

# Moving Forward: Diversity in Area Studies Programs

By Aimee L. Bachari

*“The changes have to be made in the mindset of the minority students here. They have a right to this education and they should demand that right be executed by the administration.”*  
—Gene Locke

I secretly dreaded moving to Houston, even though I knew it was the best option for me. It promised more jobs, more opportunity, and funding for graduate school at the University of Houston. I pictured myself living in a southern city, complete with thick accents and racial slurs. I based this idea of the South on my earlier experience living in North Carolina. I hated it with a passion. Everything moved at a slower pace, and I heard the “N-word” more often than I had in Massachusetts. I was a Yankee in a place where the

Civil War was referred to as the War of Northern Aggression. Luckily, I was wrong about Houston. I enrolled at UH and found myself in a sea of diversity. It took a while to settle into this big city, but now I call Houston and the University of Houston home.

Both places provide opportunities other cities do not. Much more diverse than Boston and surpassing Los Angeles and New York City, the Houston metropolitan area currently ranks number one as the most ethnically diverse region in the



*Students in the African American Studies Department can participate in a study abroad program in Ghana, West Africa. While in Ghana, former student and now professor Lamar Johnson (center) and current student Desire Davis (right corner), participate in creating fabric that is on display outside of African American Studies in Agnes Arnold Hall.*

Photo by Varsha Williams, courtesy of African American Studies.



nation, according to a report from Rice University's Kinder Institute on Urban Research and the Hobby Center for the Study of Texas that traced the change to desegregation and shifting immigration laws. Laws passed in 1924 and revised in 1952 established immigration quotas based on a percentage of each national group's population in the U.S. according to the 1920 census, insuring two-thirds of new immigrants would come from northern Europe. The quota system controlled race or ethnicity of new immigrants until Congress passed the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965.<sup>1</sup>

Mirroring the city's increasing diversity, the University ranks second on the list of the most diverse campuses. Diversity means the inclusion of different types of people; UH is diverse racially and ethnically, but also in sexuality, gender identity, age, ability, and socioeconomic class. With over 40,000 undergraduate and graduate students from around the world and across the United States, UH's current white enrollment is approximately 33% of the student population. But numbers can be deceiving. Some Arab and Central Asian students check "White" on their application forms since "Middle Eastern" is not a category. Therefore, UH is likely more diverse than the ethnicity reports show. Further, Susan Moreno at the Department of Institutional Research explained that students self-report their race on the application, and it was not until the fall 2010 that students could report two or more races.<sup>2</sup>

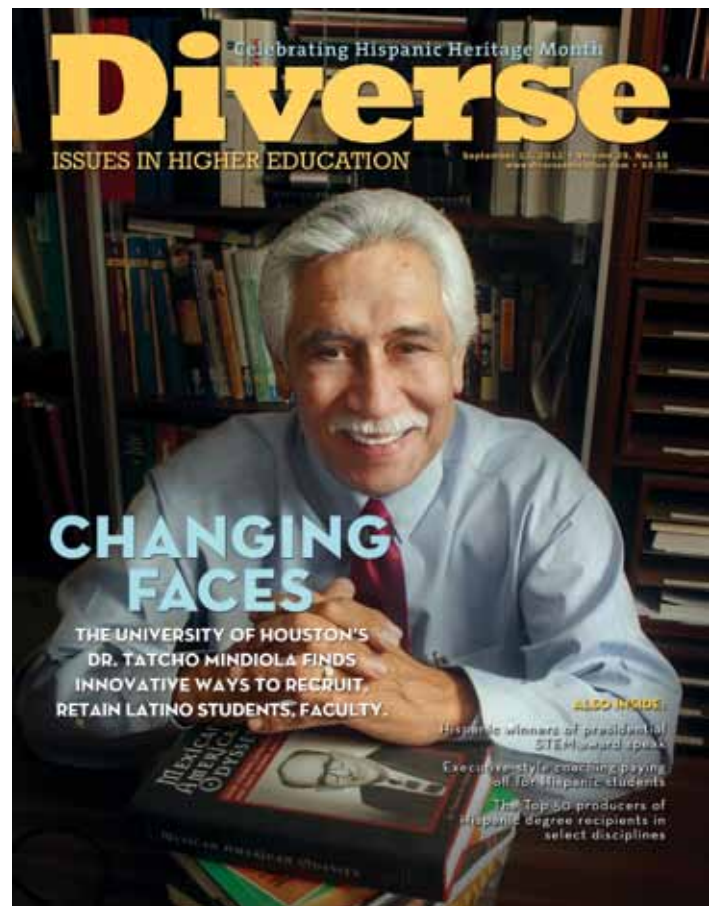
Defining features of the University, its accessibility and affordability, have made the campus attractive to the many migrants who came to Houston to take advantage of its blossoming economy. Since the 1960s, whether from student activism, community pressure, or faculty interest, the University has established at least fifteen area studies departments or centers, allowing for a richer educational experience and reflecting the diverse student body and the Houston population in general.

