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On Ranking Professional Achievement in Black Studies: A Reply to Brossard

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The Summer 1984 special issue of the *Journal of Negro Education* on Black Studies was an important collection of position papers by leading administrators and scholars in the field. In that issue, Professor Carlos Brossard of the University of Pittsburgh critiqued my work as part of his attempt "to force raw technical reports to meet expected analytical and statistical adequacy."¹ He referred to my "so-called quantitative approach" as "unorthodox," and one that reports findings "not properly explored, fully developed, or securely confirmed." Finally, he suggests that some concern has been expressed about its "intent." In reply, I will (1) restate the essence of my preliminary report, (2) critique Brossard's distortions and misrepresentations, and (3) suggest a practical direction for future work.²

¹See Carlos A. Brossard, "Classifying Black Studies Programs," *Journal of Negro Education*, 53 (Summer 1984), 278–295. The work to which Brossard refers is: Gerald A. McWorter, "The Professionalization of Achievement in Black Studies: A Report on Ranking Black Studies in Universities and Colleges" (Technical Report, Afro-American Studies and Research Program, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 1981 Typescript).

²A fuller elaboration of what is suggested in this response can be found in Gerald A. McWorter and Ronald Bailey, "Black Studies Curriculum Development in the 1980s: Its Patterns and History," *Black Scholar*, 15 (March–April 1984), 18–31, with an addendum in November–December 1984. The *Black Scholar* article was excerpted from a 58-page report prepared for the Black Studies Curriculum Project of the Institute of the Black World. The report was a critique of reviews by Black Studies specialists of course outlines focused on the Black experience from scholars throughout the U.S. The fuller paper, which presents the paradigm for the study of the Black experience, can be obtained by writing to Ronald Bailey, Afro-American Studies, University of Mississippi, University, MS 38677. For an application of the paradigm, see the widely used text, Abdul Alkalimat and Associates, *Introduction to Afro-American Studies: A Peoples College Primer* (1984), available from the Cooperative Research Network, P.O. Box 7610, Chicago, IL 60680.

I

The study referred to above was a preliminary effort at “objectifying subjective judgment.” I made a distinction between ranking and evaluation because evaluation represents “clarification of the institution’s goals and a determination of how they are being met or not met, and policy recommendations for strengthening the program.” I stipulated three main reasons for a national ranking study of Black Studies: (1) “the need to concretize the value orientation of the profession,” in this case journal publishing, professional leadership, and graduate studies; (2) “the need for the professional community of Black Studies to impose standards of excellence on itself,” in this case the achievement in a professional Black Studies context as opposed to the otherwise expected mainstream disciplinary context; and (3) “the need to define quality alternatives for national review,” in this case behavioral achievement to replace eclectic journalistic review.

I reviewed the history of academic ranking surveys, including reputational ranking, entrepreneurial ranking, pedagogical ranking, and productivity ranking. Then I defined the universe of my data, excluding the mainstream academic disciplines and the sub-discipline Black caucus in favor of treating Black Studies as a professional academic field in its own right. The research design specified three critical features of professional achievement (for individuals and academic programs) in Black Studies aggregated for an individual campus, i.e., for the collective productive behavior of faculty on a specific campus:

1. Theoretical leadership of the profession—publishing (articles) and governing (board membership) the professional journals in the field;
2. Practical leadership of the profession—governing (board membership) the professional association of Black Studies;
3. Preparation for entering the profession—graduate study focused on the Black experience, formalized into a clearly defined administrative structure.

I clarified each criteria. On the first, I stated:

The intellectual activity of a profession is usually reflected in a scholarly journal, and this is especially true with academic disciplines. The journal literature creates intellectual turf and forms a common frame of reference for the profession, i.e., its content constitutes the “state of the art.” Whoever controls access to journal publication and whoever gets published are considered powerful and successful. These individuals make up the intellectual producers and gatekeepers in professional Black Studies journals.

This criterion was used to identify 26 leading journals in Black

Studies and, for selected years between 1977 and 1980, 407 board positions and 1,662 journal articles.³

The next criterion that was explained was board membership in Black Studies professional organizations. I stated:

Every profession tried to have its own organization because of the necessity to consolidate its resources in controlling itself and protecting its members from other aspects of society. The mainstream professions are usually conservative because they tend to protect their own establishment. However, insurgent professions begin with a critique of the existing order so that it can critically define its own distinct role. Further, the broad theoretical critique is followed with a set of turf battles on issues such as academic curriculum, permanence of administrative structure and funding, faculty lines and tenure, methodological technology, etc.

