
The Struggle to “Think. Work. Serve.”: Reflections on Africana Studies at Tennessee State University in the Age of the Geier Case

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In 1968, during the onset of the Black power movement and the new call for Black Studies units on campuses nationwide, TSU faculty Rita Geier sued the state of Tennessee, launching what would become a thirty-eight-year lawsuit to challenge racial segregation in public higher education in Tennessee. The lawsuit also served as a correction for the systemic underfunding that had plagued Tennessee State University (TSU), a historically Black college and university (HBCU), since its founding in 1912 in Nashville. Although 1960s student activism did not prove successful in bringing about a Black studies department or unit at TSU, the changing and challenging campus dynamics, because of the lawsuit, inspired student activists in the late 1980s to once again demand the creation of an Africana studies department to meet the needs of students on a culturally and demographically changing campus. “The Struggle to “Think. Work. Serve.”” chronicles the rise and fall of the Department of Africana studies at TSU, during one of the longest desegregation cases on an American university campus.

KEYWORDS: HBCU, Africana Studies, Black Studies, higher education, Geier court case

INTRODUCTION

As Tennessee State University (TSU) began its 2007 academic year, it faced a monumental shift. After nearly forty years, the Geier court case was over. The case had unveiled systemic underfunding of TSU and rested on recent desegregation precedents that had helped dismantle Jim Crow. But it took aim at TSU when it decreed that the historically Black college and university (HBCU) should shed its Black identity and aim for its student body and faculty, as well as administrative staff, to be 50 percent white. As Africana studies Chair Amiri Al-Hadid would note that year on Martin Luther King Jr. Day, “After 38 years of litigation, Dr. King would applaud the systemwide efforts to dismantle the dual systems of higher education through the process of desegregation, competitive programs and financial remedies designed to overcome the vestiges of chattel slavery. However, he would be disturbed by the fact that TSU and UT-K are still unequal based on their budget, facilities, resources and commitment by the state and federal governments.”¹

The Geier case served as a correction for the systemic underfunding that had plagued TSU since its founding. As explored in this article, Rita Geier sued when she saw the appalling ways that segregation had played out through the funding of the state’s only public HBCU, as well as the very real possibility that TSU would be unable to survive, given the encroachment of historically segregated white institutions. Seemingly clearcut, the case challenged the creation of a University of Tennessee (UT) campus in Nashville. In doing so, it addressed the ways that unbalanced funding left TSU under-resourced. Despite the civil rights victory that came with the court case, the implications shook the identity of the HBCU. TSU won, but on the condition that it “desegregate,” a demand not placed on TSU’s sister land-grant, UT. As Al-Hadid rightly claimed in the op-ed that year, to achieve a victory, there was still much work to do.

The decree and funding shifts that came out of the lawsuit attempted to change the identity of the university and successfully changed the physical and academic landscape. TSU walked away from the Geier decision with new buildings, an endowment fund, unfulfilled expectations (like a law school), and some new students and hires. During the course of the lawsuit, the university also fought for several new programs. But one was an explicitly

¹ Amiri Yasin Al-Hadid, “Objective Was Always Beloved Community,” *The Tennessean*, January 15, 2007.

bottom-up push: the creation of a free-standing Africana studies department.² "The Struggle to "Think. Work. Serve."" offers meditations on TSU's Africana Studies program in relation to the Geier case. While its history is situated within the student activism in Nashville during the Black power era, and the debates around its form and function for Black students, the origin story of Africana Studies at TSU is unique. It began as a department in 1994, was the first of its kind in the Southeast, and currently remains one of the only Africana Studies units at an HBCU; though it is no longer autonomous and only offers a minor. But, just as important, students and faculty were able to establish this autonomous department that offered the bachelor's degree during the thirty-eight-year Geier case that shaped the climate of TSU and public higher education in Tennessee. We tell a piece of that story. To that end, using primary source documents, including TSU's student newspaper, *The Meter*, this article documents the rise and fall of Africana studies during one of the longest desegregation cases on an American university campus.