The University of Houston has come a long way from its founding as an all-white school. Before desegregation, its closeness to Texas Southern University enabled UH officials to exclude African Americans, claiming they had a "separate and equal" college right down the street. UH accepted women, Mexican Americans, and international students, with the exception of those with African ancestry. The exclusion of blacks at UH officially ended in June 1962 when Charles P. Rhinehart became the first African American student. The integration of athletics occurred in 1964, increasing the pool of talented athletes that took UH to the next level. Although black athletes faced discrimination and were not always accepted, the integration of the Cougar's football and basketball teams challenged prevailing racial attitudes and forced other universities to confront their segregation policies.<sup>3</sup>

Civil rights activities at the University reflected the struggles for equal treatment at the national level. Blacks at UH remained a small minority throughout the 1960s and faced challenges like segregated student organizations and restaurants even though classes were integrated. Thanks to the efforts of the student organization Afro-Americans for Black Liberation (AABL), UH has one of the oldest African American Studies (AAS) programs in the nation. Founded in 1969, AAS led to profound changes for all students of color at UH.<sup>4</sup>

With African Americans fighting for civil rights across the nation, other minority ethnic groups were spurred to follow their example. The Chicano movement fought for equality for Mexican Americans in Houston and beyond. Student groups such as the Mexican American Youth Organization and the League of Mexican American Students at UH supported AABL's desire for an AAS program and subsequently asked for a Mexican American Studies program that same year. The administration delayed their request until AAS was established. The Center for Mexican American Studies (CMAS) became a reality in 1972. Once CMAS secured special funding from the legislature in 1986, it began the visiting scholars program to generate more research on Mexican Americans in Houston and to encourage scholars to remain at UH in tenured or tenured-track positions.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to student activism, community members have also lobbied for area studies departments, as is the case with Italian Studies. Beginning as a few language courses in the 1970s, the program grew to include a minor and major in 1987 when Houston's newly established Consulate General of Italy sponsored a full-time lecturer at UH. Houstonian Baron Ugo di Portanova and his family fund a lecture series, a \$30,000 yearly endowment, and a scholarship for students that allow them to travel to Siena, Italy, for one month in the summer. "Currently, the Italian B.A. at UH enjoys more financial sup-



Featured on the cover of *Diverse: Issues in Higher Education* magazine, CMAS director Tatcho Mindiola promotes the Center's attempts to gain and retain more Mexican Americans in all aspects of university life.

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*Why support Women's Studies? Just ask UH physics professor Donna Stokes.*

Photo by Elizabeth Gregory, courtesy of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies.



*Sandra Frieden enthralled a standing-room only crowd with her reading of Nellie Sachs's poetry in German and English during the Holocaust Torah case dedication event, M. D. Anderson Library, University of Houston.*

Photo courtesy of Jewish Studies.

port from the community than any other language program," explained Alessandro Carrera, professor and graduate director for the new M.A. in World Cultures and Literature.

One year after the landmark decision to hire its first African American woman president, UH formally announced a new interdisciplinary program called Women's Studies, although courses related to women's studies were taught earlier than that. Unlike CMAS and AAS, the program is funded through the dean's office in the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences (CLASS). "We have a budget of \$8,000," said director Elizabeth Gregory. As a result, Women's Studies developed the Friends of Women's Studies in 1993 to help raise funds, which has proved successful. The Women's Archive and Research Center at the M. D. Anderson Library opened in 1996, and a GLBT minor was added in 2009. In 2010, the program changed its

name to Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies to better reflect its expanded focus.<sup>6</sup>

The Asian American Studies Center (AASC), established in 1995 in the College of Education, grew out of a vision of students, faculty, administrators, and the Houston community. As an interdisciplinary academic center, AASC's "mission is to generate knowledge, increase awareness and foster rich opportunities for learning about the Asian/Asian American experience." AASC offers a minor, a China study abroad program, research programs, professional training programs, and a visiting scholars program.<sup>7</sup>

