Department of Africana Studies
Stony Brook University

Strategic Plan

Background

Africana Studies has existed as an academic unit at Stony Brook since 1968. Like other Black Studies programs, it was established as a result of the heated conflicts, debates, and civil unrest that affected civil society in the United States throughout the 1960s. These social upheavals that addressed issues of civil rights were spearheaded by people of a variety of ethnic and racial backgrounds who came from all sectors of US society, but most especially from college campuses throughout the United States. In addition to addressing other important civil rights issues, the social activists who participated in these movements pointed out and sought to rectify the glaring biases and evident intellectual shortcomings manifested in the ways in which the traditional disciplines were being taught on US campuses as they tended to ignore, devalue, and misrepresent the contributions of peoples of African heritage and ancestry and thus distort our understanding of the world. No other academic unit shares this unique history.

The Stony Brook AFS unit obtained formal departmental status in 1998. Over the years, the undergraduate program has consistently enrolled thousands of students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds who find the different courses offered by the AFS faculty intellectually challenging, extremely informative, and exceptionally enlightening. After years of struggle, the Stony Brook Africana Studies Department obtained New York State's Department of Education's approval for its Master's program in 2007 and started our Graduate Certificate in Africana Studies in Fall 2010. A recent PBS television report (September 25, 2010) indicated that Stony Brook's EOP/AIM program registers the highest graduation rate for Blacks and Latino students (70%) nationally. What has not been acknowledged is the contribution made by Africana Studies, who ten years ago provided EOP/AIM students with its first for-credit course (AFS 101), offered during the summer. This is only one of the many ways in which AFS significantly influences Stony Brook's graduation rates.

Mission

The Stony Brook Africana Studies Department is an intrinsically interdisciplinary unit that seeks to meet the needs of a highly diverse student body across a variety of disciplines while focusing on the histories, sociology, philosophy, literatures, politics, anthropology, religions, and experiences of people of African heritage wherever they are found within the larger national and global contexts. In addition to being intensely grounded in the scholarly enterprise, our faculty encourage social commitment, promote sensitivity to the civil rights of all people, and teach responsibility to, and involvement in, local and global communities.

Challenges

The most persistent challenge faced by AFS has been the lack of consistent support from higher administration in relation to the provision of the permanent faculty lines needed for the growth of the program. Support has been at best uneven over the

entire history of AFS. Much of this lack of support may be attributed to a lack of understanding and a lack of sensitivity about the importance and significance of this field for people who have devoted their energies to the development of Black Studies, and a lack of awareness of the extent of the masses of African-heritage peoples throughout the Americas, including the significantly high populations in Brazil and Colombia, as well as in Europe.

Vision

The vision of the Department of Africana Studies at Stony Brook is founded on the recognition of the multiple intellectual cultural, human, as well as economic contributions made by "Africa" (in its widest sense) to the modern, increasingly globalized world. For Africana Studies at Stony Brook, Africa is more than a specific, though vast, geographical location. It embraces multiple migrations of peoples that contributed to the birth of modernity. AFS sees "Africa" as a dynamic and powerful fertilizing life force that is essential, in both symbolic and real terms, to the survival and progress of humanity. AFS is a unique program that presents epistemologies and ontologies radically and fundamentally different from those explored in traditional disciplines. The perspectives, the ways of knowing and of being, examined and projected by AFS have over the past five centuries been to a large extent ignored, neglected, and glossed over. Over the years, Africana Studies at Stony Brook has expanded and deepened its intellectual focus to embrace a vision characterized by an inclusive and harmonious array of interrelated themes and subjects, all contingent on the application of the symbolic potential of Africa and things African as a prism for enhancing human understanding and knowledge. One contention of Africana Studies in the 21st century is that the history, experiences, and perceptions of African peoples worldwide and the insights gained from the experiences are invaluable in light of contemporary movements toward increasing awareness and acceptance of diversity. The Department of Africana Studies provides the basic structure for the concretization of this vision.

The purpose of graduate studies in Africana Studies, centered on concepts of diaspora, interdisciplinarity, and transnationalism, is to foster the acquisition of knowledge about Africa and the African Diaspora: their cultures, their histories, their politics. Our graduate program combines a variety of methodologies, concepts, and theories of the social sciences and humanities to examine people of African descent from territories and regions throughout the world. Our immediate goal is to launch our Master's program, the start of which has been deferred as a result of the loss of faculty and the neglect on the part of administration to provide the required lines and resources. AFS has embarked on a collaborative project with the School for Professional Development to prepare educators for the future who will be sensitized to the needs and realities of the changing demographic landscape of the United States. This project involves the crosslisting of courses leading toward the BA/MAT. AFS has also initiated a Study Abroad program in Ghana, West Africa, and intends developing other Study Abroad programs in the Caribbean, in order to connect and expose students to the world outside the U.S.A. Our long-term goal involves not only the development and expansion of successful Graduate Certificate, MA, and MAT programs but also the founding of a PhD program in African Diaspora Studies. Africana Studies is also exploring ways to meet the needs of a wider learning public who for a variety of reasons cannot

consistently participate in on-site instruction by offering instructional possibilities in distance/on-line undergraduate and graduate courses, initially in collaboration with the School for Professional Development. Our intention is to work across the entire curriculum of the humanities and social sciences, expanding by creating meaningful relationships with other ethnic and area studies unite, and growing eventually into a large center of Black Studies, in collaborative alliance with similar centers at NYU or Columbia University. We also envision obtaining private funding for the hiring of an endowed chair.

Faculty: One of the unique strengths of the AFS department is the cultural relevance of the diverse range of specializations offered by the faculty, all of whom focus on areas that are significant for the intellectual development of the highest quality of students particularly in the humanities and social sciences. Since each faculty member of AFS is linked to other traditional disciplines, AFS provides essential synergy for the deepening of intellectual enquiry across the entire campus and beyond. Stony Brook's AFS faculty members are internationally-renowned scholars, with specializations in a variety of disciplines, who have published innovative, ground-breaking, and pioneering works in fields ranging from ancient Egypt to the contemporary hip-hop era, on topics as diverse as slavery and civil rights, Caribbean immigrants' transnational identities, African American women's history, black British literature, Francophone Caribbean literature in French and in translation, and even incest narratives. A significant service provided by our faculty is our accessibility to graduate students in other departments who often draw on our expertise for participation on their doctoral committees. Also of relevance is the presence in the department of a critical mass of faculty of color which sends a powerful message to students of color of their own intellectual possibilities. It is beyond dispute that without the presence and activity of AFS faculty many topics needed for a full and rounded academic experience would not be debated or covered and students would inevitably be underserved in their educational experience.