FROM BLACK POWER TO GEIER: THE ROAD TO AFRICANA STUDIES AT TSU (1965-1994)

It is very well documented that Nashville was a central hub of civil rights activism. Prior to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, many students and alumni who attended American Baptist College (ABC), Fisk University, Meharry Medical College or TSU (then Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial State University) had participated in this challenge to Jim Crow. Student activism on and off campuses continued during the Black Power era. With the assassination of Malcolm X on February 21, 1965, the failure of the federal legislation to end systemic racism, and Stokely Carmichael's call for Black Power during the Meredith March in June of 1966, all four Nashville HBCUs remained spaces for radical thought and activism. Not only did students begin to question the value of middle-class ideals in ways that many civil rights activists had not; on every campus, including TSU, students also made a concerted and protracted effort to ask pointed questions about the purpose of higher education and the need for curricula that reflected their history. Students were seeking answers to the meaning and utility of Black Power in HBCUs where the purpose

² The authors use the terms Black studies, Afro-American studies, and Africana studies interchangeably. The authors also use Black, Africana, African, and diaspora interchangeably.

of education had always been about educating Black students to transform their communities in meaningful ways. For TSU students, it was clear that “the second stage of student struggle at TSU was a response to the concept of Black Power as articulated by SNCC...”³

Carmichael’s call made a clear impression on many students at TSU. His ideas were partially responsible for students’ desire for Black Studies at their institution. Within months of the Meredith March, the student newspaper, *The Meter*, became one platform for defining the role of Black Power in the political and academic lives of TSU students. Although Carmichael, (then chair of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) was invited to speak at Vanderbilt University on April 8th 1967, he spoke directly to TSU students and the North Nashville community on the evening of April 7th.⁴ As a result of this event, *The Meter* reporters interviewed Carmichael about the role and function of education for Black people. Carmichael explained that a Black student’s “biggest responsibility is to use his techniques and skills that he has acquired in college to benefit his people.”⁵ In his response to a question about the writers, activists, and intellectuals that Black students should know, Carmichael mentioned “Margaret Walter; LeRoi Jones; Lerone Bennett; Langston Hughes; Dr. E.F. Frazier, Dr. Hare; William Kelley Miller; WEB DuBoise [sic]; John Killens and a host of others.”⁶ Over the span of the next two academic years, Carmichael’s political thought and the larger Black Power movement inspired TSU students, similar to thousands of students on American university campuses, to write proposals and, in many instances, to demand Black studies units. It would take close to twenty years for TSU to create an Africana studies unit.

Historians, sociologists, and other intellectuals have explained the reservations that an overwhelming number of HBCU administrators and faculty had about creating Black Studies units during the Black Power era. Similar to Carmichael, Howard sociologist Nathan Hare, in his 1969 “Questions and

³ “History of Student Struggle,” *The Meter*, October 4, 1974, 6. <https://digitalscholarship.tnstate.edu/meter-70s/128>.

⁴ Jimmy Ellis, “Nashville Then: 1967 Civil Rights Movement in Nashville,” *The Tennessean*, February 24, 2014, <https://www.tennessean.com/picture-gallery/news/2014/02/24/nashville-then-1967-civil-rights-movement-in-nashville/5785367/>.

⁵ “Carmichael Interview,” *The Meter*, April 19, 1967, 4. <https://digitalscholarship.tnstate.edu/meter-60s/55>.

⁶ “Carmichael Interview,” *The Meter*.

Answers about Black Studies," explained, "Ideally, Negro colleges should play the role of devising a new black ideology and a new black ethic... Negro colleges should be setting the pace and providing models of scholarly excellence and inquiry into the problems of color...."⁷ He continued, "The Negro college is glued to the mores of its missionary origins. It is located invariably in the South, cemented to the prevailing cake of conservatism, and less free politically even than the typical white there."⁸ Indeed, only Howard University and a handful of other HBCUs created Black Studies or Afro-American Studies degree granting units by the mid-1970s.