New area studies departments are springing up with help from the Houston community and the support of CLASS. Jewish Studies, India Studies, and Arab Studies represent three new programs at UH. With many courses already being taught about Jewish history and religion,

*The desire to promote good relations and understanding between Arabs and Americans has had a long history at the University of Houston. Well before the creation of Arab Studies, the Organization of Arab Students took on the initiative throughout the 1960s. Front row—Suhail Misleh, Munther Antar, Sami Rabie, Musa Misleh, Amin Saab, Riad Attar, Walid Kana, Moayad Shanshal, and Wagih Abu-Rish; back row—John Stephan, Ahmed Abushaaban, Ahmad Saidi, Ghaith, and Samir Salameh.*

Photo from the 1965 *Houstonian*, courtesy of the Digital Library, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.





Modern and Classical Languages (MCL) has created an interdisciplinary minor available to undergraduate students in Jewish Studies. Under the guidance of its new director, Marie-Theresa Hernández, two entirely new courses in Jewish Studies were created for fall 2012. Beyond the campus, outreach will bring together students, faculty, and the larger Houston community of learners. The long-term goal, to create a Jewish Studies program, will “promote teaching and scholarship focused on history, culture, tradition, languages, and religion, keeping in perspective the global Jewish Diaspora and its intersections with a multitude of world cultures.”<sup>8</sup>

The local Indian community encouraged UH to offer language and religion courses about six years ago. Then dean John Antel, established these classes within the pertinent departments. Last year, CLASS dean John

Roberts created a new department — Comparative Cultural Studies, which combined Liberal Studies, Anthropology, and Religious Studies. “India Studies was the newest, fourth program,” said Assistant Director Anjali Kanojia. India Studies now offers a fifteen hour minor with courses in history, English, economics, religious studies, anthropology, and business, which began in fall 2012.<sup>9</sup>

With increased student demand for more courses on the Arab world and the greater Middle East and with more Arab students coming to Houston to study, MCL hired Emran El-Badawi to direct the new Arabic language program in fall 2011. “Houston is home to a highly educated and vibrant Arab-American community. In recent years the Houston Arab-American community—including the AAEF [Arab-American Educational Foundation] — has expressed their desire to promote Arab Studies at UH,” explained

## Making Strides: Diversity on Campus

By Ann Lynd

Before the University of Houston desegregated, international students led the way in diversifying the UH student population. Since 1957, international student enrollment has grown steadily. The first available record indicates 829 international students enrolled in 1968, compared to 3,343 in 2011. Director Anita Gaines suggests that many internationals choose Houston for “favorable educational opportunities, affordable cost of education, location, climate, and economy.” The majority of UH’s international students have come from China, India, Vietnam, South Korea, Pakistan, Nigeria, Venezuela, Saudi Arabia, Mexico, Turkey, and Taiwan.<sup>1</sup>

At the University of Houston, U.S. student diversity is also at a high compared to past years. In fall 2011, whites represented 33% of students, a drop from 40.5% in 2002. Enrollment among Hispanic students saw the largest increase, rising six points to 23% in the same period. In 2008, the U.S. Department of Education reported that nationwide 63% of undergraduate public university students were white and the percentages of some ethnic minorities were much lower than at UH. In May 2012, the federal government designated UH as a Hispanic Serving Institution, which requires at least 25% of students be Hispanic and 50% or more eligible for need-based aid.<sup>2</sup>

The University does not solicit detailed information on student race and ethnicity. Many students are of multiple



*During International Week in February 1981, Suraj Kalbig from India and Deborah Evans from Jamaica were named Mr. and Miss International.*

Photo courtesy of the International Student and Scholar Services Office, University of Houston.

ethnicities, and many students are from backgrounds that are not listed at all. Although students had the option to check multiple races before fall 2010, those who selected more than one race were only counted as one of those chosen. This applied to students who choose multiple ethnicities when enrolling, as well. Today, students can check two or more ethnicities or choose multi-racial, and in either case they will be reported as multi-racial.<sup>3</sup>

Many view UH as ethnically diverse, but other areas of diversity seem to go unnoticed, such as age, ability, and sexuality. Since approximately 80% of full-time undergraduate students do not graduate in four years, the average age of undergraduate seniors rises. UH also attracts many “non-traditional” students who return to complete their degrees after years of being out of school. The Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) Resource Center promotes gender and sexual diversity on campus.

