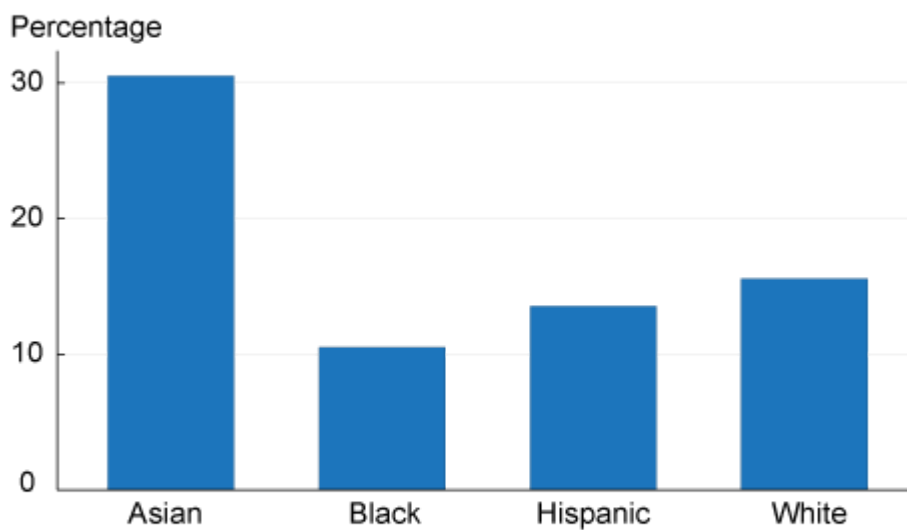
Most Popular Majors by Race and Ethnicity

Asian		Black	
Major	Percent	Major	Percent
Business Administration	8.2	Business Administration	10.3
Biology	8.2	Psychology	7.2
Nursing	5.7	Nursing	5.8
Psychology	5.5	Criminal Justice/Safety Studies	3.5
Accounting	3.8	Biology	3.3
Economics	3.7	Sociology	3.2
Finance	2.6	Social Work	2.3
Political Science	2.1	Accounting	2.3
Sociology	1.7	Political Science	2.2
Electrical Engineering	1.7	Criminal Justice/Law Enforcement Administration	2.0
Hispanic		White	
Major	Percent	Major	Percent
Business Administration	7.7	Business Administration	6.5
Psychology	7.6	Psychology	6.0
Nursing	4.9	Nursing	5.9
Biology	3.5	Biology	3.5
Sociology	2.9	Accounting	2.8
Criminal Justice/Safety Studies	2.8	English	2.8
Accounting	2.7	Elementary Education	2.6
Political Science	2.6	History	2.4
English	2.2	Political Science	2.3
Multi-/Interdisciplinary Studies	2.0	Marketing	2.0

Source: Author's calculations from Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) data for July 1, 2012 – June 30, 2013.

To explore differences in major choice by race and ethnicity across broader groups of majors, I aggregate majors up to the two-digit CIP level. I begin by examining differences in STEM subjects. I use a narrow definition of “STEM fields,” which includes only fields with a two-digit major code in the following categories: computer and information sciences and support services, engineering, biological and biomedical sciences, mathematics and statistics, and physical sciences. Using this definition, about 16 percent of white bachelor's degree recipients had a major in a STEM subject, and over 30 percent of Asian students did. The comparable figures for black and Hispanic students are around 11 percent and 14 percent, respectively.

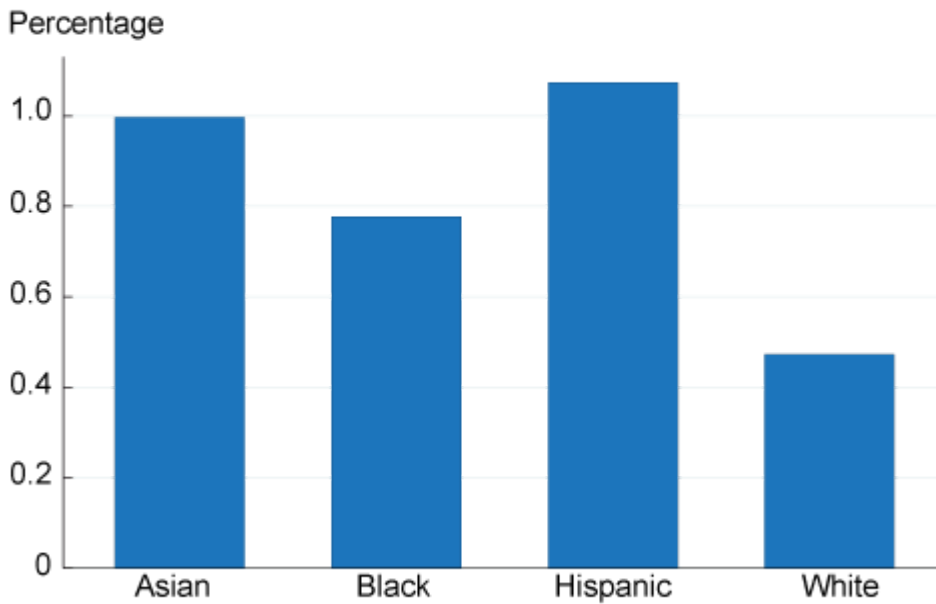
Percentage of Bachelor's Degree Recipients Majoring in STEM Subjects



