Charting Our Path: Celebrating 50 Years of Black Studies

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"Charting Our Path: Celebrating 50 Years of Black Studies" celebrates the 50th anniversary of the University of Nebraska at Omaha’s Department of Black Studies. Created through student activism and community involvement, and encountering periods of challenges, UNO’s Department of Black Studies remains one of the oldest Black Studies departments in the country. This traveling exhibit highlights important moments in the department’s history including its origins in the 1960s, institutional conflict, and triumphs of a thriving department.

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"Charting Our Path: Celebrating 50 Years of Black Studies" is part of a cooperative project of the UNO Libraries and the Department of Black Studies. Support has been provided by UNO’s Strategic Investment in Social Justice, Inequality, Race, and Class initiative, UNO Libraries, and the Department of Black Studies. This exhibit is funded in part by Humanities Nebraska and the Nebraska Cultural Endowment.

This traveling exhibit was curated by Claire Du Laney, UNO Libraries’ Outreach Archivist, and researched in part by Paul Jensen, UNO Libraries’ student worker.
On November 10, 1969, students known as “The Omaha 54” held a peaceful protest in the office of UNO President Kirk Naylor. The students were arrested and charged with unlawful assembly.

Omaha’s Black community supported the students, bailed them out of jail, and engaged in the ongoing fight for Black Studies courses at UNO.

The Department of Black Studies at the University of Nebraska at Omaha is a direct legacy of this activism and sacrifice. It remains one of the oldest Black Studies departments in the country.

THE OMAHA 54

Palmer Anderson
Wilbur Bailey
William Batts
Michael Blackson
Michael Brown
Barbara Brown
Geri Brown
Preston Bush
Wanda Burton
Johnny Butler
Marvin Dailey
Ron Estes
Jesse Everett
Howard Farrell
Haidee Foust
Warren Green
Aaron Hall
Clarence Hall
Maryl Harris
Karen Hayes
Thomas Hendrick
Robert Honore
Terese Hudgins
Ronald Jackson
Carey Johnson
Joseph Johnson
Jesse Kendle

Richard Lee
Vincent Mallory
Michael Maroney
James Massey
Labeta McCloud
Harry McGuire
Simon Mosley
Catherine Pope
Johnnie Paule, Jr.
Douglas Powell
Carl Robinson
Terry Rose
Jennifer Scott
Carl Sullivan
William Teabout
Howard Tucker
Paul Tucker
Rodger Ulmar
William Walker
Vicky Webb
Marla West
Grant West
Constance White
Gary Williams
LaVell Williams, Sr.
Thomas Wright
Daniel Yancy
Black Studies was rooted in activism as students voiced concerns about the unfair treatment of Black students, faculty, and staff, and the dearth of courses that focused on Black history and culture. These concerns were largely ignored. On November 10, 1969, some of UNO’s Black students, including members of the student group Black Liberators for Action on Campus (BLAC), peacefully protested in the office of President Kirk Naylor. The students, known as the Omaha 54, were arrested. They were bailed out by Black community members and organizations, including the NAACP, the Urban League, Wesley House, Ernie Chambers, and others.

This sit-in was part of a larger national demonstration of campus unrest encompassing activism from San Francisco State University to Cornell University. It sparked conversations and heated debates about what Black Studies should, and could, encompass on college campuses.
“Black Students Demand for Action.” November 5, 1969, Student Unrest Collection, UNO Libraries’ Archives and Special Collections, University of Nebraska at Omaha. 

Newspaper photos and headlines chronicle the sit-in, arrests, and trial while the scrapbook shows materials gathered by Naylor and his office about the events.

Images reproduced here are from the UNO Libraries’ Archives and Special Collections. The petition from BLAC made clear the demands presented to Naylor.

“UNO 54” BLAC (Black Liberators for Action on Campus) Sit-In Related Documents, 1969-1970, scrapbook, Kirk Naylor Papers, UNO Libraries’ Archives and Special Collections, University of Nebraska at Omaha.

