Recommendation of the Department of Africology and the L&S Academic Planning and Governance Committee to Change the Name of the Africology Department to the Department of African and African Diaspora Studies

Background:

Black Studies emerged in the 1960s as an outgrowth of the Civil Rights and Black Liberation Movements and the demand for scholarly recognition and scrutiny of the life experiences and perspectives of peoples of African descent in the United States and across the world.

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee took a leading role in the creation of African-American Studies in the United States. UWM was among the first cohort of such programs created when it approved the creation of the Center for Afro-American Culture in 1968. By 1971 the Center achieved departmental status as the Department of African-American Studies. As the department evolved, both its faculty and class offerings increasingly took on an international character. The department, including its long-standing chair, Winston Van Horne, looked to establish this global outlook on Black Studies that united research on the African continent with the African diaspora. They changed the department’s name in 1994 to Africology to reflect this new direction.

Rationale:

It was thought that this approach to research uniting the study of Africa and its diaspora would spread across the academy and be branded under the name Africology. More than two decades out from establishing this name, this research direction has indeed spread, just as our department wished. The branding of this enterprise as Africology, however, has not.

The past few years our department recognized the name Africology was not seeing widespread adoption throughout the academy. In fact, some thought it was becoming a liability, given confusion surrounding what the name implied. In response, we canvassed our graduate students’ views on whether we should change the department’s name. Eight students responded. Only 2 of the 8 were firm in the view of retaining it, while 4 were wholly against, with 1 undecided. This surprised some of us (faculty) as we assumed students selecting our program would have supported its name (branding). Yet, on another level, it made sense, as it is the substance of what we do that is more important than the name applied to it.

Last year, Drs. Nolan Kopkin and Erin Winkler sent a survey to academic departments and programs throughout the country that fall under the umbrella of ‘Black Studies.’” Some 186 faculty and students responded to at least part of the survey. Of the many department names used to brand our research and teaching, the one reporting the most negative connotations was Africology.
With the weight of those opinions and realities in mind; and their implications for enrollments, recruitment of minors, majors and graduate students; along with perceptions of editors of publishing outlets and reviewers of grant proposals; and career prospects for our graduate students, our departmental committee voted unanimously on January 19th to change our name.

The new department name selected was African and African Diaspora Studies (AADS). Our department’s view is that this name is consistent with our research and teaching mission. The name is known in the academy, with respected academic departments (e.g., The University of Texas, et al.) identifying themselves with it. Moreover, the above referenced survey indicates the name is well regarded generally. African and African Diaspora Studies also has the virtue of not having to be explained, as the name itself makes evident what we do without others imposing perceptions (sometimes fanciful) on what our department does.

With all the above in mind, we look re-brand our department under this new name. Ideally, this could take place for the launch of the new academic year, starting fall 2018, which also looks to see the launch of our new Master’s program.