Executive Summary

At the invitation of the Office of Institutional Effectiveness of Georgia State University, a review team of three scholars visited the department of African American Studies (DAAS) on March 22-24, 2015. After a series of meetings and conversations with faculty, students, and staff in the department, members of the senior academic leadership team at Georgia State University, including Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs and Provost Risa Palm and Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences William J. Long, the review team formulated this report which represents the collective assessment of the department and suggestions for strengthening the overall department and academic program in African American Studies.

Formally established in 1995, the department of African American Studies at Georgia State University has established itself as an intellectually vibrant and dynamic program characterized by engaged faculty and intellectually assertive students within a context of a dynamic urban public research university. At Georgia State University, African American Studies has a high profile in the College of Arts and Sciences and is poised to leverage broad interdisciplinary opportunities for curricular and co-curricular collaboration with other departments, programs and initiatives in the College as well as other academic units at the University particularly the Andrew Young School of Policy Studies, College of Education, College of Law, J. Mack Robinson College of Business, and School of Public Health. This intellectual constellation offers unique opportunities to develop a model African American Studies program that serves as a hub of research and learning innovation by bridging academic and institutional divides in developing new knowledge while facilitating broader public access to cutting edge scholarship and influential thought leaders who offer much needed expertise in addressing some of the most pressing issues facing societies across the globe.

The Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia and Georgia State University have underscored the imperative for faculty to “prepare citizens for lifelong learning” as well as generate scholarly work that solves “complex issues ranging from the most fundamental questions of the universe to the most challenging issues of our day.” Georgia State University’s department of African American Studies is strategically positioned to be a key unit in realizing
these goals. The faculty is committed to teaching courses that stimulate critical thinking among undergraduate and graduate students, providing exceptional service to the diverse urban campus community and broader Atlanta community, and publishing cutting edge scholarship that advances the field and interdisciplinary knowledge.

The department is uniquely positioned to create and cultivate novel approaches, perspectives, and new knowledge on the peoples, cultures, and ideas of the African diaspora and humanistic studies that create opportunities for broad intra-institutional collaboration between faculty members. The 2016 launch of Perimeter College of Georgia State University is a grand opportunity for the department to serve as a signature academic partner in realizing the tremendous intellectual opportunities presented by this institutional realignment. Indeed, the global city of Atlanta serves as a catalyst for the department to realize itself as a self-reflexive educational program that moves across and beyond the university in enhancing the academic experiences of students, faculty, and citizens.

With key investments which align existing institutional, fiscal, and human resources in a strategic program of faculty renewal, curriculum renewal, cultivation of broad collaborative institutional partnerships supported and endorsed by senior academic leadership, and strengthening of already existing creative student retention and success initiatives, the department of African American Studies will play a central role in developing generations of learners who will contribute to the enhancement of human knowledge and well-being now and into the long future.

Contributions to the Discipline

A critical survey of the DAAS academic program and faculty reveals that the academic unit is committed to advancing a mastery of the discipline of Africana Studies complemented by a deep knowledge of interdisciplinary scholarship across the humanities and social sciences. The DAAS pursuit of academic excellence is benchmarked by the leading departments and scholars in the discipline in addition to close examination its selected peer group. The department has particular strengths in and contributes to advancing Africana Studies scholarship in the areas of Africana arts and expressive cultures; social movement history and theory; global gender studies; health and public policy; and race and southern studies. In addition, the department is in continual intellectual dialogue with anthropology, cultural studies, film, gender studies, history, literature and literary theory, media studies, politics, psychology, public health and sociology.

In the areas of social movement history and theory and global gender studies, however, the DAAS goes beyond its peer institutions. The department utilizes and leverages engaged scholarship to bring social movement history and theory alive to students and the broader public while advancing novel methods and theories for undertaking scholarly investigations in Africana social and political movements. Most notably and unlike most departments that too often only slightly gesture towards gender, the DAAS is deeply anchored in a critical recovery of gendered Africana knowledges and histories which explore how gendered subjectivity shapes and informs political activism, literature, cultures of health, artistic expression and creativity. Indeed, the DAAS is fully invested in lives, languages, and experiences of black women across space and time. By doing so they authorize new knowledge frameworks, constructs, and categories while
elaborating new *epistemes* that can critically inform and revise other disciplinary frameworks while creating the basis of new possibilities for collaboration and knowledge creation.

These evolving areas of intellectual distinction for the department have the potential for broader and more robust development with the potential of creating a novel model of interdisciplinarity that moves critically across the arts and sciences and professional programs in public policy, education, law, and public health. However, this potential is currently underdeveloped and hindered by the extensive service commitments of two of the senior faculty members, the demographics of the existing faculty (two faculty informed the team of the desire to retire and their recent withdrawal from active departmental life), and the relative junior status of the recent faculty hires in the department. With the success of a program of faculty renewal the DAAS will readily realize a national intellectual identity that will enhance the overall standing of the entire university.