Source: Author's calculations from Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) data for July 1, 2012 – June 30, 2013. The majors included are those with a two-digit Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP) code in the following categories: computer and information sciences and support services, engineering, biological and biomedical sciences, mathematics and statistics, and physical sciences.

If STEM fields have a disparity in favor of Asian and white students, which fields have a disparity in favor of black and Hispanic students? One set of fields with particularly low representation from white students consists of those included in the two-digit CIP major category “area, ethnic, cultural, gender, and group studies.” However, relatively few students from any racial or ethnic group major in these subjects. Less than 1 percent of black students major in these subjects, about 1 percent of Asian students do, and only slightly more than 1 percent of Hispanic students do.

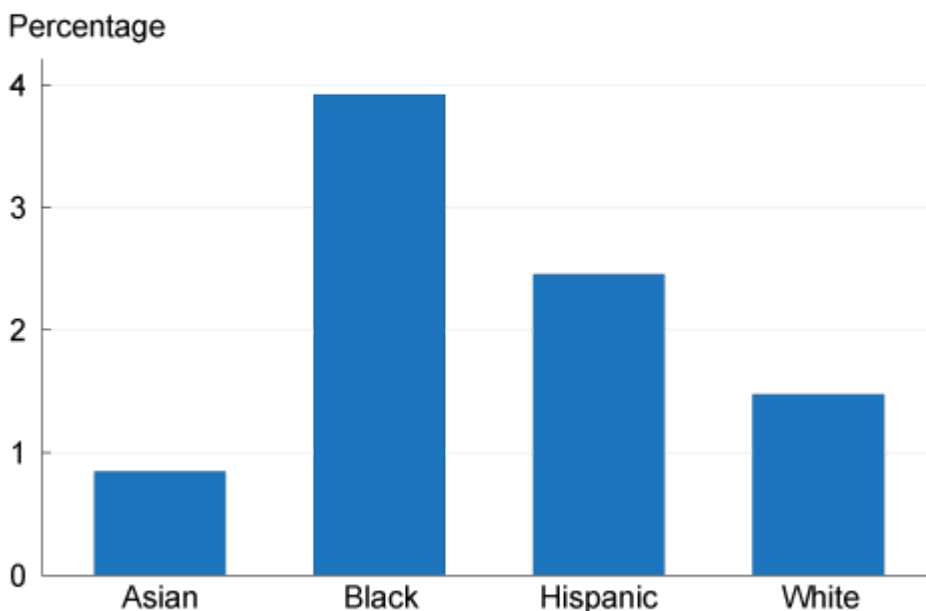
Percentage of Bachelor's Degree Recipients Majoring in Area, Ethnic, Cultural, Gender, and Group Studies Subjects



Source: Author's calculations from Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) data for July 1, 2012 – June 30, 2013.

An area in which there is an even larger disparity in favor of black and Hispanic students is the two-digit CIP major category for public administration and social service professions. Nearly 4 percent of black students and 2.5 percent of Hispanic students major in these subjects, whereas only around 1.5 percent of white students do and less than 1 percent of Asian students do.

Percentage of Bachelor's Degree Recipients Majoring in Public Administration and Social Service Professions Subjects



Source: Author's calculations from Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) data for July 1, 2012 – June 30, 2013.

So although there are a number of similarities in major choice across racial and ethnic groups, there are also some differences. And there are inherent tradeoffs for policies and programs designed to draw students into selected majors. New students in these majors must come from somewhere. The

possibilities are students who would not have otherwise attended college, students who would add the selected major as an additional major, and students who would major in the selected subject instead of some other subject. For example, having more STEM majors may come partly at the expense of fewer social work majors. Whether this shift would enhance students' overall well-being or be best for society as a whole is a difficult question.

Meet the Author

Peter L. Hinrichs








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Peter Hinrichs' main field of research is the economics of education. Additional fields include applied econometrics, labor economics....

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