

Black and Puerto Rican Studies Raise Students Consciousness

By Amina Abdus-Salam

The Dept. of Black and Puerto Rican Studies has been on Hunter's campus since 1968, but according to Manny Otero, a Hunter Junior, Black and Puerto Rican Studies on college campuses really began around 1964.

"In 1964," he explains, "there was an uprising in every ghetto in the U.S., because people were tired of the conditions they were living under. A lot of young people got involved in 'The Movement', so SEEK, College Discovery and similar programs were started to get young people off the streets and into the university. This was done so they would acquire the same mentality and outlook as those already in college. But what happened was they saw that a lot of what was being taught was irrelevant, so the demand for Black and Puerto Rican studies arose."

"In 1968, at Hunter, some Black and Latin students formed a Third World Coalition to demand Black and Puerto Rican studies. The Administration at first refused, but later that summer Black and Puerto studies became a reality at Hunter.

When the Department first started there were 5 Puerto Rican studies courses and 7 Black Studies courses. Now there are 11 and 18, respectively, with two inter-departmental courses dealing with the Third World. The Major consists of 30 credits of

both Black and Puerto Rican Studies courses, and the Minor can be taken from either Black or Puerto Rican Studies or both.

When Myrna Bain, the director of the Black Studies sequence was asked what made her choose Black Studies, she said, "I graduated from Hunter in 1961, and at that time you would find perhaps two Blacks in any given class in any city college. While I was attending Hunter, the Black movement was just starting, and there were no Black organizations on campus. At one time Malcolm X came to Hunter to speak. He spoke on Black history, and the impression he left with me stayed for a long time."

After Myrna graduated, she couldn't find a job. When she finally did, she got a job in advertising and stayed there for three years. She helped found a

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Black newspaper in Newark, and then worked for the Urban League in Washington, D.C. "After all that," she said, "I knew what I wanted to do."

"I saw the necessity to educate young people in terms of setting realistic goals after college. I realized everything I had been taught was from a white perspective, and none of what was helping me deal with the real world." She came to New York in 1970 to start teaching, and intends to continue in Black Studies, "so we don't have to keep making the same mistakes. Previously, a lot of Black straight-A students knew nothing about themselves, or forgot about themselves in four years. Now, when a Black student goes to a white-oriented class, it doesn't all sink in."

Myrna stressed that Black Studies can help a student, no matter what field he or she goes into. To name a few, she listed teaching, social work, journalism, medicine, law, or just being a parent. She informed me that students can take a double major of Black and Puerto Rican Studies with a major from another department.

Diane Wilson is a Senior with her Major in Black and Puerto Rican studies. A transfer student from New York Community College, she says Black people got her into Black Studies, as she was involved in extracurricular activities closely related to the Department and has been to Africa twice. She found she could relate to Black Studies better

She plans to teach on the college level. "It's a necessity for Black people to know their own history and culture. For other people, Black Studies wouldn't hurt them at all!"

Benjamin Ortiz, the newly-appointed director of the Puerto Rican sequence, has taught at the University of Puerto Rico and at the SEEK Department of Queens College, as well as at Hunter. He became involved in Puerto Rican studies while teaching in Puerto Rico.

He said the goal of the Puerto Rican Studies sequence is to, "create a conscious identity of the Puerto Rican student, and provide them with a broad base of knowledge of where they come from. Not only Puerto Rican students, but anyone interested in learning about colonialism, can benefit from Puerto Rican Studies. Puerto Rico is the last classical colony in the world today, with a movement for independence."

He went on to say that, "We don't want to institutionalize Puerto Rican studies, but on the other hand we don't want a ghetto in the university; something that is totally alienated from the rest of the school. I see the Department as a constant adversary to the system."

Ana Zentella, an instructor in Puerto Rican Studies, like Myrna Bain, also graduated from Hunter.

It took her years, she says, to find out that a lot of what she learned was not relevant and was jaundiced in a particular way.

She started teaching at Hunter in the Education Department, but she wanted the opportunity to reach people who shared her background. "I wanted to say things that should have been said to me, so the process with them would be shortened; so at age 20 they would know things it took me to age 30 to find out."

A couple of Puerto Rican students who had taken electives in Puerto Rican studies were sitting in the cafeteria one afternoon. E.J. Torres is a Junior and a Communications Major. He told me, "I took Puerto Rican History I, but I didn't care for the teachers presentation of the material." (The teacher has since left Hunter.) "I may take a couple of more courses. I think it's very important to learn things you didn't

know about yourself. Second and Third-generation Puerto Ricans who are raised in New York lose a lot of their culture. Now that the Department exists, we have a better choice of a major, one that deals with our own. I have a sister who is growing up now, and I hope she gets into Puerto Rican studies."

Tilden LeMelle has been the Chairman of the Department of Black and Puerto Rican Studies for the past year. He has a PhD. in African Studies and was instrumental in forming the Black Studies Department at Fordham University and the Center on International Race Relations at the Graduate School of International Studies of the University of Denver. According to LeMelle, Black and Puerto Rican studies is not a fad, but "is developing and will continue to grow, and will be an important component in educational structures."