



## *Short Communication*

# Challenging Heteronormativity: Contextualizing the Need for Queer Studies in Academia

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### Abstract

Queer Studies was born from social issues concerning sexuality, sexual orientation, and gender identity, and has continued to grow over time as an academic discipline. Even with recent social and political developments concerning the LGBTQ population, the legitimacy and necessity of queer studies is still debated both inside and outside of academia. As such, Queer Studies needs to be introduced within an historical framework of disciplines concerning traditionally oppressed people, and their struggles for freedom, equality, and justice. Through a review of African-American and Women's Studies, this article presents a context for the need for Queer Studies in higher education.

*Keywords: Queer Studies, Higher Education, Diversity*

## 1 Introduction

The legitimacy and necessity of queer studies is still debated both inside and outside of academia. Some argue against the inclusion of a discipline that not only challenges the status quo, but also heteronormativity. Like other disciplines concerned with diversity, queer studies has become an established field within academia, allowing for an intellectual pursuit of knowledge regarding the LGBTQ community (Young, 2012). Queer Studies was born from the social issues concerning sexuality, sexual orientation, and gender identity. Given recent social issues such as transgender bathroom rights and the discrimination faced by same-sex couples, there is a need to discuss the important role of Queer Studies within academia. As such, Queer Studies needs to be introduced within an historical framework of disciplines concerning traditionally oppressed people, and their struggles for freedom, equality, and justice. While discussing Queer Studies, it is important to understand its place in relation to other, minority-centered disciplines. Queer Studies, as an academic discipline, falls under the broad umbrella of diversity studies. Diversity concerns the "presence of historically underrepresented and systematically oppressed groups" (Campbell, 2016, p. 27). Campbell (2016) stated that diversity, "encompasses a wide range of factors such as: age, gender, sexuality, race, class, religion, mental/physical ability, etc." (p. 27). Queer Studies, and its focus on the academic and intellectual exploration of the LGBTQ community, its history, its struggles, and its accomplishments, fits naturally within the diversity studies framework. Like other disciplines (African-American studies and Women's Studies), Queer Studies is but one component within the spectrum of diversity.

Queer Studies continues to grow as an academic discipline in higher education; however, despite such continued growth, Queer

Studies continues to face opposition, both inside and outside academia. This opposition is due in part to the way in which Queer Studies challenges the status quo. Queer Studies focuses on queerness, and part of that focus includes challenging society's historically dominant binary gender system. One of the challenges facing Queer Studies is that of heteronormative beliefs. Heteronormativity is the belief that gender exists in only binary terms such as male and female, and that sexuality exists only between those of the opposite sex (Robinett, 2014). Within the heteronormative belief structure, heterosexuality is the dominant practice and is equally unquestioned within society (Robinett, 2014). Heteronormativity thus views queerness as harmful and problematic because it challenges binary heteronormative beliefs.

Through the use of a social and historical perspective, the purpose of this article is to contextualize how the field of Queer Studies fits into the broader range of academic disciplines pertaining to historically marginalized populations in the United States. The need for Queer Studies in higher education is rationalized through a historical review of African-American studies and women's studies. Examining academic disciplines that concern historically marginalized and oppressed populations allows for an understanding of how Queer Studies fits within the scope of diversity programs, and is needed in higher education as a tool for growth and progress.

## 2 African-American Studies

African-American Studies has become an integral part of academia. Its purpose and need have proven essential to educating and preparing students for diverse life experiences; however, the start of the

African-American Studies program was turbulent and filled with conflict. Shortly after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., a movement began which focused on the establishment of African-American Studies as a new field within higher education (Miller, 1990). Initially called Black Studies, the driving force behind this academic discipline was the result of years of oppression and marginalization of African-Americans in the United States. Kunnie (2016), regarding the early years of African American Studies, stated that:

