

# Developing a Black Studies Minor

Social Justice Praxis Lab Final Project  
Sarah Kanu she/they COMD III & SJ Minor

*For the past three years, my drive (theory of change?) has been to bring communities across campus doing THE work into conversation with one another to build awareness and supportive networks.* Understandably certain tasks/projects are distinct and may lose their power, strength, or impact if perceived to be combined. However, as Pratt has a running 'joke' that it does not communicate successfully, people are unaware of all the moving parts they could support.

Although the Black Studies Minor is not an immediate solution to this, it is an aspect of numerous goals the community at Pratt has for its school. *I began the work on getting Pratt to provide a BSM for other students who may not see themselves in the class's content and the space of the classroom.*

As a student leader, I work to provide spaces to gather, vent, rest, and have fun. Before this project, I started or supported several other initiatives. Events included advocating for Black Diaspora community spaces in residence halls, collaborating with BLM Pratt and the Center for Equity and Inclusion to plan and - I say with joy - increase the annual MLK Week's attendance and the Black History Month Teach-In and collaborating with many other clubs and groups. As a member of Student Government, I am also dedicated to supporting students and going off the demands Pratt's Student Government and Black students from Pratt MWP put together earlier this year -

I am committed to pushing their demands for a Black Studies Program forward.

**My Community Partner(s)/  
Selected Public:**

Pratt community - administration, faculty, and the student body

**Why I Choose This?**

As a student leader I strive to improve the student experience for Black folks by providing events, programming, and spaces for them.

This community not only impacts myself, but my peers and it felt only right for this to be what I decided to go forward with.

Being that I already had avenues of access and privileged status within Pratt Institute, I knew this would also allow my intervention/goal to move along with significant haste.

**Who Needs to be Involved and Why?**

Being that I dedicate my labor to supporting Black students and this Minor is for them, Black students specifically need to be involved.

My fellow students play a crucial role in holding me accountable and reminding me that my perspective is a single one—many students with vast experiences have valid, needed opinions on how this Minor comes into existence.

A significant amount of classes under the Minor must also be taught by Black faculty. Therefore, faculty, especially those recruited into the working group, play a crucial role in developing the Minor's structure.

**What Do You Hope to Explore and/or  
Learn through your  
Collaboration/Intervention?**

Get students (alumni and current) honest feedback

Understand their experiences and points of view

Ensure they know the work is student started and there are folks working to improve their time at Pratt

Establish/Push a ground up framework in all decision that will impact students

Learn how to best organize folks and gather the highest amount of student presence and input as possible

Continue to develop my skills as a community supporter

In late May-early June, students across campus came together to present **three different lists of demands to Pratt administration** - one of which clearly asked for a Black Studies.

In February 2018, **a new strategic plan** was created. Under this strategic plan are five thematic pillars; academic excellence, student success, diversity, equity, and inclusion, global education, and civic engagement

The BLM Faculty and Staff-led group worked to demand accountability from Pratt which resulted in Pratt's **formation of the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Department** 3 years ago.

The **call for the existence of Black Studies** - and even Latinx Studies - as a minor, program, etc. have **circulated Pratt for 50 plus years** as Black and Latinx students gathered in the 1970s to demand these similar spaces and avenues for education.

[Student Government Letter of Demands to Pratt Administration](#)

[SDSU Letter to Pratt to Cut Ties w/ NYPD & Ban Cops from Pratt Campus](#)

[Pratt's Strategic Plan Site](#)

[Pratt's Diversity and Inclusion Site](#)

[Pratt Institute Archives Instagram](#)

## Final Letter to the Pratt Admin

Signed by 671 members of Pratt's community, the Brooklyn Student Government and the BSU of the MWP/Utica Campus come together to put together these list of demands in late May/Early June.

Dear Pratt Administration,


In response to the murder of George Floyd and subsequent protests, numerous students have reached out directly to Student Government via social media, email and other methods in order to voice their concerns about Pratt's response. Together we have met and discussed what we think Pratt must do to address its own role in combating structural racism and violence.