A distinguishing characteristic of the DAAS is the fact that its contribution to the larger Georgia State University intellectual community is grounded in the commitment of faculty who not only provide academic leadership for the undergraduate and graduate programs, but also continue a historic commitment to service learning and community engagement. Indeed, current undergraduate and graduate students expressed their love for the program in African American Studies as one rooted in the DAAS commitment of linking the life of the mind with the lives and life chances of African Americans and African diasporic peoples.

**Quality of the Undergraduate and Graduate Program**

The high quality of the undergraduate academic program was underscored by the most inspiring comment shared by a number of undergraduate majors – a *love* for the DAAS. Although most of the undergraduates switched to the major late in their academic career, they all expressed how the faculty and program not only transformed them intellectually but, in some cases, gave them the desire to continue to matriculate at Georgia State University. Disappointment in other departments and lack of intellectual stimulation initiated a withdrawal from university life. Fortunately, the DAAS intervened where others departmental units had failed, providing meaningful scholarship, community engagement, and service learning.

The undergraduate and graduate students emphasized the role of individual faculty members as both teachers and mentors as keys to their intellectual commitment to the African American Studies at Georgia State University. The research agendas of the graduate students were clearly anchored in the discipline of Africana Studies while informed by the theories and methods of other academic disciplines. This is indicative of the quality and strength of this first level graduate program. The graduate students also appreciated the relatively funding advantage of a small MA program.

The undergraduate and graduate students also expressed an appreciation for the specific community empowerment focus of the department and its supportive faculty. Overall, given the size of the department, enrollment, retention and graduation rates are appropriate. The commitment and dedication of the faculty, particularly with new faculty members, will
eventually yield more undergraduate majors, especially as students become familiar with the vibrant and energetic junior faculty.

While the African American Studies programs are of sufficient quality, there are some distinct opportunities for curricular renewal and enhancement at both the undergraduate and graduate levels that should be seized upon to move the programs to the next level. With innovative thinking and planning, the undergraduate program may become lean while still meeting the desired learning outcomes of the department and university. A lean approach to the academic programs will also support realigning fiscal and human resources and support structures to advance the intellectual life of the department and position the department in developing critical synergies with other academic programs. This could yield the development of innovative program models (i.e., one-year MA program with readily translatable skills applicable to the broad arts, culture and heritage industries of greater Atlanta; joint MA in Africana studies with other graduate research and professional programs; certificate programs at both the undergraduate and graduate level; introductory and first level courses at Perimeter College of GSU). The department may also pursue a distinctive model of a dual graduate degree upon demand that has been largely successful at Indiana University.

Research Culture

The research culture in DAAS is best described as an evolving in an academic unit with heavy service obligations, particularly among is most senior and accomplished faculty. The academic leadership in the department is uniquely strong, with the department chair firmly established as a scholar with a national reputation. The department has a presence at the major professional venues in the discipline, most notably the National Council of Black Studies, Association for the Study of the World Wide African Diaspora, and the Association for the Study of African American Life and History. In addition, the faculty also actively participates in professional meetings and societies of other disciplines as well as smaller research collectives which enhance the research culture of the department.

The department sponsors an active mentoring program in pairing new tenure-track faculty with senior tenured faculty. The current three tenure-track faculty hires hold definite promise in elevating the department’s research culture and national standing. The research projects and programs of the tenure-track faculty must be encouraged and supported in order to elevate the research culture of the department to a standing commensurate with its dedicated teaching culture.

In addition, to enhance the culture of the department, all faculty must strive to contribute peer-reviewed articles in quality journals in addition to pursuing book projects with quality academic and trade publishers. The department should consider diversifying its singular focus on the scholarly monograph as the absolute standard of quality research given the dynamics of the scholarly publishing market and pursue pioneering models of scholarly presentation – leveraging new media platforms – which continue to support scholarly rigor while reaching and creating new audiences.
Given the signature strengths of the department and the critical convergences in research programs, there exists significant potential for collaborative research in the department and with scholars across the university that, if exploited, will dramatically increase the standing and stature of the department. In order to develop and realize these opportunities, the leadership in the College of Arts and Sciences and University Research Services and Administration should develop a series of workshops and development opportunities with departmental faculty to create, develop, and submit grant proposals that advance scholarship in the department. Linkages between the department and University Research Services and Administration must be encouraged in order to be regularized and normalized.

