Announcer: The Missouri State Journal, a weekly program keeping you in touch with Missouri State University.

Emily Yeap: Every year in February, people all across the country observe Black History Month, also known as African American History Month. This month grew out of Negro History Week in the mid-1920s. Missouri State University will host several events and activities on campus to highlight the accomplishments and culture of the black community. I'm Emily Yeap.

Joining me today to share more about Black History Month and its significance is Wes Pratt, MSU's chief diversity officer.

Wes Pratt: It was established I believe, in 1926, by Carter G. Woodson who was a scholar, historian and educator. It was to address issues of empowerment and cultural awareness and growth for African Americans during that period of time in 1926. It had a pretty hostile national society in relation to the changing demographics, reconstruction, Jim Crow era and so Carter G. Woodson felt that there was a need to empower and uplift and promote cultural awareness and knowledge about African Americans and their contribution to America.

Emily Yeap: Negro History Week took place in the second week of February to coincide with birthdays of former President Abraham Lincoln and abolitionist leader Frederick Douglass. In 1976, during the American Bicentennial celebration, then-President Gerald Ford, formally established Black History Month. Why should such an event matter to people in today's society?

Wes Pratt: I remember one time I was on the shuttle, and there was a shuttle bus driver who asked me, "Why do we have African American Heritage Month? It seems to me that we shouldn't be separating people." And I explained to him it's simply about cultural awareness, increasing one's knowledge about the contributions of all Americans. That's why we have heritage months on campus. That's why we have within our public affairs mission is the pillar of cultural competency. It's important to recognize the value that everyone brings to, not only our campus, but to our community, state and nation.

Emily Yeap: Pratt encourages everyone on campus and in the community to celebrate Black History Month.

Wes Pratt: I’d go on Missouri State website, look at multicultural student programs and see what programs are going to be a part of the heritage month. There are going to be community celebrations as well. You can contact various community-based organizations, the NAACP, you can engage in conversations in your own churches or in your own communities about the value of heritage months. Just get involved and actively participate. It's for everyone. It's to grow our knowledge and our awareness and hopefully will help us to develop skills associated with becoming more culturally conscious and competent.

Emily Yeap: Pratt believes being part of heritage months such as Black History Month is even more important now due to the climate of divisiveness in America.

Wes Pratt: We're so divided politically and we yell at each other as opposed to engage in conversations, and so I think it's time that we as Americans really start to understand the value that everyone brings to our nation’s experience. These heritage months gives us an opportunity to do that, so I would certainly encourage all our listeners and all of the citizens and residents to engage and participate. I think they'll be edified by the experience of learning more about one another and our cultures. But we all contributed to what we call this land of America. So, let's revel in it. Let's celebrate it and let's engage.

Emily Yeap: One of the major events for the Black History Month celebration at Missouri State is the Sankofa: Black History Month banquet. It will take place at 5:30 p.m. February 22nd in the Plaster Student Union. RSVP is required to attend the banquet. It's free for students, but $10 for staff, faculty and community members. Payment must be made in cash at the door. F

For further details, including a full list of events, visit missouristate.edu/multiculturalprograms. I'm Emily Yeap for the Missouri State Journal.

Announcer: For more information, contact the office of university communications at (417) 836-6397. The Missouri State Journal is available online at ksmu.org.