President Bronet's letter to students states, "As your president, I renew my commitment, and the Institute's commitment, to work to eradicate racism and injustice through our curriculum, our outreach, and our mission." This statement is meaningless without action. Your commitments are meaningless without dedicated follow through. Change doesn't just have to happen on the local, state, or national level; it has to happen within the confines of our own institution of learning. We call on Pratt to do the following:

1. Pratt must immediately break all monetary and symbolic ties with the NYPD and private security companies.\* Police and their proxies (private security companies) have no place on our campus. Instead, Pratt must commit resources to support community-led alternatives to policing.
2. Pratt must decolonize its educational structure and actively integrate Black inclusion in both the curriculum and classroom. In *every* class in *every* department, students should learn about Black artists, Black designers, Black architects, and other Black folks who have contributed to their field of study. The Eurocentric, White experience must be decentered across departments and schools. Beyond this, we call on Pratt to immediately begin work on the creation of a Black Studies program, as a part of Pratt's core | curriculum.
3. Pratt must renew its commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion as a whole by hiring more non-white, especially Black, faculty to all of Pratt's departments. In addition, diversity training must become mandatory for all members of the Pratt community.
4. Students at Pratt demand greater transparency behind the implementation of institutional policies. The progress of the Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion Strategic Plan must be made publicly available for all members of Pratt's community.
5. Pratt must commit to financially supporting the Black community inside and outside of its gates by increasing and deepening scholarships for Black students, expanding its HEOP program, and finding ways to reinvest in the neighborhood it has gentrified.
6. Pratt must diversify who holds leadership positions especially within the Board of Trustees. They must also create an advisory board that informs them of DEI issues and how their decisions affect Black students, faculty, staff, and the surrounding community.

\*Pratt's initial response to remove the police vehicles from the NYPD 88th precinct from campus is a step towards solidarity with Black students and all marginalized communities. However,

### Indicators of Success

- a. Beyond the direct goal of providing a Black Studies Minor, what I am working to achieve as Saidiya Hartman expresses in her book *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* “an archive of the exorbitant, a dream book for existing otherwise.” As a collective, beginning to consider the ways a Black Studies Minor - in ideation, formation and release - reclaims a history of Black experiences on the grounds of Pratt.
  - b. To reach these goals requires the upliftment and integration of the folks who once organized at Pratt and the folks currently working on its campus to advance equitable and inclusive theories and practices.
  - c. Although the larger goals of archiving, uplifting and inviting Black folk into spaces they are often erased from is less direct to track, I had the commitment to form the Minor as a huge indicator of initial change/success for me. After a commitment, action and decisions being made in a reasonable timeframe (before December) was needed to ensure this was not pushed to the side.
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- The formation of a Minor working group
- The group is populated by Black faculty and considers the students it wishes to serve
- The Minor is formed and support faculty who are excited to teach courses for it
- Students know about and are eager to take classes that will lead to declaring the Minor if they wish
- It informs all Pratt course curriculum allowing Black students to see themselves in liberal arts and design

## A lot of Meetings

Donna Heiland - Vice Provost for Academic Affairs

Donna and Avishi

Avishi and the Provost

calyn

Creative Imagining!!!

Amir, Donna and Avishi

Student Government Updates

Amir, Helio and Avishi

Jayna Brown

Chairs and Faculty who wanted to talk

## and a significant amount of learning and note taking

### How does Pratt Hold Up? (Compared to other schools under the AICAD)

Parsons is one of the school with the most to offer compared to Pratt, with 57 Minors and around 10 focused on identity/ race/ethnicity (no Black Studies in particular)

10 schools offer 10 or more Minors to their students.  
3 schools offer 25 or more (25 is the amount Pratt offers its students)  
3 offer Minors specifically related to race, identity, etc. OCAD (understandably) offers a minor on Indigenous Visual Culture.

### Meeting with Kirk Pillow, Provost for Academic Affairs | Take - Aways

Nothing new was brought up at this meeting and it was a very short conversation. Again, Amir Parsa was brought up and it was stated that he would be the person I work with to get faculty and select students together to oversee the creation of the Minor.

Apparently on Kirk's end, there has been an inconsistency in the naming of the Minor. Some folks have said an Ethnic studies minor, while others have been using BIPOC minor. I found this interesting as I have only used Black to describe what I am forming and wonder were the expansions and name inconsistencies is occurring.

### Meeting with Donna, Amir Parsa and Avishi | Take - Aways

Based on my discussion with Donna and Amir, it seems that the Black Studies Minor is going to sit underneath the School of Liberal Arts and Sciences. In speaking with Amir, he stated that logistics and structure are key in ensuring this Minor reaches its completion within the 2020/2021 school year. That the minor would be 15 credits - as most are - with 3 underneath the School and 6 across Schools. A consistent thread across my conversations is the need to have this be a Minor - at least for now - of curation versus creation. That to form new classes would extend the timeline and present a lot of divergences.

Another thread was the stakes the faculty-working group has in ensuring this stays within the timeline. That although enthusiasm by faculty is valuable it can or will derail the needed specificity of the Minors completion.

### Benefits of a curated Minor:

It could be provided to students by Fall 2021

Students who have taken classes already within it can declare the Minor.

It can be structured to be updatable

It opens up space for future additions and changes e.g new minors, further the diversification of curriculum.