Goals

The department of African American Studies at Georgia State University has formulated appropriate goals in continuing to solidify its academic programs and to position itself in strategically pursuing its intellectual aspirations. The departmental name change from African American Studies to Africana Studies represents the intellectual recognition of the global experiences of black people and the department’s intentional engagement of the global dimension of the African diaspora which includes the experiences of peoples, cultures and ideas of African descended peoples in the United States and across the Americas. This change is appropriate and is consistent with leading trends in the field, particularly with departments at top universities such as Brown University, Cornell University, and the University of Pennsylvania, with all offer graduate education with two offering a Ph.D. in the discipline.

The discipline of Africana Studies and goals of the DAAS are critically aligned in seeking to explore and exploit new collaborative opportunities in applied research and professional fields. Many of students desire an education with clear options in view. They want to have the choice of continuing opportunities in the academy, but also have the opportunity to build careers with public and private entities, and sometimes simultaneously. The goals that the DAAS has are in line with these objectives and are cognizant of trends in higher education in our contemporary moment. The Office of the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences has encouraged targeted faculty hiring with an emphasis in the area of health. The opportunities for targeted hires that capitalize on synergies with Public Policy, Education, Law, Public Health, and Social Work should also be explored. Such synergies will need to be defined by the faculty in the department with an understanding of how such a program enhances the academic strength of the department and contributes to the strategic mission of the university.

The DAAS is appropriately focused on developing strategies to enhance the number of majors and minors in the undergraduate program. In this regard, curricular renewal will assist in realizing this goal as a lean African American Studies program will enable more students to take advantage of the department singularly or in combination with other academic programs. In terms of the creation of new approaches that would connect African American Studies more broadly to the university, the DAAS would benefit greatly from pursuing such strategies which would enable more departments within and outside of the College of Arts and Sciences to understand the signature strengths of the program in addition to realizing how to bring Atlanta strategically into the curriculum. Such efforts should help accomplish the goal of increasing
majors and minors with the added benefit of promoting collegial collaborations with faculty across the College and broader University.

The DAAS focus on strengthening the graduate program is important. The graduate program should not compete with the undergraduate program, but rather serve as a complement and resource for enhancing the overall academic program and profile of the department. A way to realize the goal of strengthening the graduate program is to pursue an on-demand dual degree graduate program for students in other graduate programs at the University who have an interest in African American Studies. The DAAS could also pursue “4+1 options” for undergraduate students across the university. Another option is to create standing graduate degree program arrangements with selected professional schools on campus (JD/MA; MBA/MA; MPH/MA). The potential opportunities of these combined degree programs would create the next generation of innovative thought leaders with the skills and abilities to respond to the public policy issues in Atlanta and across the nation and world. These combinations will also institutionalize the University’s commitment to improving the quality of life for African Americans.

The DAAS goals of increasing funding for the graduate program, increasing early recruitment of undergraduate students to the major, expanding undergraduate student participation in signature experiences, increasing graduate students’ employability, changing their name to Africana Studies, establishing criteria for evaluating creative works, and rethinking and reinvigorating concentrations within the undergraduate curriculum are all achievable. The name change will help with many of these goals because it would provide an intellectual focus for the department while signaling to the broader Georgia State University community that something new and exciting is happening. An intense and ongoing renewal effort of the undergraduate curriculum should aid in the early recruitment of undergraduate students to the major, while also giving attention to signature experiences, which could influence and have a spill over effort with a renewed graduate program. With these transformations working together, the DAAS will be able to take advantage of increased enrollments, higher visibility across the University, and a increased standing in the national higher educational landscape.

Summary and Recommendations

The department of African American Studies at Georgia State University holds distinct promise of becoming one of the top departments in the nation, particularly given its strong and quality academic leadership. Indeed, ensconced within a public research University committed to access, equity, and innovation, the department is singularly poised to distinguish the University from others in connecting curricular innovation with community engagement in a truly global and cosmopolitan city.

In order to accomplish this we offer the following recommendations:

- Cleary and fully define the intellectual and institutional meaning of Africana Studies at Georgia State University and develop creative ways to communicate this message to the broader University and Atlanta community to ensure that faculty and academic leadership are able to persuasively speak about that intellectual and institutional identity to various constituencies.
• Review and revise the DAAS standards and criteria statement to reflect changing faculty expectations at the University and across the discipline and to provide faculty with a clear understanding and expectation of faculty roles and responsibilities for tenure-stream and non-tenure stream faculty, inclusive of defining standards for teaching and research excellence consistent with University expectations and peer groups.

