

Black History at the University of Idaho: An Application of the Model of Black Transformation¹

Speech written and presented by Dr. Sydney Freeman, Jr.

It was the summer of 2015, and I was offered a tenure track position here at the University of Idaho. In a conversation with my then department chair, I asked her to put me in contact with Black faculty at the university. I wanted to know what environment I was coming into. Whenever I come into a space, I want to know where I fit culturally and historically.

So, after 3 years of being on campus and earning tenure, I launched a partnership with the History department to investigate the history of the contributions of Blacks at the University of Idaho. I have worked with over a half a dozen students that have assisted this work, namely Bailey Guyette, Derek Higgins, and Brody Gasper.

In the close to half of a decade of doing this work, we have learned a lot. I have often been asked, “Has the University of Idaho had enough Blacks contribute to the institution to warrant such a study?” This and other comments have helped me to develop my framework of Black Transformation.² The work of the Black History Research Lab, in particular this exhibit project is a part of the first step in this framework which is *Decolonization*. We have to decolonize the history of the university so that it is inclusive of the Black experience. What we are sharing today is not just Black history but should be a part of the central narrative of the institution’s history.

The Black students at the University of Idaho have also engaged in the second step of the model of Black Transformation as UI’s Black Student Union has used *abolitionist* tactics over the last 50 years to dismantle racist practices. For instance, in 1974, Eighteen Black Student Union members confronted President Hartung about the “racist nature of the white administration” after a leader on campus wore a Ku Klux Klan robe and passed by the same area where the BSU was hosting their meetings. BSU continues in that tradition when they participate in protest for Black Lives as they have done in recent years.

The third step in my model of Black Transformation is *Revolution*, which is engaging in changing the fundamental ways of knowing, being, and operating. A revolution started in 1968 when Joseph Tasby, a Black student lead two petitions to have a Black history course taught at the university. His work was not in vain. Because in during 1970 school year the initial course Black history was offered. That revolutionary idea was the precursor to what is now the Africana Studies program launched exactly 50 years later from the date of Tasby’s petitions.

I believe historically and contemporarily why Black people have had to engage in decolonial, abolitionist, and revolutionary approaches are because some are afraid of *Black Liberation*. That meaning being free and liberated from all forms but particularly psychological oppression and captivity. On the Idaho house floor on this past, January 28th President Green called out “Conflict Entrepreneurs” who make their living sowing fear and doubt around issues of race. Creating a Black Faculty & Staff Association and Black Lives Matter speaker series in a time of anti-Blackness and racial misinformation are liberatory acts that will be forever apart of the University of Idaho’s history.

¹ This speech was given on February 15, 2022, at the University of Idaho’s Black History at U of I exhibit: Celebrating 50 years of the Black student union and cultural center in the 1st floor lobby of the University of Idaho Library in Moscow.

And as I close, I recognize transformation happens over time and telling the true and accurate history of Blacks at the University of Idaho is paramount. I am clear that a Black History exhibit is just the beginning. So, I am hopeful and elated that we have put down roots to address the final step of the model of transformation and that is ***Sovereignty***. We have done this through the reestablishment of the Black Cultural Center (now known as the Black Student Center) and hiring a director to lead it and the creation of the Black History Research Lab. So, to the person who still might ask, “Has the University of Idaho had enough Blacks contribute to the institution to warrant such a study?” Tell them yes and we are laying the infrastructure so that our history will never be forgotten.