For Black Studies, the model of an insurgent profession has been followed. Black Studies organizations were founded with an activist baptism in struggle against "racism" in intellectual—academic—professional circles. The tradition of Black Studies professional associations is a record of academic excellence and social responsibility.

Overall, there were 177 board positions in 11 professional associations.⁴ I had hoped to include a ranking of papers presented at the annual conferences of these professional associations. However, it was not possible to present this data adequately, so this measure was omitted. The broad pattern of journal articles and board positions is presented in Table I.

The final criterion was "graduate education." Three types of degree programs (formal master's degree programs, doctoral fellow programs and Black Studies related graduate study at historically Black institutions) were chosen.⁵ Our focus was clear:

. . . we are interested in Black Studies as a coherent academic profession.

³The journals are as follows: General Category—*Black Books Bulletin*, *Black Scholar*, *First World*, *Freedomways*, *Journal of Black Studies*, *Phylon*, *Review of Afro-American Issues*, *Studia Africana*, *Umoja*, *Western Journal of Black Studies*; Social Science Category—*Black Law Journal*, *Black Sociologist*, *Howard Law Journal*, *Journal of Black Psychology*, *Journal of Negro Education*, *Journal of Negro History*, *Journal of Non-White Concerns*, *Negro Educational Review*, *Review of Black Political Economy*, *Urban League Review*; Humanities Category—*Black Art*, *Black American Literature Forum*, *Black Perspectives in Music*, *CLA Journal*, *Callaloo*, *Obsidian: Black Literature Review*. Detailed descriptions of these journals can be found in Gerald McWorter, *Guide to Scholarly Journals in Black Studies* (Chicago: Center for Afro-American Studies, 1981), available from the Cooperative Research Network in Black Studies, P.O. Box 7610, Chicago, IL 60680.

⁴The associations are as follows: General Category—African Heritage Studies Association, Association for the Study of Afro-American Life and History, National Council of Black Studies; Social Science Category—Association of Black Anthropologists, Association of Black Psychologists, Association of Social and Behavioral Scientists, Association of Black Social Workers, National Conference of Black Political Scientists; Humanities Category—College Language Association and the National Conference of Artists.

⁵The programs of graduate study are as follows: formal degree programs (Atlanta, Cornell, Ohio State, State University of New York at Albany, University of California at Los Angeles, and University of Illinois—Urbana-Champaign) and the Black Studies related degree programs at the historically Black institutions (Alabama State, Cheyney State, Delaware State, Fisk, Howard, Meharry, North Carolina State, Southern, Texas Southern, and the University of the District of Columbia).

TABLE I

Positions of Achievement in Black Studies Journals and Associations, By Subject Areas

Black Studies Subject Area	No. of Journals	Black Studies Journals				Black Studies Associations		
		Board Positions (1979–80)		Articles (1977–79)		No. of Associations	Board Positions (1979–80)	
		N	%	N	%		N	%
General	10	241	59.2	749	45.1	3	74	41.8
Social Science	10	87	21.4	553	33.3	6	65	36.7
Humanities	6	79	19.4	360	21.7	2	38	21.5
Total	26	407	100.0	1,662	100.1	11	177	100.0

Therefore, our focus is not on how the Black experience is subordinated as a sub-field within some other discipline, but how it has an intellectual integrity of its own.

Overall, the results were summed up to reflect the different types of high professional productivity and not merely a combined quantitative measure requiring assumptions about the inherent comparability of each criteria. Four distinct categories were delineated. They are:

- Category A: Full service, top quality Black Studies faculty achievement;
- Category B: Full achievement in journals and associations, but no formal graduate study;
- Category C: Achievement in the journals, with graduate programs, but inactive on boards of associations;
- Category D: Active in journal publishing and on boards, but no graduate program and no board participation in associations.

The data on the colleges and universities are presented in Table II. These figures could easily change with the relocation of one or two faculty members. However, these results stand up to the ranking efforts of others, and constitute a significant reorientation of the entire ranking enterprise in Black Studies. We have found a way to give due respect to our leading Black institutions (still at the top of professional achievement in Black Studies!), to Black Studies professionals at major mainstream elite institutions, and to Blacks at white institutions who are in the nationalist wing of the Black Studies professional community—all in the same context. In this sense, with all its shortcomings, the report is sound and useful.