Black Studies after all, was conceived in the crucible of relentless and tireless struggle against white supremacy and white racism, nurtured in the womb of Black womanist, youth, and working class rebellion, and sprouted in the revolutionary movement against the contemporary American slave industrial and human sacrifice industrial complexes, incarceration and the murderous execution of poor men by the colonial state... now manifest in resistance to the late capitalist military-prison industrial monstrosity with the objective of precisely making capitalism late, dead... so that it is buried forever, never to resurrected by the ghosts of colonial Europe anywhere in this world. (p. 363)

African-American Studies has had many names, such as African Diaspora Studies, Africana Studies, and various others (Norment, 2001; Robillard, Spencer, & Richardson, 2015). Zulu (2015) viewed this discipline by stating that:

African American Studies is defined as an interdisciplinary academic discipline devoted to the study of the history, culture, and politics of people of African heritage, created in the 1960s and 1970s as a result of a new consciousness and activism articulated by the African American community. (p. 62)

While names of early programs varied, they all shared the drive and aspiration for social change and educational reform (Bell, 2012). Higher education has historically held a predominantly white perspective that often omitted the views, experiences, and histories of minorities as told from their own point of view. Establishing an African American Studies program was the first step in diversifying such perspectives. African-American Studies “emphasizes the centrality of an African-American perspective” (Robillard et al., 2015, p. 95). Proponents for this new field believed that African-American Studies was needed because there was a void within higher education, one lacking in “black life and culture” (Oguejiofor-Okafor, 2014, p. 211). It was believed that this void could be filled through the establishment of African-American Studies, with hopes of improving the social status of minorities (Miller, 1990).

Establishing a field devoted specifically to the life and culture of African-Americans was a step toward equality and justice, while also serving as “vehicles of social change” (Miller, 1990, p. 85). Educating all students about African-American history and culture is a necessary component of breaking down stereotypes, bringing about social transformation, and helping African-Americans become advocates and activists within their own communities (Beasley, Chapman-Hilliard, & McClain, 2016; Miller, 1990). Proponents for African-American Studies argue that, through coursework, students acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to help them challenge social issues such as “mass incarceration, police brutality, the shootings of unarmed Black people, poverty, [and] educational inequality” (Beasley et al., 2016, p. 15). As African-American Studies evolved, becoming a more grounded element within academia, the benefits to students and society became more apparent. Some research suggests that students enrolled in African-

American Studies courses are more likely to adopt positive mindsets related to achievement, which helped both academically, and within racially challenging situations (Marie, 2016). African-American Studies allows all students opportunities to learn about groups of people who may be unfamiliar to them, or to learn about one’s own history.

## 3 Women’s Studies

As with the creation of African-American Studies, Women’s Studies came about as a result of political and social unrest. While desegregation efforts were taking place during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, women too were fighting their own battle for equality. The National Women’s Liberation Movement was taking hold and fighting against the hierarchical and patriarchal societal systems that had been oppressing women (Salper, 2001). Women were standing up against such institutions, calling for changes in thinking and attitudes. The Women’s Liberation Movement helped unite women, bringing together those who had previously been denied opportunities at political engagement and activism, and allowing them to learn how to stand up and protest injustice (Salper, 2001).

As the movement gained momentum, activists began to examine the institutional oppression of women through an educational perspective. Education had previously been presented through a white, heterosexual male perspective. Like early advocates for the establishment of an African-American Studies, there was a demand for a program of study that brought to light the unique experiences of women. Franklin (2002) described Women’s Studies at the time as the “academic offshoot of the Women’s Liberation Movement” (p. 436). Similarly, Galbreath (2012) described the establishment of a Women’s Studies program as “the ‘arm’ for the feminist movement” (p. 313). The mission and purpose of a Women’s Studies program is multifaceted. Simply put, Women’s Studies is an institute “based on the female experience” (Galbreath, 2012; Salper, 2011, p. 657). Women’s Studies serves to present the lived experiences of women across geographies, racial identities, sexual orientations, and social class (Wood, 2015). Franklin (2002) stated that the purpose of a Women’s Studies program was to explore the sources of women’s oppression, and to discuss methods of overcoming it. Previously, the life trajectories of women had not been previously recognized, nor studied (Galbreath, 2012). As Wood (2015) stated:

