African American Studies Program Self-Study

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I. The Curricular Context

(A, 1) The African American Studies Program offers a graduate degree and an undergraduate minor. The one-year Master of Arts degree (in the African American Experience in Global and Comparative Perspective) concentrates on building the conceptual, theoretical, and research skills that can enable students to become life-long critical investigators of cross-cultural interaction. While focused on the African American experience, the Program approaches it within a global context, paying particular attention to Latin Americans, Blacks from the Caribbean, Asians, European Americans, and Africans. To earn a degree in the master’s program, students must complete eight courses total, including the core courses of GRS AA 871 African American History and CAS AA 580 History of Racial Thought, along with six electives in African American Studies. The students must also write two major research papers, one of which the student must orally defend during the last semester in residence. In addition, any student who has not previously completed at least two years of study in one foreign language at the undergraduate level must demonstrate such proficiency either by adequate completion of university language courses or passing marks on a translation test administered by the university. This year (AY 2010-2011), the African American Studies Program has two graduate students, one of whom is a Fulbright scholar from South Africa and another from the United States. (A, 2) The undergraduate minor requires that students complete six courses total, including the core courses of CAS AA 371 African American History and CAS AA 580 History of Racial Thought, along with four elective courses. Due to a number of faculty leaves, in academic year 2009-2010, the program offered only 7 courses in the fall, enrolling 150 students and 9 courses in the spring, enrolling a total of 92 students. In the summer term, African American Studies offered two literature courses, enrolling a total of 20 students. Though the program offered fewer than half of the courses offered in the previous academic year, the program enrolled more than twice as many students in its courses. These statistics indicate very promising growth in the program.

(B, 1) Undergraduate majors from other BU departments and programs depend on courses offered in the African American Studies Program. Undergraduate majors in the Departments of History, English, Sociology, Art History, Political Science, International Relations, Religion, Romance Studies, and Economics, as well as in the Programs in
American and New England Studies and African Studies take courses that are cross-listed with those in African American Studies. (B, 2) Undergraduate majors and degrees outside of the College of Arts and Sciences also depend on our courses. The African American Studies Program has collaborated with the School of Education in the creation of a course, which began in spring 2009, titled “The (Mis)Education of Black Boys.” In addition, a course taught by Professor Ronald Richardson, titled African American Drama, has recently been cross-listed with the Department of Theatre in the College of Fine Arts. (B, 3) Finally, the undergraduate minors in CAS and elsewhere whose requirements can be fulfilled by coursework in our Program include those in African Studies, American and New England Studies, Art History, Economics, English, Religion, History, Political Science, Sociology, and Women’s Studies. (C, 1, 2) Similarly, graduate programs offered by fellow GRS departments depend on courses in African American Studies. They include both the master’s and doctoral programs in American and New England Studies, Art History, Economics, English, Religion, History, Political Science, and Sociology. (C, 3) As it stands, there are no non-GRS graduate programs whose requirements include coursework in our Program.

The African American Studies Program has responsibilities for selected aspects of the CAS curriculum beyond the major. The Program contributes to (D, 3) the College Writing Requirement, via courses taught by Professor Allison Blakely. In addition, this academic year, the program will be offering its first (D, 5, 6) Divisional Studies course, an introduction to African American Literature offered by Mary Anne Boelcskevy, the program’s new Director of Undergraduate Studies. Presently, the Program does not contribute to (D, 1) the Core Curriculum or to (D, 2) the College Honors Program. (D, 7) The courses that are not important to fulfilling requirements but remain popular include (in fall 2010) CAS AA207 Introduction to Race and Ethnic Relations; CAS AA355 Science, Race, and Society; CAS AA388 Black Radical Thought; and CAS AA588 Women, Power, and Culture in Africa.

II. Assessment of Specific Course Needs

The Program in African American Studies is obligated to provide undergraduate and graduate courses that continue to develop the conceptual, theoretical, and research skills that can enable students to become life-long critical investigators of cross-cultural interaction. The primary context in which such intellectual and academic development occurs is a curriculum that interprets the African American experience according to a global perspective. In order to implement this mission for undergraduate education, we have long offered specialized courses that normally appeal to advanced undergraduates (such as juniors and seniors). (Note that these courses, since they are specialized and span course numbers 400-500, sometimes include both advanced undergraduates and the graduate students who are enrolled in the master’s program and who need fulfill their course requirements.) Last academic year, the faculty worked to develop introductory courses that should appeal to undergraduate in an earlier stage of their education (such as freshman and sophomores) and to re-number and re-design existing courses so that they might attract younger students.

