

Black Excellence at Cal State East Bay

What Is The Black Excellence Project?

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February is Black History Month, a month paying tribute to the achievements and acknowledging the struggles of African-Americans throughout history.

Black History Month started as Black History Week in 1915 when Black historian Carter G. Woodson and prominent minister Jesse E. Moorland founded the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH).

“In 1986, the Presidential Proclamation 5443 noted that “the foremost purpose of Black History Month is to make all Americans aware of this struggle for freedom and equal opportunity,” ASNLH wrote.

The ASNLH, now known as the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH), is an organization dedicated to researching and promoting achievements by Black Americans and other people of African descent. Coinciding with Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass’ birthdays, the second week of February was selected to celebrate Black History Week.

Over the next few decades, Black History Week evolved into Black History Month primarily due to the Civil Rights Movements and the increase in awareness of Black identity and the significance of Black history.

President Gerald Ford officially recognized Black History Month in 1976, marking February as a month of celebration from then on.

California State University, East Bay is known and celebrated for its diverse student body, ranking number one in the U.S. News and World Report Greatest Racial and Ethnic Diversity West coast University in 2021.

While it is true that CSUEB is one of the most ethnically diverse universities in the nation, four-year graduation rates among racial minorities are lower than expected.

After Sarah Aubert, a staff member at CSUEB, and Steven Cleveland, a professor in the History and Eth-



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nic Studies departments, noticed that less than 10% of Black students were graduating in four years, they knew something had to change.

Aubert and Cleveland created The Black Excellence Project, a multimedia social media campaign documenting the experiences and success stories of Black students at CSUEB.

“We are lifting up and centering Black voices as the most precious and important tools to empower the next generation to be able to figure out how to get through college themselves,” said Cleveland.

Both Cleveland and Aubert emphasized the strength-based approach The Black Excellence Project takes in the stories they share.

“Rather than focusing on the deficit of why students are not graduating, we wanted to spotlight and highlight the stories of the students that are graduating,” said Aubert.

The life of a college student is hard enough, but even more so when students feel they do not have access to proper resources and systems of support. Students’ success must give them access to hearing about the experiences of people from similar backgrounds to them.

“One of the things we’re hearing back from students is that without the Black Excellence Project, they haven’t had a chance to talk to Black alumni before, so this provides them with that opportunity. They don’t have to know someone who’s graduated to have access to these stories,” said Cleveland.

Both first-generation college students, Aubert and Cleveland, shared how they would have loved to have something like the Black Excellence Project to hear the experiences of Black alumni—particularly hearing about how they successfully navigated through their college experience.

“As a documentary filmmaker, these are some of the most compelling stories I have ever heard. We hear from students who have overcome homelessness and students who have come out of prison. Students who are first-generation college students. And they all share their stories about how they’ve approached these chal-

lenges with such strength and joy to be able to complete their degree in two years as transfers and four years as freshmen. It’s really just amazingly heartwarming,” said Cleveland.

The Black Excellence Project created by Aubert and Cleveland collaborates with CSUEB faculty and staff, working alongside student interns and industry professionals who help produce the work. Aubert and Cleveland shared their gratitude for how far the campaign has come.

“We started off with just an idea; we didn’t know what it would grow to,” said Aubert.

The campaign’s Instagram page has garnered more than 1,600 followers and is still actively posting content sharing the stories of Black students at CSUEB. While The Black Excellence Project is a great step in the right direction, CSUEB still has a way to go in terms of supporting its Black students, faculty, and staff.

“The campus does have room for improvement. And we’re really hoping to be a part of that work because Black Excellence can be a tool that we hope can help bring the community together in a way that supports Black student graduation, which is our primary function of being here,” said Cleveland.

When asked if Black History Month is a beneficial month to celebrate or whether the focus should be shifted to remembering Black history every month of the year, Aubert and Cleveland agreed that having a month specifically to remember Black history is excellent. At the same time, though, it would be even more beneficial to teach more Black history in general.

“I think it’s important to understand that Black history is American history. There is both a need to do this deep-dive that Black History Month provides but at the same time, we do need to do better at including Black humanity in American history,” said Cleveland. The Black Excellence Project amplifies Black voices, attracting attention to the crucial institutional best practices to enhance Black Student success. The campaign hopes to expand to other universities sometime in the future.

The campaign will be holding a Black Excellence Panel during U-hour (12:15-1:15 p.m.) on the Hayward Campus on Feb. 15 and is open to everyone. Don’t miss the panel if you want to learn more about The Black Excellence Project and how to support them.

For more information on the panel and to keep up with the campaign’s content, follow @educational-excellenceproject on Instagram.

