

Early College Folio

The House of Education Needs Overhaul

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The Insistence of Inclusion

The Black Excellence Project

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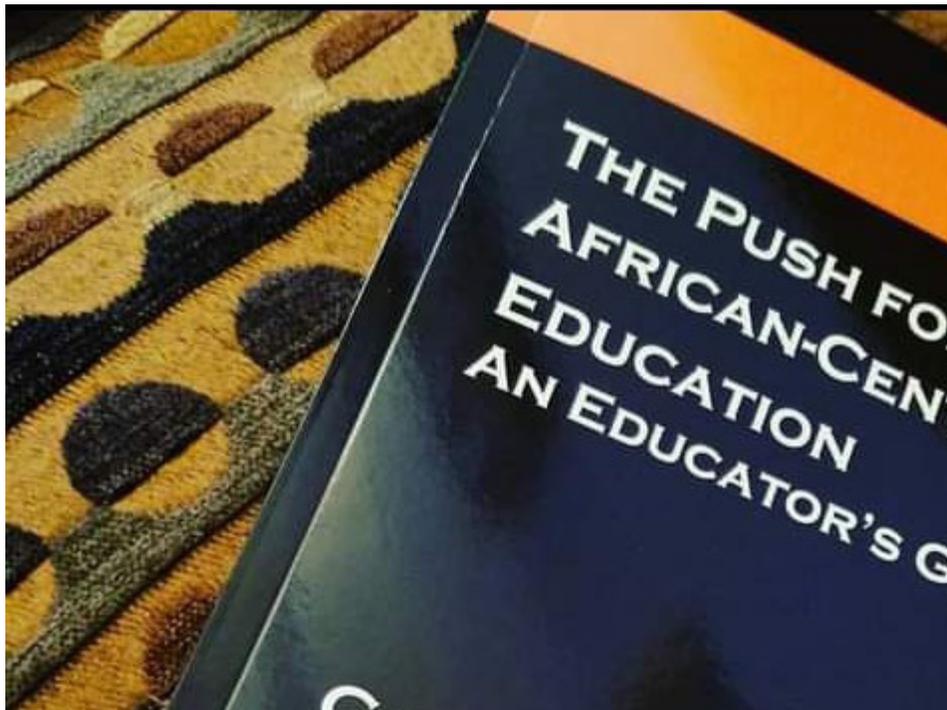
Blackness is also excellence. If that statement is to be held as true, Blackness must certainly be valuable, respected, let alone, included in society. However, throughout history we learn that Blackness was never meant to be regarded as an upper-tier in society or even afforded equal social participation. In the United States, colorism has unequivocally become associated with race, largely because racial lines could be more easily distinguishable than complexion, particularly as racial groups mixed and blended with each other throughout history. Whiteness has been prized; you can’t necessarily become White or adopt whiteness but are rewarded for your proximity to it. To maintain this preference for whiteness as a racial and social construct, society must then have its opposite. Therefore Blackness had to be created as a construct not to become equal, but to exist as the nonexample of what whiteness must be. This construct has been created and upheld to create social order and understanding. **Blackness was designed to move beyond being different, it had to be lesser than to uphold and safeguard this concept of whiteness.**

This protection of social hierarchy was never going to be successful because people, Black people among them, are indeed, valuable. It is not surprising then, that our own U.S. history is riddled with actions and counteractions to maintain a social order that simply cannot survive as long as the will of people do. Within the construct of whiteness are values of self-worth and esteem that would undeniably become goals for Black people in this country, too. Black people have never been aligned with this idea that they must remain the base of this social hierarchy for the greater good of society. Black peoples cannot accept assignment to inferiority for the mere comfort of White society as they have been asked to do, because that would relegate them to the throngs of oppression for the rest of their existence. For every Black person who has succumbed to this lesser role, fallen to stereotype or somehow successfully ignored this hierarchy they are confronted with each day, there has been an equal effort of resistance. Over time, over history, across groups, Black peoples in the United States have fought desperately to exist, to aspire, to achieve, to excel much like any other person and group in this country. Maintenance of social order has thus had to transform Black experiences and successes, distorting their impact and cause for equal standing, as well as discounting the

reason for their mutiny. Black peoples have and have had to defend themselves to preserve their identities, and their participation through society and history has been neglected and ignored for the purpose of re-teaching that whiteness needs to keep at the top of social order.