Women’s studies programs started out with the core mission of analyzing women’s lives by diagnosing and explaining social problems affecting women. (p. 389)

Women’s Studies as an academic discipline serves to contextualize and bring to light the lives of women, in order to illuminate their perspectives, struggles, and achievements. Moving from once being viewed as “other”, “minority”, or “victim”, Women’s Studies helps with rediscovering the voices of past women (Franklin, 2002, p. 436). Salper (2011) eloquently stated that:

The nation’s first Women’s Studies Program was riddled by arguments that characterized much of the women’s liberation movement in the 1970s. The basic tenet of the movement was female unity. Global sisterhood and commitment to an egalitarian ethic and to collective forms of action and organization by all women were the be tools to combat the injustices of patriarchal society. (p. 674-675)

## 4 Queer Studies

Queer Studies focuses not only on LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) lives and their communities, but also focuses more broadly on the social production and regulation of sexuality and gender (Wesleyan University, 2019). Further, Queer

Studies challenges heteronormativity, and explores what it means for gender and sexual orientation to be non-binary (Robinett, 2014). Sex, gender, and sexual orientation are not limited to the philosophical constraints of heteronormative beliefs and there are more complex and unrecognized identities that exist. For example, sex, which is often believed to be strictly either male or female, while some individuals are born intersex, with both male and female genitalia (Robinett, 2014).

When Queer Studies first began to make its mark within academia it was met with skepticism; it lacked clarity and was seen as inauthentic (Dynes, 1995). Dynes (1995) also discussed the problems with defining queerness and that it is nothing more than individual preferences. This earlier discussion of queerness helps demonstrate how not only the field of Queer Studies has changed, but how the social changes that have since developed have contributed to the evolution of the field.

Queer Studies now exists as field of its own, and continues to grow both in popularity and breadth, challenging long-held beliefs of what *normal* sexuality is. Queer Studies helps to humanize what is often perceived as nonnormative (Young, 2012). Young (2012) stated:

In queer studies, then, our aim is to expand modes of knowing such that other realities—identities, experiences, histories, and institutions—in our context are not only recognizable but also deemed worthy of charitable engagement and critical dialogue. (p. 303)

Young (2012) also stated:

Recognizing queerness as both theoretical and embodied in this way actually helps them [students] to deconstruct categories of identity, which sometimes aids in subverting oppressive power. (p. 303).

Having evolved over time in order to keep pace with rapidly changing social and political contexts, Queer Studies continues to seek and share understanding of sexual and sexualized embodiments, along with identities, and sexual cultures in the United States and abroad (Wesleyan University, 2019).

## 5 Conclusion

Like other diversity studies, Queer Studies has a valuable place as an academic discipline within higher education. Having an established academic discipline concerned with educating students about the LGBTQ community helps to bring understanding to an often misunderstood and marginalized population and helps lead to transformative social change. Education is the tool for such change when it comes to reversing the effects of marginalization and oppression. Campbell (2016) stated:

It is crucial that colleges and universities provide transformative and educational opportunities about the historical and contemporary significance of race in the United States so that critical consciousness is provoked among students. Igniting transformational thinking about race will create inclusive campus environments where students of all races can thrive academically as well as socially, feel supported, and feel acknowledged. (p. 27)

While Campbell (2016) referred to exploring race and African Americans within predominantly white institutions (PWIs), this idea of transformative educational opportunities can be applied to all fields of study pertaining to diverse populations. This powerful sentiment resonates beyond African-American studies, but also with Women's Studies, and Queer Studies. Campbell (2016), further stated the implications of such programs, stating:

Ignoring the impact of systematic forms of oppression is problematic because being *aware* of and sensitive to racial differences, varying worldviews, political correctness, celebrating difference, and stigmatizing hateful language is only the first step to creating a less hostile environment. (p. 31)

Queer Studies gives voice to the voiceless. There is no doubt that future social and political debates will arise related to the LGBTQ community, and thus it will be the duty of the Queer Studies program to educate and shed light on marginalized individuals in order to educate and enlighten future generations.

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