(A, 1) Beginning this academic year, we will be offering one course every semester:
CAS AA207 Introduction to Race, Ethnic and Minority Relations (which is currently our highest enrolled course)

(A, 2) In addition, the program offers a number of courses every year:

CAS AA 371/ GRS AA 871 African American History (core course for minor and masters)
CAS AA 580 History of Racial Thought (core course for minor and masters)
CAS AA 103 Introduction to African American Literature (for Divisional Studies credit)
CAS AA 304 Introduction to African American Women Writers
CAS AA 355 Science, Race, and Society
CAS AA 382/ GRS AA 882 History of Religion in Pre-colonial Africa (pending approval by the Humanities Curriculum Committee)
CAS AA 385 Atlantic History
CAS AA 388/ GRS AA 888 Black Radical Thought
CAS AA 408/ GRS AA 808 Seminar: Minority Groups
CAS AA 502 20th Century African American Novel
CAS AA 502 Studies in African American Literature
CAS AA 504 African American and Asian American Women Writers
CAS AA 507 Literature of the Harlem Renaissance
CAS AA 514 Comparative Slavery
CAS AA 537 Caribbean Fiction
CAS AA 559 Justice and Reparations
CAS AA 583 Black Radical Thought
CAS AA 588 Women in Africa
CAS AA 590 The World and the West

(A, 3) We currently offer the following courses every other year:

CAS AA 396 Commerce in Atlantic Africa
CAS AA 489 African Diaspora
CAS AA 571 African American Art
CAS AA 586 African Americans Abroad

The following courses have been offered every year but have had consistently low enrollments (at least in the last 2 years). We may consider only offering these every other year:

CAS AA 564 Abolition in Comparative Perspective

(B, 1) Although we have no graduate courses offered every semester, we have some obligatory courses for graduate education offered every year:

CAS AA 580: History of Racial Thought
GRS AA 871: African American History
The following graduate courses have been offered every year and have seen relatively strong enrollments (included are courses with low enrollment last year but strong enrollment over their history):

CAS AA 502 20th Century African American Novel
CAS AA 502 Studies in African American Literature (GJ)
CAS AA 504 African American and Asian American Women Writers
CAS AA 507 Literature of the Harlem Renaissance
CAS AA 514 Comparative Slavery
CAS AA 537 Caribbean Fiction
CAS AA 559 Justice and Reparations
CAS AA 588 Women in Africa
CAS AA 590 The World and the West
GRS AA 882 History of Religion in Pre-Colonial Africa
GRS AA 888 Black Radical Thought

As we have a one-year MA program, courses offered every other year serve only one half of the graduate students we see, and so this scheduling pattern is impractical. Nevertheless, the following graduate courses have been offered every other year:

CAS AA 586 African Americans Abroad
CAS AA 571 African American Art

The following graduate course has been offered every year but has suffered low enrollment in the past two. We may consider offering this course every other year:

CAS AA 564 Abolition in Comparative Perspective

III. Planning for Staffing

Below is a three-year plan for staffing the courses identified in Part II.

CAS AA 207 Introduction to Race and Ethnic Relations (every year): Ruha Benjamin, Assistant Professor of Sociology and African American Studies, will be the primary instructor for this course moving forward. In her absence, the course can also be taught by John Stone, Professor of Sociology, or by a graduate student in the Department of Sociology.

CAS AA 304 African American Women Writers (every Spring): Mary Anne Boelcskevy

CAS AA 310 History of the Civil Rights Movement: This course was offered last academic year (AY 2009-2010) by Julia Rabig, a one-year Visiting Assistant Professor in African American Studies. The course was very popular, and the program would like to
be able to continue to offer it, though we do not have the faculty resources to do so at the moment.

CAS AA 316 African Diaspora Arts (every other year, Spring semester): Cynthia Becker

CAS AA 355 Science, Race, and Society (every year, Fall semester): Ruha Benjamin

CAS AA 371 African American History (every year, Fall semester): Linda Heywood

CAS AA 385 Atlantic History (every year, Spring semester): John Thornton

CAS AA 395 Leadership, Power, and Governance in Africa and the Caribbean (every other year, Spring semester): Linda Heywood

CAS AA 396 Commerce in Atlantic Africa (every other year, Fall semester): John Thornton

CAS AA 408 Seminar: Minority Groups (every other year, Spring semester): John Stone or Ruha Benjamin

CAS AA 489 African Diaspora (every other year, Spring semester): Linda Heywood

CAS AA 490 Blacks and Asians (every other year, Spring semester: Ronald Richardson

CAS AA 502 20th Century African American Novel (every year, Spring semester): Mary Anne Boelcskevy

CAS AA 502 Studies in African American Literature (every semester, varying topics): Gene Jarrett

CAS AA 504 African American and Asian American Women Writers (every year, Fall semester): Mary Anne Boelcskevy

CAS AA 505 Black Community and Social Change: This course was previously taught by James Teele and was taught last academic year by Julia Rabig. We do not currently have the faculty resources to offer this course, though it was of interest to a number of our students.

