

The Importance of Black Studies

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“Who are your people?” It is a deceptively simple question, but one that asks quite a bit of you. I first encountered it during my second-to-last semester of undergraduate studies while studying the life and legacy of Ella Baker. Since then, it has followed me, shaping not only what I study, but why I study it. I did not enter my first African American and Diaspora Studies course with many expectations. I enrolled in *The Making of the African Diaspora* with Dr. Tiffany Patterson thinking it would be a class secondary to my academic path. Instead, it fundamentally transformed how I understand history, power, and myself. It taught me that history is not neutral. It is constructed, contested, deeply political, and shaped by whose stories are told, whose are silenced, and whose are deemed worthy of preservation. What I didn’t realize at the time was that the question “Who are your people?” would become a framework for how I understand education as rooted in community, responsibility, and history.

The beauty of Black Studies is that it does not offer easy answers. Instead, it equips you with the tools to ask better questions. What does it mean to be Black? American? A citizen? Who writes the narratives we are taught to believe, and why do we believe them? At their core, these questions are asking the same thing: who are your people, and how does that shape what you know and how you move through the world? These questions pushed me to approach my political science coursework differently. Black Studies became the intellectual grounding beneath my political analysis, giving me the historical context and moral clarity that traditional frameworks often assume away. Where other disciplines sometimes prioritize abstraction, Black Studies insists on accountability by grounding ideas in real experiences.

The practice of constantly locating yourself in relation to others is not new. This practice

of asking better questions is deeply rooted in the work of Ella Baker, whose organizing philosophy centered on collective empowerment rather than charismatic, top-down leadership. Baker believed that education should not produce passive recipients of knowledge, but active participants capable of shaping their own communities. As she famously stated, “Strong people don’t need strong leaders.” Her work emphasized that leadership is not about visibility or hierarchy, but about cultivating the capacity of ordinary people to act collectively. When Baker asked, “Who are your people?,” she was not asking for a simple declaration of identity. She was asking for accountability, and for a recognition that we are shaped by and responsible to communities, histories, and struggles larger than ourselves. Knowledge, in this framework, is not something to possess, but something to use in the service of others. In this way, “Who are your people?” becomes more than a question, but a method and way of thinking that ties knowledge to responsibility.

Black Studies asks that same question of its students. It challenges the illusion of individualism and detachment that often defines higher education and instead centers community. It teaches that learning is not confined to the classroom or measured solely through grades, but rather it must be applied. Knowledge should transform how we move through the world. It asks students to move beyond individual achievement and instead understand themselves as part of something larger. To study Black history, culture, and politics is to be called into a deeper relationship with the past and a more intentional responsibility to the present.

This commitment is precisely why the growing attacks on Black Studies and DEI initiatives are so concerning. On college campuses—including Vanderbilt—these shifts are often framed as administrative restructuring or responses to political pressure. But they carry significant intellectual consequences. The scaling back of DEI programming, reduced funding

for culturally specific initiatives, and broader national rhetoric that frames Black Studies as “divisive” signal a deeper devaluation of the field. When institutions treat Black Studies as optional or disposable, they send a clear message: histories and experiences that challenge dominant narratives are expendable and critical engagement with race, inequality, and power is not essential to a university education, but supplemental.

What is lost in this process extends far beyond Black students. What we lose is not just a department or a set of courses. Without Black Studies, we lose the tools to analyze inequality honestly. We lose frameworks that help us understand how past injustices shape present conditions. We lose pedagogies that teach students to ask who benefits, who is harmed, and who is left out. Perhaps most importantly, we lose the ability to recognize that so-called “neutral” education has always been anything but neutral. Traditional curricula often present themselves as objective while quietly centering dominant perspectives and excluding others. Black Studies disrupts that illusion. It forces us to confront the reality that knowledge is produced within systems of power.

If we stop asking the questions that Black Studies demands, we risk becoming complacent, accepting incomplete histories and unchallenged narratives as truth. We risk divorcing education from responsibility, reducing it to a series of credentials rather than a tool for transformation. Education becomes something we earn, and not something that encourages growth. Black Studies resists that outcome. It insists that education should be rigorous, ethical, and intellectual, but also grounded in lived experience. Ultimately, Black Studies is not a field reserved for those who already see themselves reflected in it. It is an invitation for all students to think critically, historically, and ethically about the world they inhabit. It asks not just what we

believe, but who we are accountable to. It reminds us, again and again, that education is not simply about knowledge, but about purpose.

And so, the question remains: Who are your people, and what does that require of you?