Several other institutions, like TSU, began to create African and diasporic courses in so-called traditional disciplines, over a period. Doing so was not necessarily answering the students' call for Black Studies units, although this strategy was in line with the way some faculty at HBCUs had always included the experiences of Africana folks within their subject matter.⁹ For instance, TSU began to offer courses in African American history shortly after its founding. However, following the students' demand for Black studies and a more relevant education, TSU's administration allowed faculty who taught liberal arts, social science, and humanities disciplines to offer more Black-oriented courses.¹⁰ In fact, by the 1970s, the Department of History and Geography offered a minor in Afro-American culture, where students took history and geography courses.¹¹ However, the administration believed that the creation of an academic unit for students to study their history, culture, and ways of knowing was unnecessary because the TSU student population lived the Black experience, participated in Black cultural activities, and were taught, for the most part, by Black faculty.¹² A freestanding Africana Studies department would not materialize at TSU until 1994.

⁷ Nathan Hare, "Questions and Answers about Black Studies," in *The African American Studies Reader*, (Carolina Academic Press, 2007), 22.

⁸ Hare, "Questions and Answers," 22.

⁹ Theologian Alexander Crummell, sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois, historian Carter G. Woodson, and historian Anna Julia Cooper are just a few examples of this approach at HBCUs; sociologist Charles Johnson and linguist Lorenzo Turner, for example, taught courses about Africa in the first half of the twentieth century at HBCUs.

¹⁰ Amiri YaSin Al-Hadid, "Africana Studies at Tennessee State University," in *Out of the Revolution: The Development of Africana Studies* (Lexington Books, 2000), 97.

¹¹ Tennessee State University, *Undergraduate Catalogue, 1974-1976* (1976), <https://digital.scholarship.tnstate.edu/undergraduatecatalogues/22/>.

¹² Al-Hadid, "Africana Studies," 97.

Between the Black Power era and the official creation of Africana Studies at TSU, the institution was at the center of an unprecedented civil rights lawsuit—the Geier case. The plaintiff, Rita Geier, was a 23-year-old law student at Vanderbilt University and a part-time faculty member in History at TSU beginning in 1966. While there, she witnessed firsthand the institution's dire financial situation. The low salaries of faculty and the dilapidated buildings, including classrooms and student dormitories, for Geier, were unquestionably the result of legal racial segregation and the racist policies allowing the state to underfund TSU. In Michael Cass's 2001 interview with Geier, which was published in *The Tennessean*, Geier indicated that she was also inspired to sue the state of Tennessee when UT announced expansion plans for their downtown campus in Nashville. Cass wrote that Geier "didn't like what she saw in the future. She feared UT-Nashville would become a four-year, predominately white campus with first-rate facilities. And historically black TSU, which was here first, would be neglected. Geier was furious."¹³ In 1968, just six weeks after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., in Geier's hometown of Memphis, Geier, with assistance from George Barrett, for whom she clerked, sued the state of Tennessee. Her objective for suing the state was to "keep it from perpetuating a dual, race-based system of higher education."¹⁴ Geier and Barrett also sought to hold the state accountable for financially supporting TSU, in accordance with its 1890 Morrill Act land grant status; under this Act, the state is required to match the yearly federal funding amount awarded to TSU.

The Geier case was the start of what would become a thirty-eight-year lawsuit to challenge racial segregation in public higher education in Tennessee. Historians, attorneys, and legal scholars, have extensively written about the Geier case and the slow and unsuccessful measures for desegregation of TSU and the predominately white state institutions in Tennessee. And despite the unprecedented mandate for TSU to absorb the predominately white University of Tennessee, Nashville, in 1979 (and other measures discussed below), by the close of the Geier case in 2006, TSU retained its HBCU designation. TSU also found itself still grappling, however, with its financial outlook, criticism from both within and beyond the campus community about

¹³ Michael Cass, "TSU Desegregation Suit's Spark Looks Back 32 Years," *The Tennessean*, January 10, 2001, 13.

¹⁴ Cass, "TSU Desegregation," 13.

its academic rigor, and TSUs ability to effectively adhere to the institution's motto, "Think. Work. Serve."

THE CREATION, INSTITUTIONALIZATION, AND RESTRUCTURING OF AFRICANA STUDIES AT TSU (1984-2011)

The call for Africana studies that finally brought about its creation can be found within this unique backdrop. Like the rise of Africana studies units at most HBCUs, the establishment of Africana studies at TSU is the result of a combination of factors, including the "boots on the ground" civil rights activism, the debates around the meaning of Black Power, and the often-contentious debates about the value of Black studies to prepare Black students for meaningful careers. But the decades-long Geier case in Tennessee opened the door for another wave of student activism at TSU during the Stipulation of Settlement period that eventually led to the creation of an academic unit on campus.