• Engage in a departmental strategic planning process in order for the department to clearly develop a vision and mission consistent with its institutional and intellectual aspirations along with a comprehensive and continuous improvement process with appropriate metrics and resource allocations to advance and strengthen the undergraduate and graduate programs, identify and cultivate new areas of academic distinction, create and sustain curricular and co-curricular collaborations across the University, strategically leverage the program to advance collective community engagement, and increase the visibility of the department and program on campus, in the city of Atlanta and the state of Georgia, and in the discipline of Africana Studies.

• Review and revise the duties of the Director of Undergraduate Studies (DUS) as this position is key to the success of the undergraduate experience and development of the major. The DUS should have the pulse of the undergraduates and should be an innovative and creative thinker who is effectively positions the undergraduate program to take advantage of new and emerging trends in the discipline and across the higher educational landscape. The DUS should also serve as the chair of the department’s Curriculum Committee and provide leadership for creating bridges for students to seamlessly transition to the major with the launching of Perimeter College of Georgia State University as well as identifying faculty with research and teaching interests in the discipline in developing faculty affiliation opportunities that will institutionalize these linkages.

• Critically explore and exploit new intellectual synergies created by the University strategic plan and broad institutional planning, particularly the new media initiative and the Creative Industries Institute. Given the relationship between Atlanta, arts, media, race, and history there exists a unique opportunity to make a national and international statement in this area of opportunity. With the endorsement and support of senior academic leadership this effort can serve as a model for collaboration, integration, and inclusion of key intellectual and institutional principles grounding these initiatives.

• Strategically invest in tenure-track faculty with appropriate resources to advance and highlight their research programs. Plan for faculty renewal to build the department’s reputation while leverage existing intellectual synergies with affiliated faculty. One way this may be done is by encouraging the DAAS to apply for National Endowment for the Humanities funding to establish a summer institute which prominently places Atlanta at the center in examining issues of urban life, history, and culture.

• Introduce Africana Studies to Perimeter College of Georgia State University immediately with the DAAS initiating a pipeline that would help transition students from Perimeter
into the major. The introduction of Africana Studies may also include having
departamental faculty offer guest lectures in related courses in other fields and creating
synergistic co-curricular programs that highlight the intellectual strengths of the
department.

• Create research cluster(s) in the department that leverage the signature intellectual
identity of the department and that critically align with the University strategic plan.
These research clusters should lead to collaborative grant-writing possibilities, especially
ones that require new and novel approaches to major research and policy questions that
require an interdisciplinary approach. Interdisciplinary perspectives are ideally suited for
grants that require cross cultural and cross disciplinary approaches to the study of under-
represented communities.

• Enhance the strengths of the undergraduate and graduate programs through a continual
program of curricular renewal, inclusive of curriculum mapping, that further develops
opportunities for service learning, collaborative teaching, integrated study abroad
opportunities, Urban Field School experiences, and partnerships with community
institutions and businesses. The focus of curricular renewal will need to reflect the
distinctiveness and signature research attributes of the department with the creation of
new courses aligned with the department’s areas of strength. It may prove beneficial for
faculty to discuss how a department advisory board and alumni of both the AAS program
and of Georgia State University, in general, would help with the development of some of
these ideas.

• Work with the Office of the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences to develop and
implement a comprehensive faculty renewal program which not only plans for tenure-
stream faculty replacement hires, but also strategically develop cluster hire opportunities
which build on the distinctive strengths of DAAS and the University and which facilitate
cross-institutional collaboration; a distinguished visiting faculty program which can bring
target term hires to the department; and work with development to created endowed
faculty opportunities in DAAS at both the senior and junior level to attract scholars to the
department and University.

• Engage in a series of departmental conversations to explore and examine how the DAAS
can leverage a model of interdisciplinarity that moves critically across the arts and
sciences and professional programs in public policy, education, law, public health, and
social work. Such a conversation may take up the question of “How to advance a
conception of health that is critical and comprehensive that leverages the signature
strength of the discipline of Africana Studies in collaboration with other scholars and
disciplines?” Such intra- and inter-departmental conversations will be helpful in
identifying potential teaching and research partners across the University as well as
building on the strengths of the department with colleagues interested in establishing a
stronger relationship between theory and practice, supporting critical cultures of student
learning within and outside of the classroom.
• Create and cultivate an institutional vision of academic leadership that is flexible in recognizing multiple regimes of academic excellence that captures the distinctive strengths of the DAAS and other academic programs and initiative within the context of a diverse, public, urban research university committed to access and equity. The DAAS presents a grand opportunity for the University to advance a new model of academic excellence that reinforces the institution’s core intellectual and social commitments and recognizes the institution’s dedication to creating an ecosystem of excellence that realizes that difference does not mean deficient.

We trust it is evident that the review team truly believes that with a critical alignment of institutional and intellectual resources the department of African American Studies at Georgia State University will realize its potential and become one of the leading programs in Africana Studies.