After Friday's event, I will work to compile the input and information to present to Amir and Julio.

### One on One with Evan Neely of the History of Art and Design Department

This was more a meeting for Evan than myself and moving the Minor forward. He provided me with a fair amount of advice and actually said he would put in a word with his Chair to ensure students sit on the working group for the Minor - such as myself and Avishi.

### Meeting with Donna Heiland, Vice Provost for Academic Affairs | Take - Aways

Off the bat, Donna reassured us (Avishi my Stu Gov peer and I) that a Minor for Black Studies can be done. The processes to get it going and approved are doable - that across campus Deans are already working on proposals and means of decolonizing and diversifying their curriculum (conversations that started in May/June).

We shortly discussed how it could exist as a program vs a minor and if it would serve as a single entity or be interdisciplinary in its creation and existence.

She went over the steps and areas this would need to pass to be approved as a Minor. If it was a departmental or school proposed version there would be a difference in how many steps of approval were required and that one would be longer than the other.

In regard to a timeline, especially knowing I graduate this year and we all agreed we'd love to see this come to completion as soon as possible, she told us it would need to be approved in April. In knowing that we worked backward hitting what needed to be accomplished or set up by certain deadlines. Ultimately we concluded (which we already knew) that the work needed to be started now as it would take 6 - 8 weeks to form a working group that would fully flesh out the curriculum for this Minor.

Within all of this work there are three moving parts, the Student Leaders such as myself, Student Government and other folks organizing on the student end, there is the Faculty Senate and there is the Provost Office. At certain points throughout the process, these groups will converge and be in conversation with one another.

By the end of the meeting, we laid out next steps for myself which involve joining Avishi in her routine Monday meetings with Kirk, for me to email Kirk with a proposal and clarification of our meeting and to continue planning and push for student input with my Oct 23rd event.

I originally planned to begin contact with Faculty, but upon speaking with Donna she mentioned waiting until after meeting with Kirk. Adding that it may be more efficient for him to set up the process for faculty outreach.

### A few questions to consider during the process:

Who needs to be represented? Whether that be types of students or certain faculty.

Should the name stay Black Studies? Consider the power of naming and how it is perceived.

Who will do what? Mainly, as a student how far can I actually go in accomplishing this and who do I need to communicate with to move forward with the work?

For faculty: Do you want to be apart of a working group for this Minor?

Overall, I was excited and invigorated to know this is a topic that is still in Administrative conversation and that I can be a consistent reminder to continue to push it.

\*If the minor does not move on, our back-up plan is to develop means of highlighting and curating courses that already exist at Pratt under a common theme of Black Studies.

### People interested/Potential Contacts

Uzma - Academic Senate and Faculty

Amir - Interdisciplinary Programming

### Contacted a Former Pratt Student to Illustrate Poster

The Black Studies Minor is about so much more than the credits and a declaration on a diploma or degree audit. The creation of the Minor will enhance relationships, challenge structures at Pratt, create and form bonds between folks. For me it is also about further providing Black and IPOC students with opportunities to share how they have felt or want to feel when at Pratt, as well as allowing them to utilize their skills. I got Critical and Visual Studies Alumni 2020 Calyn Pickens to create the poster for the event. Doing this allowed me to support her career/work as well as alleviate myself of more tasks and stress.

### Planning Event and Reaching the Students

- Building an event agenda with time, questions and space for things to go astray
- what happens if no one shows up?
- what happens if several people show up?
- what does outreach look like?

As I have come to see over this semester, emails are working even less successfully than normal and IG posts are not any more or less beneficial.

Compared to before, I feel that I am going to need to push personalized invitations to really get people to show up.

My biggest goal was to reach Freshman students. However, I feel that is not going to be success. Not enough work on my part was done to accomplish that such as request the Foundation department send out a blast email.

My goal of having the Chairs get faculty to message students also did not go as planned. I do not think I was clear about my intentions when I asked Peg Fox to contact the Chairs. Instead of getting students involved, it was directed toward faculty. This is generally not an issue, but with students at the originally intended audience this was also unsuccessful.

Thank you to Professor Caitlin for the idea of not just utilizing the BSU members emails, but reaching out to the students who signed the various demands this summer. As they did not provide their emails, it is a much heavier labor load to find and compile the email of these students. To mitigate this, I began with the students who signed the PrattMWP letter. It was a short list and I knew more of the students would be Black or Brown compared to the Student Government list.

I drafted a few alternative quick messages and reached out to Black students and alumni I knew over private direct messages on Instagram. Building off my public intervention, I see the potential for folks to be more involved and feel a different type of drive to act when they feel they are being addressed as an individual. There is also the continued building of trust between myself as President of Black Students organizing on campus and the various students on campus.