In 1984, Judge Thoman Wiseman ushered in the Settlement period of the Geier case to further encourage desegregation at TSU. The judgment included directives for TSU and all of the public higher education institutions in the state to become "non-racially identifiable."¹⁵ However, Wiseman gave the State Board of Regents (SBR), the governing body of TSU, specific directives for desegregation at the institution, including a mandate that by 1989 TSU's faculty, staff, and administration must be 50 percent white. Further, Wiseman required that by 1993, the white student population must also reach 50 percent.¹⁶ Yet there was no legal mandate for the SBR to desegregate any predominately white institution with similar quotas. About this distinction, Al-Hadid writes, "the burden of change was placed on the shoulders of the black public institution, which was historically and sociologically the most oppressed victim of the dual system of higher education. Furthermore, the settlement decree concluded that the heart of the problem of the dual system of higher education was the existence of 'Black TSU.'"¹⁷

The campus community and students had mixed ideas about this legislative maneuver. On the one hand, some TSU students (and faculty and staff) were

¹⁵ *Geier v. Alexander*, 593 F. Supp. 1263 (M.D. Tenn. 1984).

¹⁶ Al-Hadid, "Africana Studies at Tennessee State University," 97; *Geier v. Alexander*, 593 F. Supp. 1263, 1268.

¹⁷ Al-Hadid, "Africana Studies at Tennessee State University," 100.

cautiously optimistic about the mandate. Many thought that with a more diverse student population, the state would be more apt to provide financial support for much-needed improvements to the institution. And indeed, the state was a bit more supportive than it had been before the ruling. According to historian Bobby Lovett, during this early period, TSU completed “huge physical education, recreation, and convocation center; a new engineering building; a business school building; a new library; [and] renovations of several facilities.”¹⁸ On the other hand, many students, faculty, and alumni were uneasy about the measure; they were concerned about the possible shift away from the historic mission of TSU, which was to educate the descendants of enslaved Africans in ways predominately white institutions had not. In 1993, when white students comprised 36 percent of the overall student population at TSU, student government president Rahssan Robinson shared this sentiment.¹⁹ While TSU had not reached Wiseman’s goal of 50 percent for the student population by 1993, the faculty, staff, and administration surely had, explained Timothy Quain, who directed the affirmative action office at TSU that year.²⁰ This Stipulation of Settlement period, then, sets the stage for Africana Studies to emerge on a campus that was still financially strapped because of the enduring legacy of racism, while simultaneously, and slowly, moving toward being racially unidentifiable.

During the Settlement period, students demanded the opportunity to study in this changing environment. Many of them participated in protests on at least two occasions, hoping to convince the administration to take their concerns seriously. According to the Memphis paper, *The Commercial Appeal*, and TSU institutional reports, students resorted to campus organizing to bring about an African American Studies degree program only after students were unable to vote on creating a unit between 1980 and 1988.²¹ Therefore, when 200 students, led by student government president Alfred Miller, occupied the office of President Otis L. Floyd on November 17, 1988, students were not surprised that academic affairs administrators were skeptical of

¹⁸ Bobby L. Lovett, “Tennessee State University: A Synopsis of A Touch of Greatness 1912-2012,” *Journal of Tennessee State University* 11, no. 1 (April 2012): 22. <https://digitalscholarship.tnstate.edu/ejtsu/vol1/iss1/11>

¹⁹ Getahn M. Ward, “Officials Assess Efforts to Attain Stipulation Goals,” *The Meter*, February 23, 1993, 1.

²⁰ Ward, “Officials Assess Efforts,” 1.

²¹ Michael Kelley, “TSU Opens New Area with Focus on Africa,” *The Commercial Appeal*, January 4, 1994, 11.

offering an undergraduate degree in Africana studies. Annie Neal, the newly appointed vice president of academic affairs, believed that most students were uninterested in a degree in Africana studies; she suggested that more research should be undertaken to determine students' interest in the subject matter.²² But, within twenty-four hours of the occupation, Floyd agreed to a degree program. Before the close of that fall semester, Neal supported the creation of an official Africana Studies committee composed of interested faculty, and Bobby Lovett, then dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, began writing a curriculum for the degree.