II

Brossard levels several specific criticisms at the work discussed above. He blames me for using “only domestic Black Studies journals.” My report focuses on Black Studies as Afro-American Studies in the USA. This is the consensus in the field. Of course, other perspectives exist, and could be used as less popular frames of reference, with the mainstream integrationist position (including

TABLE II
*Top Fifteen Colleges and Universities in Black Studies, by Category**

Category and School	No. of Journal Board Positions	No. of Journal Articles Published	No. of Positions on Association Boards	Graduate Program
Category A				
Howard	31	113	7	yes
Atlanta	22	6	3	yes
Cornell	7	19	1	yes
Univ. of Illinois— Urbana-Champaign	6	7	1	yes
Ohio State	1	5	2	yes
Category B				
Morgan State	7	11	2	no
Morehouse	6	6	3	no
Hunter	4	5	2	no
Univ. of Pittsburgh	3	9	4	no
City University of New York	3	4	1	no
Category C				
Univ. of Wisconsin—Madison	1	12	0	yes
Univ. of Iowa	1	6	0	yes
Category D				
Brown	4	12	0	no
Univ. of Washington—Seattle	4	8	0	no
Harvard	3	18	0	no

*Definitions of the categories are found on page 232.

the mainstream “white” journals) or the Pan-Africanist position (including journals from the Caribbean and Africa). Further, Brosard makes the elitist proposal to rank journals on their prestige. I chose the democratic alternative, for this purpose, of giving all of the journals equal value.

Brossard wants to disaggregate the data and explore the meaning of “department affiliation, professional age, continuity of well-established research by specific individuals, and differentially weighing new research endeavors as against exhausting long-term theory building from an aging or career project.”⁶ This is fine as a speculative series of explanations of productivity as measured as it is, but it is functionally irrelevant to my variable other than to accept my data as a given dependent variable while his speculations remain yearnings to explain what I have found.

Standardization of data was also raised as an issue. I chose to use raw data because I wanted to fully face the campus as a meri-

⁶Brossard, “Classifying Black Studies Programs,” p. 288.

tocracy in which Black Studies professionalism would be a rather scarce resource. I provided a measure of how to establish one's market position in an objective manner, in a labor market in which schools "buy" talent, rather than through the "old boy network." Objective productivity is the best game in town, and the most democratic, in the elite meritocracy of the university. However, even if one wanted to control for campus size, there would be the decision about the population base to use, total faculty or total Black faculty, or total students or total black students, and so forth.

Brossard criticized me for making "the easiest count." Surely he must know that social science has always progressed by realizing the possible. He has a rather complex desire for "more powerful multivariate strategies," which are certainly conceivable but not immediately probable without large-scale funding to cover the cost of data collection and analysis. My research was conducted with in-house funds. Brossard offers his esoteric interests, but fails to discuss my fundamental purpose and results. He pondered, "Perhaps we could learn if economists, for example, published more than sociologists in Black Studies. If this is so, is it related to the higher quality of updated government-reported data as well as a higher standardization of mathematical, normative reasoning in most economic modeling?"⁷ Obviously, this was not a concern of my study. What use could Black Studies make of this? On the other hand, my method directs Black Studies professionals to participate actively in journals and associations as the mainstream of their academic profession. With this report, an effort has been made to support Black Studies as a profession. Brossard summarily stated that these empirical measures have not "fully captured professionalization," but he did not offer proof for his charges. He offered alternative ideas about research design, but he offered no critique of the substance of the report.

III

I believe that the issue of quality must be at the heart of our debate over ranking. It is obvious that journals, professional associations, and graduate education are key; and, perhaps we must include additional features such as book publishing, grant and fellowship awards, and so forth. But also we now have to adopt as a new national focus the professional quality of our journals and

⁷Tbid.

associations.⁸ There is a malaise stalking our field of study as exemplified by the tragic loss of some journals, the numerous cancellations of sessions at professional meetings, and the overall decline in memberships, subscriptions, and conference attendance. The issue of ranking is significant if it leads to self-imposed standards that lead to excellence. Our standards of excellence must remain as high as those set by Charles H. Thompson, Carter G. Woodson, and W. E. B. Du Bois, among others. Why shouldn't we continue to build a Black intellectual tradition of academic excellence and social responsibility?

⁸My views on the professional organizational aspect of Black Studies are fully expressed in a report to the national board of the National Council for Black Studies. This report has proven to be controversial as it raises the issue of quality and calls for a more competitive style of work in which high achievement is rewarded. Copies of this report are available for the cost of reproduction from the Cooperative Research Network in Black Studies, P.O. Box 7610, Chicago, IL 60680.