Several student organizations joined with the Student Government Association to pass the Gender Expression Non-discrimination and Anti-harassment bill, protecting students from discrimination on the basis of gender expression and identity. The bill calls on the University to apply these principles in all areas, including scholarships and financial aid assistance, employment, and admissions.<sup>4</sup>

Of the seventeen UH presidents, only two have been women. In 1990, UH hired its first woman and first African American president, Marguerite Ross Barnett. She was up

El-Badawi. And with Houston ranked as the fourth largest U.S. metropolitan area and its strong commercial ties to the Arab world, “both UH and Houston naturally lend themselves to Arab Studies.”<sup>10</sup> Having created a minor in Arab Studies, El-Badawi hopes to collaborate with other departments to create a major in Middle East Studies. Meanwhile, he notes, “the minor enables UH graduates to bring some much needed dialogue and understanding between the U.S. and Arab World.”<sup>11</sup> As of October 2012, AAEF is \$25,000 shy of its \$1 million campaign to establish an endowed chair in Modern Arab History. It hopes to formally announce that the goal has been reached when UH, AAEF, and the Arab American National Museum in Dearborn, Michigan, open “Patriots and Peacemakers: Arab Americans in Service to Our Country.” The exhibit will be on display at the Alumni Center from March 11 to April 5, 2013. The ultimate goal is to

raise enough funds to support an interdisciplinary Center for Arab Studies at UH.<sup>12</sup>

Since its founding in 1836, Houston has attracted numerous waves of migrants from across the country and around the world. People, like me, come to Houston for a fresh start, to change their lives for the better, for the jobs and opportunities Houston holds in its ever-growing economy. Moreover, people who come to Houston now have the option to attend an affordable state school that is a Carnegie-ranked Tier One research university with numerous area studies departments. In this truly international city, the University of Houston represents one more opportunity Houston affords to all who come here seeking a better life and a brighter future.

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against “older candidates who would have normally been president of U of H—fifty-five year old white guys,” said Joe Pratt who served on the search committee. Dr. Pratt recalled that some believed that Houston was not ready for a black woman to run UH. The committee felt the University was ready and that Barnett represented the best candidate. Unfortunately, due to her untimely death from cancer, she only served two years. The University of Houston’s current chancellor and president, Renu Khator, came to UH in 2008 and is the first Indian immigrant to head a research university in the United States. “My mother never expected anything less of me because I was a woman,” recalled President Khator. “I may have had to cross extra hurdles or jump extra hoops, but in my mother’s eyes, I was not being defined by my challenges but by the way I faced them.”<sup>5</sup>

With increasing diversity in the president’s office and student diversity at an all-time high, the University has recognized the need to reflect this progress at the front of the classrooms. In 2007, 75% of all tenured four-year public university faculty nationwide were white, and UH fared only slightly worse at 79%. Of the 406 professors on campus, 16% were women, which fell far short of the one to one gender ratio of the student body.<sup>6</sup>

In January 2011, the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences (CLASS) dean, John Roberts, established the ongoing Ad Hoc Committee on Diversity to develop recommendations for retaining and recruiting a more diverse population of students, faculty, and staff. The committee



*UH is the second most diverse campus in the nation. Here, a group of students show off their Cougar pride.*  
Photo courtesy of the University of Houston.

is comprised of faculty and staff from a wide range of programs, and chaired by Elizabeth Gregory, director of Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. Their first task involved collecting data on the diversity levels within CLASS and comparing that to university-wide and national statistics. In 2011, although 62% of CLASS students were women, only 39% of tenured faculty were women. Race and ethnicity closely resembled university-wide numbers. White students

made up 42% of the CLASS population, but 77% of tenured faculty were white. Black students made up slightly over 16%, but black faculty was less than 4%. Once the committee has compiled all the data, it will investigate what can be done to increase the number of minority graduate students in fields where they are underrepresented. This in turn will lead to an expanded pool of diverse faculty candidates nationwide.<sup>7</sup>

The ethnic diversity among students and faculty is reflected in the University’s many student organizations, academic programs, and daily life around campus. As the second most diverse campus, UH compares favorably to other colleges and universities across the nation. As UH strives to include more diverse people at all levels of the University, let us celebrate how far we have come.

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