The approval process was indeed a slow one, prompting more student protests. This time the protests focused on students' urgent need for safety and sanitary conditions in campus housing, classrooms, and dining halls; these are the same conditions that the Geier case sought to alleviate and prevent more than twenty years before. Nonetheless, beginning on February 20, 1990, less than two years after the 1988 student occupation, students participated in several campaigns over the course of three weeks. This series of events began with three hundred students, again, occupying the administration building on main campus and engaging in negotiations for better living conditions, well-equipped classrooms, and an Africana studies degree, as faculty were still in the proposal writing and approval stages of the process. For more visibility, students eventually relocated to the downtown campus, which had once been UTN.²³ The final leg of the protest took place near the state capital in Nashville, where students demanded further funding to address their concerns. It is indeed the longest and most intense student organized protest in the history of TSU. Because of their campaign, Governor Ned McWherter pledged \$120 million for campus renovations. However, it would take another four years for Africana studies to move through approvals by TSU's academic affairs, the Board of Regents, and the Tennessee Higher Education Committee, the state organization that provides fiscal and curricular oversight for higher education in Tennessee.

The Africana studies department officially began on January 4, 1994, as a degree-granting and freestanding, autonomous department. It is the first free standing department in the Southeast to offer a Bachelor of Science degree

²² Sherrel Wheeler-Stewart, "TSU Students Stage Protest, Demand Coaches Resignation," *The Tennessean*, November 18, 1988, 2.

²³ David Waters, "Sitting In, Crying Out: TSU Takes Course in Politics," *The Commercial Appeal*, March 4, 1990, 1.

in the study of Africa and its diaspora. Within the first ten years, Amiri Al-Hadid, the founding chair of the department, published “Africana Studies at Tennessee State University: Traditions and Diversity,” the first (and one of the only) report about the origins and institutionalization of Africana studies at TSU. His work documented the contributions and research interests of the founding two core faculty, Mayibuye Monanabela and Wosene Yefru, and the development of the departmental mission, affiliations, and student programming. Al-Hadid’s work also outlined the role of the National Council for Black Studies, the premier academic organization for the discipline, in the creation of the department’s curriculum and subject areas.

The Africana studies committee and faculty seriously considered the unique student population at TSU when outlining its mission and objectives. Al-Hadid, Monanabela, and Yefru were clear that “TSU was a historical black land-grant university.”²⁴ They therefore wanted students to understand themselves in relationship to their ancestors and communities. An early general statement about Africana studies at TSU explains that the curriculum:

is based on an African paradigm. It is rooted in global African canons and epistemologies. Slavery and colonization compartmentalized the African world into the African continent and her Diaspora. The curriculum seeks to restore the cultural, economic, political, social and spiritual links between Africa and her Diaspora. Once students acquire the practical and theoretical knowledge of Africa and her Diaspora, they will be able to concurrently pursue lucrative career paths and work for the development of African people at the level of culture, families, institutions, and organizations.²⁵

The Africana Studies Committee and Al-Hadid, Monanabela, and Yefru, were unapologetic in their desire for students in the department to receive a social justice-oriented education to transform their communities.

Likewise, the faculty believed that the white students at TSU, consistently comprising the largest minority on campus, could also benefit from the

²⁴ Department of Africana Studies, Tennessee State University, “Faculty Meeting Minutes,” n.d., unpublished document, author’s possession.

²⁵ Tennessee State University, *Undergraduate Catalogue, 2003-2005* (2005), “Department of Africana Studies: General Statement,” 8, <https://digitalscholarship.tnstate.edu/undergraduate/catalogues/8>.

curriculum and mission. The faculty followed in the tradition of Molefi Asante and other Afrocentrists popular during this time; they theorized that all cultures and races could begin to interpret the world through African philosophy, cultural values, and ways of knowing, to create a more humane and just world. Adhering to these ideas, the faculty in Africana Studies openly welcomed and embraced white students as majors and minors and anyone else interested in taking courses in the department. The faculty hoped that offering an Africana studies education to white students would encourage these students to begin to transform their consciousness, correct any racist stereotypes that they may have about Africa and the diaspora, and challenge injustice and systemic racism. In fact, one of the earliest majors decided to do just that. Wanting to understand the larger historical narrative on her journey to become a civil rights attorney, Heather Wells became one of the first of several white students to major in the discipline at TSU.²⁶

