A t the dedication of the Valentin Lizana y Parrague Endowed Chair in Latin American Studies on October 11, 2011, Clarence Taylor, Chair of the Department of Black and Hispanic Studies at Baruch College recounted for us the history behind the creation of our department. Since that day, our Department has changed its name and it is now known as the Department of Black and Latino Studies. And that is another story worth of telling.

The establishment of the Black and Latino Studies Department at Baruch College was part of a nationwide movement of Black and Latino students struggling against racial discrimination in higher education. Civil rights organizations such as the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee and the Congress of Racial Equality consisted of college students who challenged American racism in housing, politics, employment, and healthcare and in education. By the mid-sixties when the struggle for black empowerment intensified, SNCC, CORE and new student led organizations focused on higher education. Black students led a strike at San Francisco State in 1968 demanding that the institution be more racially inclusive in student body and faculty. The school hired Sociologist Nathan Hare to coordinate the first black studies program in the nation and in September of 1968 the program became the Department of Black Studies. Black studies across the nation held demonstrations demanding the creation of black studies programs and departments. In 1969 Black and Latino students at every single division of the City University of New York demonstrated. At City College black and Puerto Rican students took over the South campus and Klapper Hall from April 22 to May 4. Among their demands were greater black and Latino student enrollment and the creation of Black and Puerto Rican Studies Departments.

Their heroic efforts led to the university’s implementation of Open Admissions, a program that, according to historian Martha Biondi, was the most significant civil rights victory in higher education in the history of the United States. In practically no time CUNY granted more degrees to Black and Latino students than any institution of higher education in the U.S.A.

In addition, Black and Latino studies departments and programs were created at CUNY colleges. The Black and Puerto Rican Studies Department at Hunter was created in 1969, followed by the Black and Hispanic Studies Department at Baruch in 1970 and in 1971 the African American Studies Department at City College was founded. By the 1970s Brooklyn and Queens Colleges created African Studies. These departments were interdisciplinary attracting scholars who investigated the history, literature, psychology and cultures of people of African origins. These scholars explored both the ways in which the Black and Latino experience is configured by social, political and economic factors and the aesthetic dimensions of the experience as expressed in the arts and literature. Those brave students at City, Brooklyn, and other campuses clearly understood the need for Black and Latino Studies. They help end CUNY’s racially exclusive and class bias admission policies, providing the opportunity for working class as well as middle class students to receive a broader education.

Then, why is it that today, questions such as “Why do we have this department?” “Why do we need such a program at Baruch?” continued to be asked by faculty and other members of our own community at Baruch?

“A few days ago a colleague of mine in the history department said to me that there might not be a need for such a department under the new Pathways Gen. Ed. requirements.” (Clarence Taylor). Really?

As the city of New York moves more and more to run the public school system as a business, history, civics, the literature, and the humanities in general of receiving less than minimal attention. More and more we are becoming passive spectators when we should be active participants in the decisions of our time. If we claim to be “a democratic society” we must produce and rely on well-informed and committed citizens.

My experience has revealed to me that our freshman classes arrive to us with such significant vacuum of knowledge that is daunting. Many students who have graduated from high school come to us poorly educated. Why? Or, is there a specific policy put in place that forces us to bring down our standards?

Our department is dedicated to the interdisciplinary study of diversity and multiculturalism, with a focus on ethnic and racial minority groups in the United States. We are all committed to understanding more deeply the multiple meanings of racial diversity in the Americas. Our scholarship and teaching focus both on the specific experiences of African Americans, Latinos, non-American Africans and many other racialized peoples in the United States. We offer students a variety of courses that center upon the historical, and sociological, economic, political, artistic, and ideological aspects of American ethnicity and how it interplays with culture, gender, race, and class. Through an interdisciplinary approach, our students are given a clear view of the historical importance of ethnic identity in the United States of America. The students in our classes today learn and appreciate more fully the history and cultures of various peoples in the United States and the world community, correcting the racial and ethnic stereotypes that lead to misunderstanding and conflict.

Thanks to the Black and Latino studies department students are offered courses in Black and Latino history, African history and the history of Latin America, literature, race theory, pedagogy and discovering the pivotal role Blacks and Latinos play in this country and globally.

Our students are fortunate to have access to our extraordinary scholars who are extremely productive. Department members have produced significant pieces of scholarship. Works that have been published or are near completion focus on transnational immigrant social networks, detail the history and culture of Cuba, enlighten readers on Nuyorican intellectuals, provide one of the first scholarly examinations of the Young Lords Party, explore how Puerto Ricans in Chicago construct and perform nationalism, detail the efforts the radical New York City Teachers Union to redefine teacher unionism in New York City, and provide an ethnic history of the United States. Department members have also won prestigious awards, including Fulbright scholarships and grants from the National Science Foundation and National Endowment for the Humanities. And when focusing on the department’s importance we should not overlook the point that our faculty serves as role models for the growing number of students of color. In general, Black and Latino Studies paved the way for other students of color to seek out knowledge careers in the study of groups of all kinds.

There are new challenges for the Black and Latino Studies department here at Baruch. But this is one of the finest departments at the College. And we have become stronger because of our new Valentin Lizana y Parrague Endowed Chair in Latin American studies. This position has been endowed specifically to foster the humanistic and critical study of Latin America and/or Latinos in our Interdisciplinary department. Also stresses the need to promote a stronger interconnection among Latino, Black and African Studies.

Our department has made history when elected the First Black woman to be a Department Chair at Baruch, Dr. Vilna Bashi Treitler.

Hedwig Feit, born in Chile, graduated from Universidad de Chile in 1972. Studied in Peru, Puerto Rico, New York State University, and Rutgers University. She was a Member of the Board of Education of Chile, Director of the Mercer County Hispanic Association, the Office of Civil Rights, and the Director of the Department of Social Services in Princeton, New Jersey. Since 2007, an Adjunct Lecturer of the department of Black & Latino Studies and is the Chair of the Advisory Council to the Dean of the Weissman School of Arts & Sciences at Baruch College. Hedwig has published books on history, education, statistics, and Spanish grammar.