The school, as an institution, is the engine then that instructs society into order. It is the only environment that can mass produce a wide understanding of the country's inherent value system in ways the nuclear family or religion or even politics cannot address. It is at school where pupils learn the right way to exist, which is again most proximate to inflated values of whiteness. Becoming a soft concept, "whiteness" in schools must then include urgency, individualism, proving of your intelligence via standard exam or seminar, diction, conviction, presenting with obsession with product-over-process, in all—intellectualism. **You must perform to be a contributor, and if you are not a contributor in society you don't belong. Those who don't belong are not scholarly, and therefore do not merit the respect afforded to the intellectual.**

It is in this environment that the early college must exist. It is responsible for creating, training, and preparing these intellectuals to assume societal roles. Yet, the early college is uniquely positioned to expand access to who is allowed to become an intellectual. It brings university education to active and aspiring minds who have been excluded, lost in major cities and mega schools, or hidden by economic boundaries and misjudgements of ability and racial disparities. Without an early college, many students don't get the opportunities to even pursue intellectualism, nor the respect given those who attain it.



The inclusion of Black representation in academic studies has often been categorically referred to as, "African-centered education." Dr. Cass published on the subject in 2017 as a U.S. Fulbright Scholar.

Now, if it has crossed your mind that I need to cite these speculations and conjecture, my counter-question to you is “Why?” Why do I have to prove my own experience and ideas? Why support it with the opinions and subjectivity of others as if their thoughts are somehow worth more and are more substantive than my own? Have I not articulated my meaning and ideas clearly? This expectation and desperation for me to prove my point is a value of whiteness. That there can be no other way to exchange ideas without references and justification is a reflection of white dominance in society. That I have to justify my expertise as a Black scholar, author, veteran educator, and trained Africanist to be able to position myself to opine about race and dissolve anti-Blackness is in itself indicative of this preservation of social hierarchy.

The absence of the Black narrative in what we learn in educational spaces is the most dangerous tool used to reinforce social hierarchy. Not knowing of their contributions destroys the potential that Black groups can be seen as scholars and full social citizens who belong in society. For as long as possible, the approach has been to exclude Black testimonies from academic study all together, unless presented as villain or threat to order. However, as a result of much rebellion, Black resistance has inevitably swelled to sizes that it can no longer be contained. Today, it is unfavorable to continue to quiet the Black narrative; it is conservative and non-liberal to exclude Blackness. The liberal mind is the most elite of the echelon and the aspirational goal of the intellectual; to be an intellectual contemporarily, one now has to be well-versed in diversity. Not to be is unwise, unscholarly, and detrimental to social advancement. Thus, we then begin to see makeshift efforts to finally include Black perspectives in the series of historical events they have always belonged to, but now the next weapon to protect social order must be introduced: if the Black perspective must now be included, appended to syllabi, and hired on faculties, in adherence to social order, Blackness must now be distorted. Black groups are no longer multicultural within themselves, they are a singular race. It has collapsed from its plurality to become one singular and negative topic to discuss. Do you know how impossible it becomes to view anyone highly when you have learned of them as a victim? Black suffering, victimhood, and oppression is the new subject at hand, and to learn about Black groups becomes to learn about their pain and suffering and again, to now position them as inferior, even if no longer the “other.” In that way, social order is maintained as we learn *about* rather than learn *from* Black people, which holds whiteness and creates saviorism to protect and provide for Black peoples.

It is in this web of social tragedy that the Black Excellence Project had to come about to avert the danger in including Black groups and experiences and perspectives as non-contributors to society at large. This initiative was designed to counter anti-Blackness to address this below-surface belief that a bottom must be necessary in order for any group to continue at the top. It is the responsibility of every learner to glean knowledge from untold perspectives that have never been uncovered before. As founder of this initiative and designer of its curriculum, I am not the “passable Black,” the acceptable token who simply

adds to any unspoken quota or liberal agenda. I am a reflective mirror showing our educational systems what simply must exist, particularly as we offer liberal arts education in multiracial and multicultural student and staff bodies that have already been excluded. We simply cannot continue this leveling of people without expectation of further resistance and the maintenance of the status quo. In this particular new year of 2021, the racialized ceramic that has upheld this social structure has been cracked. **People are aware that Black people exist, do not ascribe to one form of representation, and cannot be excluded from society's fabric any longer.** The new task must then become, how do you teach all people about Black peoples who have been there all along?