The excitement about Africana studies at TSU did not last long. Several events lead to its transformation in 2011, from an autonomous department to a minor degree program that was housed in the History, Political Science, and Geography department. First, in 2001, the district court issued the final decree in the Geier case. It stipulated that the state must allot TSU \$200 million for campus improvements and that each university in Tennessee must intentionally support diversity, equity, and inclusion in hiring practices and student recruitment, enrollment, and retention.²⁷ During this decree period, James Hefner was president of TSU, hired by the Board of Regents in 1991. By 2004 he had increased enrollment by 22 percent and openly embraced the Geier case by supporting the transformation of the downtown campus to attract white and non-traditional students. He had also backed up the creation and institutionalization of Africana studies, which was initially approved during Floyd's tenure.²⁸ As Al-Hadid would editorialize in *The Tennessean* years after the program's creation, the larger context of the Geier decision served as a pragmatic backdrop for administrative support. Overall, the Board of Regents and most TSU faculty and staff applauded Hefner for

²⁶ Lisa Benavides, "Ancient African Study Begins Anew at TSU," *The Tennessean*, March 23, 1995, 16.

²⁷ Betsey B. Creekmore, "Geier Lawsuit and Consent Decree," University of Tennessee Libraries, archived September 25, 2018, <https://volopedia.lib.utk.edu/entries/geier-lawsuit-and-consent-decree/>.

²⁸ Michael Cass, "Contradictions Fill Hefner's Tenure at TSU," *The Tennessean*, May 23, 2004, A2.

increased enrollment and a higher endowment. However, in the later part of his tenure, the state auditors were publicly very critical of his financial practices.²⁹ In the face of these accusations, Hefner resigned in 2005, a year before the court lifted the decree.

Second, for TSU, the thirty-eight-year Geier lawsuit had not necessarily remedied the overall financial outlook of the institution. This was abundantly clear to the TSU community during the Great Recession that began in 2007. Decreased financial budgets for most state universities, and a decline in student enrollment across the nation, quickly became the norm for most institutions, including state institutions governed by the Board of Regents. TSU, like most colleges and universities in the state, had to dig deep to restructure its budget and curb spending. But TSU, with its history of underfunding, its smaller yet fluctuating student population in general, and other fiscal concerns, was hit especially hard and would experience a dire financial crisis during the recession. By the fall of 2008, Melvin Johnson, who had replaced Hefner as president in 2005, cut thirty vacant positions and was considering laying off ten other employees to trim the university budget.³⁰ Johnson also proposed “voluntary furloughs and possible larger class sizes to cut 9 million from the school’s budget.”³¹ By the end of his tenure in 2010, some faculty felt that he had been very uninterested in shared governance, nor had he been able to increase financial support for the institution.³²

Just a few months after Johnson’s resignation, Africana studies faculty were very concerned about its survival, with the talk of budget cuts from the state and the new interim university administration. But conversations about this possibility took place a few years before among the faculty. In the fall of 2007, the core faculty learned that Academic Affairs was concerned about the low number of enrolled students in the major, even though students continued to enroll in Africana studies courses.³³ The Tennessee Higher Education

²⁹ Michael Cass, “Contradictions Fill Hefner’s Tenure at TSU,” *The Tennessean*, May 23, 2004, A2.

³⁰ Jennifer Brooks, “TSU Trims Job, Programs, Services to Balance Budget,” *The Tennessean*, September 16, 2008, B1.

³¹ Jennifer Brooks, “Personnel Anxious over Cuts at MTSU,” *Daily News-Journal*, January 23, 2009, 12.

³² Brade Schrade and Jamie Sarro, “A University Challenge: Leadership at Crossroads,” *The Tennessean*, July 12, 2010, A1.

³³ Department of Africana Studies, Tennessee State University, “Faculty Meeting Minutes,” January 9, 2007, unpublished document, author’s possession.

