

African and African American Studies: Stanford University

The Program in African and African American Studies (AAAS) at Stanford University first became a degree granting program in 1969, the first of such programs at a private university, and the oldest ethnic studies program at Stanford.

First named the "Program in African and Afro-American Studies," the interdisciplinary program was formed by a committee headed by Professor James L. Gibbs, Jr. of the Anthropology Department in 1968, and was the direct result of student activism on campus. The assassination of Dr. Martin L. King, Jr. on April 4, 1968 sparked a new intensity of student protest at Stanford. Just four days later, members of the Black Student Union (BSU) "took the mic" from provost Richard Lyman at a university wide convocation entitled "Colloquium and Plan for Action: Stanford's Response to White Racism." The BSU issued Ten Demands to the university, including demands to create curriculum relevant to Black students. Demand number nine read:

"That the University become actively engaged in the hiring of minority group faculty members; that an immediate meeting be called for the consideration of faculty recruitment; that necessary and sufficient steps be taken to introduce curriculum relevant for minority group members."
(Stanford Daily, April 9, 1968)

Concerned about having their interests reflected in the classroom, the BSU's actions were directed at making changes in the intellectual mission of the university as well as in social and cultural domains. The original committee and subsequent directors have been staunchly committed to responding to these demands.

Dr. St. Clair Drake was the first director (then titled Chairman) of AAAS, brought in by the original committee led by Professor Gibbs who continued to be actively involved by serving on the Steering Committee and the Executive Committee for AAAS, as well as teaching courses in the Program. He was instrumental in designing the AAAS 105 course which is the introductory course required for all majors and minors in AAAS.

Dr. St. Clair Drake served as the first Chairperson of the program from 1969-1976. Along with establishing the curriculum of the program and coordinating faculty involvement, he developed several student initiated courses such as the Workshop in Community Development; the Workshop in Performing Arts; and the Workshop in Economic and Political Analysis.

Thom Rhue served as Interim Director for two years from 1974-1976 (under the guidance of Dr. Drake) while completing his Ph.D. work in the Sociology of Education and subsequently serving as Acting Assistant Professor of Sociology. His tenure was during a politically tumultuous time and he worked to keep student participation in the program high. He concentrated his efforts in trying to meet the needs of a diverse student population consisting of students reflecting Nationalist and Marxist perspectives as well as others with more conservative backgrounds.

Dr. Sylvia Wynter became the next director, serving from 1976-1979. During her tenure as Chairperson, she brought the Committee on Black Performing Arts under the umbrella of AAAS. She also introduced additional courses into the AAAS curriculum.

Dr. Kennell Jackson directed the program from 1980-1989. He developed the Undergraduate Scholars Program which paired undergraduates with faculty members to work on specific research projects. He also implemented a program that brought visiting scholars to campus to address such themes as Black Popular Culture and the Black Intelligentsia.

The next chairperson of the program was Dr. Horace Porter who served from 1990-1995. Professor Porter continued to enhance the intellectual impact of the program by bringing to campus scholars such as Geneva Smitherman, Barbara Fielding, and Martin Kilson. He implemented the annual St. Clair Drake Memorial Lecture. Professor Porter also established the AAAS Executive Committee, replacing the previous Steering Committee.

Dr. Morris Graves served as director of AAAS for two years from 1996-1998. Under the directorship of Graves, the African and Afro-American Studies Majors and Minors Association was developed. He also reorganized the administration of the program to better meet the needs of the students, which included creating an associate director position. Dr. Diann McCants served as the first Associate Director.

Dr. John Rickford took over as the new director of AAAS in the fall of 1998 and worked with Associate Director Vera Grant from 2001. His innovations included the creation of Learning Expeditions, the Black Book Collection Contest, and Archives of interviews with lecturers focusing on Black themes.

Dr. Lawrence Bobo continued to strengthen the curriculum from 2005-2007. With Associate Director, Vera Grant, he led a Learning Expedition to Paris France.

In 2008, Dr. Michele Elam began "Race Forward," a university-wide initiative that integrates the critical study of race with studies of faith, the environment and public health. The initiative sparks innovative scholarship, curriculum, and conversations through lecture series and symposia. She worked with Associate Director Dr. Cheryl Brown from 2009-2010.

In 2010, Dr. Arnetha Ball added a fourth theme to the "Race Forward" initiative. Together with Associate Director Dr. Cheryl Brown they hosted a number lectures, panels and events throughout the 2011-2012 year to address issues of race in education. In the spring of 2012, Dr. Ball, developed a new community oriented comparative research program focused on supporting students who want to do comparative research of communities nationally and internationally.

In 2013, Dr. H. Samy Alim began his term as director. Professor Alim began a university-wide initiative "Race in Post-Obama America: New Approaches to New Problems in "the New America." In the Spring of 2015 he co-taught a course entitled, "Race, Policing & Mass Incarceration" as part of this three year initiative.