“UNO 54 BLAC (Black Liberators for Action on Campus) Sit-In Related Documents, 1969-1970, scrapbook, Kirk Naylor Papers, UNO Libraries’ Archives and Special Collections, University of Nebraska at Omaha.

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I’d recommend either showing only one code on this banner, or putting them on opposite edges of the banner to make scanning them easier. Also suggest to label all QR codes with their destinations.
The first years of Black Studies were overshadowed by curriculum debates, budget tension, and conflict over administrative support. During the first two years, communication broke down between the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, the Dean of Academic Affairs, and the Black Studies department chairs. Allegations were made that other college units refused to cross-list Black Studies classes and that space and personnel were intentionally denied to the department.

Things reached a crisis point in 1972 when Black Studies chair Milton White accused Dean William Gaines of Academic Affairs of racist and paternalistic practices. An investigation was called for, and a one-man fact-finding mission was authorized. The People’s Regent, a community and student activist group, became involved when the calls for a committee, instead of a single person, to investigate White’s allegations went unheeded. Gaines was acquitted and White left UNO shortly after.
The documents here illustrate the early struggles the department faced for legitimacy from other university departments. The first two chairs of the department, Melvin Wade and Milton White, experienced deep frustration at the lack of progress and resources in building the department. The situation in the early 1970s became so fraught that White began a hunger strike. Despite the turbulent beginning, the department grew throughout the 1970s. Read full accounts of these and other events chronicled here by scanning the QR codes, which will take you to the UNO Libraries’ digital collections.

“Plan for Black Studies at the University of Nebraska at Omaha,” February 5, 1971, page 1 of 3, Department of Black Studies Records, UNO Libraries’ Archives and Special Collections, University of Nebraska at Omaha.

“Black Minority Interest Action Committee on Campus letter to Dr. Blackwell, May 12, 1971, Department of Black Studies Records, UNO Libraries’ Archives and Special Collections, University of Nebraska at Omaha.

“UNO Moral Commitment to Black Studies,” November 17, 1971, page 1 of 2, Department of Black Studies Records, UNO Libraries’ Archives and Special Collections, University of Nebraska at Omaha.

“Fact Finding Investigation- Dr. George M. Johnson,” March 23, 1972, page 2 of 14, Department of Black Studies Records, UNO Libraries’ Archives and Special Collections, University of Nebraska at Omaha.

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The department survived the conservative backlash of the 1980s, which defunded Black Studies departments across the country. In 1984, a motion was made to downgrade the department to a program, housing faculty in other colleges and cutting the number of courses available as part of University of Nebraska system-wide budget cuts. The Black community and NAACP were once again active in supporting the department, and Black Studies survived the budget crisis and efforts to cut the department.

A troubling episode in the history of the university was a threat of violence against graduates in 1997. According to the Omaha World-Herald, a letter was slipped under the door of the department, threatening to harm and kill Black students during graduation. The situation was escalated by the NAACP and brought to the attention of U.S. Senator Chuck Hagel and the FBI.
Though there have been significant moments of turbulence during its 50-year history, Black Studies remains a thriving and interdisciplinary department that maintains its original mission of attracting leaders in the field, providing avenues of engagement with rigorous scholarship, involving the community, and supporting students as they grapple with academic, political, and cultural topics.

The Black Studies department has always sponsored speakers, events, and programs for the campus and community. The most enduring is the annual Malcolm X Festival, first held in 2002. Notable speakers to visit campus include Alex Haley, Maki Mandela, Kwame Ture (formerly Stokely Carmichael), and Ibram X. Kendi.

On July 28, 2021, the Department of Black Studies and UNO Libraries’ Archives and Special Collections welcomed members of the Omaha 54 back to UNO to celebrate and recognize their courage and activism 52 years prior. This important event kicked off the 50th anniversary year of the Black Studies department. View video and photos of the event by scanning the QR code.