CAS AA 510 African American Drama (every year, Fall semester): Ronald Richardson

CAS AA 514 Comparative Slavery (every year, Fall semester): John Thornton

CAS AA 537 Caribbean Fiction (every year, Spring semester): Laurence Breiner

CAS AA 559 Justice and Reparations (every year, Fall semester): Neta Crawford
By offering some courses every other semester, faculty will have space in their schedules to develop and teach additional lower-level courses aimed specifically at freshman and sophomore undergraduates. Several of these courses have been developed in the last year. Mary Anne Boelcskevy has designed a 100-level Divisional Studies course that will serve as an introduction to African American Literature. This course will be offered for the first time in Spring 2011. In addition, John Thornton will also be teaching a new 300-level course of the History of Religion in Pre-Colonial Africa this coming spring. Allison Blakely has worked to re-number several of his courses so that they might be more appealing to students earlier in their academic careers. Linda Heywood’s core course on African American History has also been re-numbered to the 200-level so that it will attract students interested in more of an introduction to these historical issues.

Patricia Hills and Cynthia Becker are in the process of designing two new courses to be cross-listed in African American Studies and Art History. The first is a 200-level Introduction to African American Art, which will hopefully be offered every year in the Spring (when we currently have no African American and Art History courses). In addition, Patricia Hills currently teaches a course on Representations of the Civil War that has in the past been offered as a topic under an Art History course number. The program is working to develop a separate number for this course so that it might be cross-listed. This will ensure that both undergraduate and graduate students have exposure to courses in African American Art.

Finally, last year the African American Studies Program and the Department of Sociology hired Ruha Benjamin, a new Assistant Professor in both departments. Professor Ruha Benjamin has developed several new courses for the program, including a very popular 300-level course on Science, Race, and Society. In the spring of this academic year, she will be teaching a newly developed 500-level course on the Biopolitics of Race.

IV. Executive Summary
The major updates made to this document this year include: The increased enrollment in and popularity of courses in the African American Studies Program; the addition of several new courses to the African American Studies Program curriculum, including CAS AA 103 Introduction to African American Literature, CAS AA 382 History of Religion in Pre-Colonial Africa, and CAS AA 355 Science, Race, and Society; and the re-working of course numbers and times to appeal more strongly to the undergraduate population at Boston University.

The African American Studies Program is continuing to work to expand and diversify its undergraduate offerings. Since the first annual report in September 2007, enrollment in the African American Studies Program at both the undergraduate and graduate levels has admittedly been uneven (that is, enrollment that alternates between high and low numbers), but more recent numbers show a clear increase in enrollments and more students taking multiple courses in the program. Although some of the low enrollments over the past few years may be attributed to normal and random fluctuations, the program has viewed this as an opportunity to restructure fundamentally curriculum development and course scheduling with an eye toward strengthening the long-term health of the program. Since the arrival (in AY 2008-2009 and AY 2010-2011) of Professor Linda Heywood as the Program’s new director, and during the tenure (in AY 2009-2010) of Professor Gene Jarrett as the Program’s acting director (while Professor Heywood was on sabbatical leave), the core faculty actively began to implement a self-assessment to redress the uneven enrollment figures. Proposed solutions include:

- The development of more attractive courses. In the past academic year, the program has introduced a number of new courses, including CAS AA 382 History of Religion in Pre-Colonial Africa; CAS AA 355 Science, Race, and Society; and a new course on Toni Morrison. All of these courses are designed to appeal to the interests of undergraduate and graduate students in African American Studies.

- The inauguration of introductory courses. Historically most of the courses offered by the Program have been geared toward junior and senior undergraduates as well as graduate students. As a result, they have been unable to attract students at an earlier educational stage, and to continue to cultivate their interest in the Program through coursework. To address this difficulty, the faculty have been designing undergraduate introductory courses, such as an introduction to African American literature, an introductory African American history course, and an introduction to African American art history, that will be cross-listed with equivalent courses in our fellow Departments and Programs. The new course on African American Literature will be offered this spring for Divisional Studies credit, which the program hopes will serve as an introduction for many students to the work of the African American Studies Program.

- Expanding the pool of cross-listed courses. African American Studies Program is suffering from an undercount of courses that refer to the themes we find important and, therefore, should be cross-listed. Examples include CAS AN 252: Ethnicity and Identity; CFA MU 757: Crossroads: Blues; and COM JO 505: Impact of
Race. Over the next academic year, we will begin to reach out to the departments and programs featuring these courses, seeking to cross-list theirs with ours. This will represent our ongoing effort to formalize and expand curricular relationships between our program and the rest of BU.