## Creative - Imaginings: Developing a Black Studies Minor Event

After proposing the BSM to the Provost office and getting that front engaged and committed, I needed student input to go forward.

The Creative - Imaginings event served many functions.

- 1) Get direct feedback and thoughts from the community I claim to speak for
- 2) Publicize that this work is being done and was started by a student
- 3) Open space for students to imagine radical transformation to their art/design college experiences
- 4) \*not planned, but put faculty committed to change in direct dialogue with students
- 5) Provide students a space of release

The Event Agenda



CREATIVE-IMAGININGS: Developing a Black Studies Minor

Guided by BSU President Sarah Kanu

October 23rd 2020 at 1 pm EST

Zoom Link <https://pratt.zoom.us/j/96315036094?pwd=NC9jZFloMkY5eE5kWINteFRjcXNBZz09>

**SIGN IN LINK** <https://forms.gle/s43nKDHNVeNHjQrz8>

Collective imagining space for us to free range a proposal on how a Black Studies program would function on campus and what you would want it to provide for you/future students!

Potential Outcomes

- possible requirements
- class types
- ways it bonds

Set Requirements

15 credits +

**MILANOTE:** <https://app.milanote.com/1KugRP1Y98lf7b?p=oHXr2dzfwC>

Agenda:

Welcome/Introduction [start at 1:05

Moment of collective breath

Honoring

What we are doing today/The "goal" [15 mins]

Sign In

Community Guidelines

Ways we interact with one another

What would you like to come out of this collective?

How can we accommodate your needs? [15 min] AS A LARGE GROUP.

Mini-Group Questions (in break out room)

One person please take notes on Milanote to document your discussion

Enter into break out room for question #1 [20 mins]

8 min break (in the main room)

Enter into new break out rooms for question #2 [20 mins]

1) What does a Black Studies Minor feel like? (be expressive, no need for logical answers, draw an image, write a verse etc.)

2) How does a Black Studies Minor function? (engage with structures, but do not worry about fitting into a system, does it offer new courses? does it clearly compile a collective of courses already at Pratt etc.)



## Creative - Imaginings: Developing a Black Studies Minor Event



Main Zoom room towards the end of the event

### CREATIVE-IMAGININGS EVENT: DEVELOPING BLACK STUDIES AT PRATT

Come together to collectively imagine how a Black Studies program would function on campus and what you would want it to provide for you/future students!  
Guided by BSU President Sarah Kanu.

October 23rd, 2020 1 - 2:30 EST on Zoom  
Find the link in our bio and on Engage.  
Email the BSU to join the mailing list to be emailed link.



Poster by Calyn Pickens 2020 Alum

[CREATIVE-IMAGININGS: Developing a Black Studies Minor Recap 2020](#)

## CREATIVE-IMAGININGS: Developing a Black Studies Minor Recap 2020 Document

5 Main Pillars (brought about through the condensed student and faculty comments, notes and questions from the October 23rd, 2020 event)

True Equitable Inclusion  
Structural/Foundational Changes  
Transparency and Accountability  
Cross-Disciplinary Existence  
Building New Relations / Moving into the Future



- Inform the creation of the Black Studies Minor as well as future minors, programs, majors etc.
- Provide tools for reworking what has already been formed
- Continue to de-centering whiteness in education and uplift Blackness!
- Open up more Minors and educational spaces to be dedicated to other Indigenous folks, People of Color and different Ethnicities
- Archive of this moment

## What are the Next Steps?

### Transparency and Accountability | Accrediting the Labor of Black folks and Students

A huge factor of the Minors aftermath for me is how Pratt presents it to the public. Students must be credited with initiating this work and following through with it.

### Building New Relations / Moving into the Future

Now that the intervention has occurred and the working group for the Minor is being formed, a new set of questions arise.

What does a visual identity for this Black Studies Minor look like?

in what ways is Pratt visual cohesive?

In what ways does Pratt already have a visual identity connected to Blackness?

Does the Minor break away from a standard?



by Mayowa 2021 COMD student



by Sarah 2021 COMD

rooted in, the rich legacy of Pratt Institute.



<https://www.instagram.com/blmpratt/>



Although change takes time, that time doesn't need to be infinite.

Community work is hard - especially online - and to get people engaged they need to feel seen and heard.

Reaching out to students directly was extremely beneficial to the event turn out.

Reaching out to Chairs and expanding my communicative reach also resulted in a high event turn out.

There is value in work being done on multiple fronts. That value is enhanced when all those fronts are clear on their individual purpose while staying in conversation with one another.

Thank You