Commission requires that all units offering a bachelor's degree graduate an "average of 10 graduates a year over a five-year period."³⁴ With concerns about enrollment numbers heightened because of the start of the recession, the department's faculty met on September 9, 2007, to discuss solutions. One was to revise the department curriculum so that certain Africana studies courses would fulfill general education requirements; all students at the university would have to take certain Africana studies courses to graduate from TSU, regardless of major. Changing the curriculum would have made the department "mission essential," in the way that all students who enroll at TSU must take two history courses. Their logic was based on the idea that all students attending an HBCU should become familiar with African and diasporan culture and ways of knowing.

The curriculum revision did not materialize before the Board of Regents appointed Portia Shields as interim president of TSU to replace Johnson in January 2011. The state appointed Shields to ensure accurate data collection for TSU's accrediting body, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges. Her other major task was to balance the budget because of declining enrollments, decreased state funding, and a new budget model. To achieve this goal, Shields discontinued the major in Africana studies, along with at least five other majors. Beginning in the fall semester of 2011, Monanabela and Yefru became members of the Department of History, Political Science, Geography, and Africana Studies, which only offered an 18-hour minor in the discipline.³⁵ But, according to Shields, "No one lost a job, and all students currently enrolled in these programs will be allowed to remain until they graduate."³⁶

CONCLUSION: AFRICANA STUDIES, WHERE TO NOW?

Since Shields's 2011 refrain about a minimally disruptive program closure, higher education has heard this repeatedly, particularly as teach-outs mark the end of programs terminated by boards or upper administration, throughout the United States. In the case of the elimination of the Africana studies major in 2011 at TSU, Africana studies remained a viable minor program

³⁴ Tennessee Higher Education Commission, *Academic Program Productivity Report*, July 2021.

³⁵ Al-Hadid retired before the Board of Regents hired Portia Shields as interim president.

³⁶ Portia Shields, "Positive Changes Made for TSUs Survival," *The Tennessean*, June 26, 2011, A20.

housed within the Department of History, Political Science, Geography, and Africana Studies; it remains so to date, and its current faculty are now very unsure about the revival of its major degree offering, let alone recreating its autonomous free-standing status.

In our previous publication, “(Re)establishing the Bachelor of Science Degree in Africana Studies at Tennessee State University,” we explored the vibrancy of the Africana Studies program during these interim years and discussed study abroad offerings, successful grant-funded projects, new faculty hires, and a lecture series.³⁷ And in the same way that national events and movement energy spurred the creation of an Africana studies major at TSU decades ago, the HBCU renaissance, marked by Vice President Kamala Harris’s time in office and run for the presidency, ushered in the viability of a revived Africana studies major. Student application numbers soared at TSU, and the university seemed to be in good financial standing as the proposal for a revived Africana studies major wound its way through the dean’s office, Academic Affairs, and the Tennessee Higher Education Commission; administrators at both institutions were inspired, motivated, and supportive.

While the push for a revived Africana studies major was a top-down initiative, faculty spent years laying out the groundwork and then creating a proposal that best represented the direction of the new revised major. Yet the end for that push happened rather suddenly, with the revelation of TSU’s financial troubles, beginning in late 2023. As a result, the new top-level administrators and Board of Trustees were tasked by the state with prioritizing financial stability. With that came hiring freezes, new program freezes, and delay in tenure decisions. All of this impacted the Africana Studies faculty. And while TSU has committed to greater transparency and has seen stabilized leadership since the freezes were instituted, the Africana studies major is still left in limbo.

But, once again, like the debate that swirled at TSU about whether an HBCU needs a Black studies program decades ago, institutional and state politics and deep budget cuts marred the revival of the African studies major. The relationship between the university and the state has shifted drastically since

³⁷ Andrea Ringer and Sekhmet Maat, “(Re)establishing the Bachelor of Science Degree in Africana Studies at Tennessee State University,” *Siyabonana: The Journal of Africana Studies* 1, no. 1 (2023). <https://www.journalofafricanastudies.com/siyabonana-vol1no1>.

the Geier decree, though TSU is still admittedly historically underfunded as of 2026. But all this history is in the shadow of both HBCU underfunding and state-level legislation that impacts Africana studies and other studies programs.

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