Official banner and motto of the Black Excellence Project

We begin locally. The Black Excellence Project (BEP) has a central focus on local histories, which are a more immediate bridge from the classroom to community. Who, then, are the subjects of the Black stories we must now learn about who come from our own neighborhoods, cities, states? Who have been these rebels offering resistance to the placement of Black groups at the edges of society? These people are professionals (economics and wealth are also characteristic of commitment to contribution: where you work can often define worth). We don't necessarily place as much value on how you work; it's not about effort, it's about prestige. Thus, not only do we begin with local stories, but **we learn from Black professionals who use(d) their careers to combat racism.** That then includes a focus on prestigious career pathways that model to students how to use their career trajectories to counter anti-Blackness.

Amateka
College Prep™

Fill your space.
Connect the world.

Amateka College Prep works with public high schools to advance understanding of Black groups in multiracial, multicultural communities. Its signature program, The Black Excellence Project, was brought to Bard Early Colleges by Amateka founder and BHSEC D.C. faculty, Dr. Cassandra St. Vil. To learn more, visit: www.AmatekaCollegePrep.org.

Our commitment to the written word is unstruckable maintenance to intellectualism. A scholar must write and present and contribute to the literary form in order to be valued. **Thus, if Black histories are now to be included they must be written down.** In The Black Excellence Project, students must express their thoughts in essays, showing what they have learned, not necessarily to archive over time, as much as it is to prove their intellectual contribution. Students, themselves, learn that they are a citable source responsible for clearly sharing ideas with the public.

A byproduct of BEP's inclusion of the written word and producing final, published essays is that their testimonials are shared with wider audiences who also get the novel stories of Black groups even if unable to access the instruction of the course.

BEP SESSION OUTLINE

1. Orientation & Reading Inventory
2. Arts & Entertainment
3. Civic Engagement, Public Service & Law
4. Athletics, Construction, & Military
5. Math, Science, & Technology
6. Literature, Philosophy, & Education
7. Community Interviews & Writing
8. Writing & Revision
9. Reading Inventory & Post-Survey
10. Celebratory Reading



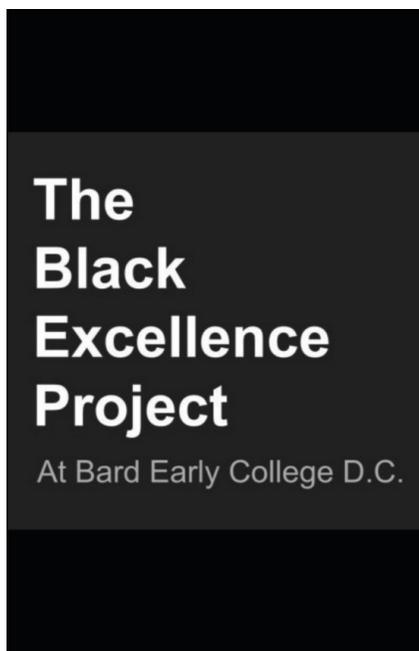
Image 3: L to R: Dr. Michael Sigrist and Dr. Cassandra St. Vil: the faculty who implemented the program at school partner, Bard Early College D.C., are pictured here in the spring of 2020.

A school as an academic institution of learning must still do its job to educate its populations, and The Black Excellence Project is not separate from this role. Within BEP, our goals were three:

1. improve reading proficiency to prepare for the intellectualism our early college would harbor;
2. demonstrate writing proficiency, where students had to be called to the

- task to share ideas in expected ways and standards; and
3. internalize commitment to the inclusion of Black narratives in positive form as part of academic and social training demonstrated by written and spoken outputs throughout the program. Harder to substantively measure, internalized commitment would be expressed by the words authored in their essays sharing what they learned and their attitudes towards Blackness, overall.

The curriculum had to have been aligned with universal curricular standards to prove its place along the traditional canon of study. It had to incorporate rigor, stretching the minds of students in the oratory and in writing in ways familiar to upper caste educators and call the attention of prestigious partners such as the U.S. State Department as a project funder. It had to culminate in product, a tangible outcome measured by understandable goals. Thus it could not exist without the book, publishing the work of students, who had to be critically evaluated for their preparedness. The underlying question it needed to prove was: **Can you be or become an intellectual by learning from Black narratives?**



BEP's first book was published in June-teenth 2020, taking place at Bard Early College in Washington, D.C.