- The consideration of an African and African American Studies major. During a September 2009 meeting of the African American Studies Program faculty, Professor Jarrett, in his capacity as acting director, resuscitated a conversation begun last year about the joint major. Professor Timothy Longman, the new director of the African Studies Center, has also broached this idea with his constituent faculty, which was likewise the continuation of a conversation that had begun in this program last year. There is yet much work to be done in clarifying the best possible course for the institution of an African American Studies major and whether or not this is best achieved through an alliance with African Studies. This academic year, the program is working with one undergraduate student, Kemi Alabi, who is designing a major in African American Studies. The addition of new courses and efforts to consolidate work done across the university on issues of race and the African American experience under the umbrella of African American Studies will help to strengthen the possibility of offering this course of study to more students. A possible major in African American studies promises to remain a topic of great interest, and it will be examined closely for its curricular, cultural, and institutional implications for BU.

- The strengthening of the master’s program. The master’s program in African American Studies has suffered from small application pools—even though the applicants are quite qualified and accredited, as the Fulbright awards show—because it is based on a one-year model that is inconsistent with the structures of peer programs or departments, such as the University of Pennsylvania and New York University, in which the master’s program is an instant gateway to a doctoral degree. In our case, the master’s program is inconvenient. As soon as students matriculate, they must begin as early as the fall semester to apply to doctoral programs elsewhere (in BU or at another university), even though their coursework is still incomplete and their relationship to professors, who must write letters of recommendations, is still embryonic. The early application process is not only disruptive, but it puts students at a disadvantage. While we may not yet be prepared to establish a doctoral program in African American Studies, we may think about establishing more direct pipelines to, say, the Program in American and New England Studies and to fellow Departments in CAS that would recognize the MA in African American Studies as credit toward a doctorate. Put another way, admission to our Program could come with greater guarantees of admission to and funding in a Program or Department at BU.

(2, B) Already the African American Studies Program has seen great improvement in enrollment and student interest due to the implementation of some of these initiatives in curriculum. The program is also working on adhering more closely to
the Registrar’s scheduling matrix, in contrast to the past routine of scheduling once-a-week seminars that may have been partly responsible for our uneven enrollments. Indeed, based on conversations between our office and those at BU dealing with course scheduling and enrollment, it has come to our attention that course schedules that disrupt the Registrar’s broader matrix of course schedules—that is, courses scheduled either for Tuesdays and Thursdays or for Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays—face the risk of low enrollment. Students are not inclined to take courses with such disruptive schedules; these courses may include undergraduate courses that meet only one day per week as a two-hour seminar, and/or courses within the same department or program whose schedules conflict with each other. In the past academic year, we have worked to eliminate the data-proven liability of disruptive scheduling by instituting a system by which faculty are required to teach lower-level courses on a Monday, Wednesday, Friday or Tuesday, Thursday schedule. We will continue to work to reach a compromise on fulfilling these preferences, while maintaining scheduling flexibility in our program, in the faculty member’s home department, and in the broader University community.

The program has also seen several staffing changes over the past academic year. This September, the program welcomed Ruha Benjamin as a new Assistant Professor of Sociology and African American Studies. Professor Benjamin’s courses have already been very popular with our students, and we are excited about what she will contribute to the program, both academically and programmatically. In addition, this year Mary Anne Boelcskevy has taken on a new position as Senior Lecturer in African American Studies and Director of Undergraduate Studies. Over the coming academic year, Professor Boelcskevy will be working closely with our Program Administrator to increase enrollments in the minor and make additional curricula changes that will help to attract more students to the program. As the program continues to grow, we look forward to expanding our faculty base. In recent years, the university has hired several new faculty members, including Khiara Bridges (Anthropology and Law), Anjulet Tucker (Religion), and Dylon Robbins (Romance Studies), who share interests with the African American Studies Program. This academic year, we hope to make more systematic efforts to better integrate these young scholars into the work of the program and to cross-list the courses that they will be adding to the university curriculum. In addition, we look forward to actively bringing new faculty to the university in the coming years. Last year’s faculty search was in either Sociology or Political Science, and the program hopes to be able to hire a new faculty member who would restore our initial strength in Political Science and International Relations, in which our earlier hire (Neta Crawford) has disavowed involvement in the program. The program also foresees opportunities for growth in Art History (in which subject we are currently unable to offer a substantial number of courses) and twentieth-century African American History, which would allow us to continue to offer several very popular courses taught last year by one-year Visiting Lecturer Julia Rabig.