The first iteration of the project chose critical and comfortable parameters within which to exist: It began in the bridge year, offered to ninth grade students at the precipice of their high school years. The ninth grade is a critical year to decide who will be creamed to the top tiers of society and who will falter. It is socially the time where adolescents choose their own values independent of the influences that shaped them up to that point. Teenagers decide for themselves who and what matters to them as they consider their post-secondary lives and options. If we are to now introduce Black narratives, we must begin at the start of their high school career as they transition to more competitive and intellectually stimulating study.

BEP started in the spring of 2020, in the month of February where the recognition of Black histories is most palatable and widely accepted. It was expected and non-threatening to social order to initiate this effort in the month of February (that rebellious work had already been argued by the resistance of Carter G. Woodson, founder Negro History Week). We then continued BEP as a ten-week program through the publication of our book compilation holding over 30 essays written by 14- and 15-year-old authors with valuable opinions and newfound learning of Black groups. The book was intentionally released

on Juneteenth, a distinguishable bookend and notion that Black study must extend beyond the shortest month of the year.

BEP was embedded in the required U.S. history course at Bard High School Early College D.C. The assignments, readings, and discussion were not an extracurricular activity or solely assigned to those who wished to participate. Collectively, across race and cultural identities, 140 ninth-grade students were going to explicitly study the impact of local Black professionals and share what they had learned with others as authors of their collective manuscript. The Humanities, much like the month of February, is also the socially safer realms within which Black studies are known to operate. It is accepted in such disciplines, even expected, thus if there is a breadth of room to diversify curriculum it needed to have started with history or english language arts, or at most, the performing arts.



Amateka College Prep and Bard Early College D.C. partnered to published a second book during Black History Month 2021.

The second iteration of The Black Excellence Project insisted that we expand to an uncommon content area and took place during the Fall of 2020. With the leadership of veteran math teachers, two white tenth-grade geometry teachers took on the task of incorporating Black studies—positively and as contributors—in what has become one of the whitest of content areas, with the purpose of including the untold stories alongside the typical sequence of mathematical study. Alongside our new goal of teacher training, developing teachers to deliver Black-affirming academic material was the goal of the continuation of BEP. The second version of the project would circle back to the month of February, where in this new year, ninth- and tenth-grade students in math and history would narrate their learnings in race-focused essays, publishing their second book for Black History Month 2021.

To move over 300 students to consider, weigh, and write about stories and approaches that have not previously been afforded them, nor available to the teachers implementing the initiative, is no easy feat. The Black Excellence Project has not been without its own bumbles, but its intent has remained steadfast. It is critical to teach learners how to dismantle racism and anti-Blackness given the multiculturalism of our society at large. As crucially important is then the disruption of this blind devotion to whiteness at the expense of Blackness. The goal is not to replace white peoples or groups, but to include Black persons

in what we learn and study, recognizing that having multiple perspectives be victorious only adds to society's values rather than compete with them.

While this project worked to inspire the authorship and voice of ninth- and tenth-grade students in history and math, Bard Early College also offered college-level coursework which further celebrated Black cultures within intellectualism. Courses offered at the early college included *The Black Aesthetic*, where students explored creativity-as-intellectualism in the arts, as well as *Afro-Latinidad*, a course dedicated to the inclusion of Black cultures in Latin America and Afro-LatinX identities in the United States in collegiate studies. Bard High School Early College D.C. fostered an environment of intellectualism where Blackness was integrally included across classrooms and disciplines. The Black Excellence Project was enveloped in an academic institution that inherently valued Blackness as excellence.

There is room for there to be scholars, professionals, and intellectuals, but just as contributing are the storytellers who proverbially teach how to live and contribute in life. There is an almost hackneyed African saying, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." That statement applies best in the slow introduction The Black Excellence Project has taken to kindly insist on the positive representation and inclusion of Black histories in intellectual settings. Our overarching goal is not to need to continue resistance but to build cohesion by including the necessity of diverse representation in our goals for intellectualism.

DR. CASS achieved her PhD in African Studies in 2009 from Howard University, a renowned historically Black college in Washington, D.C. She has worked with adolescents since 2000 as a social worker, researcher, globetrotter, facilitator and educator. As a professional, she is dedicated to teaching society to un-learn anti-Blackness.