

Regional

Black studies programs aid in understanding U.S.

Black studies and African-American study programs are now a common feature in colleges and universities. But what do students who go through these programs learn, and how does the experience shape their views of society?

"I think that what we are trying to do under the banner of black studies is to not just study the history of Africans and African Americans in the United States, but to look at a slightly broader spectrum," said Prince Wells, associate professor in the department of music and director of the black studies program at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. Wells said that there is widespread support for black studies at SIUE.

"The faculty are very interested in it," he said. "We have an advisory committee and they all know about it and they support it. We are trying to build a program as well, the black studies minor. So the university is recognizing the value of a program like this. The community seems to be very responsive and welcoming to the development of a black studies minor."

While the program is called black studies at SIUE, other institutions use various names, such as Africa-American studies and Africana studies. There is also an African studies minor available at SIUE. But what exactly do these different names mean? Do they emphasize different subject matter? After all, during the colonization of America by the Europeans, Africans landed not only in North America, but also in the Caribbean, Central America and South America. To what extent is it important to understand the whole phenomenon of the African diaspora in order to interpret the cultural, social and political climate in the United States today?

"I firmly believe that our past truly does influence our present," said Sandra Weissinger, an assistant professor in the department of sociology and criminal justice at SIUE, and a member of the black studies program. "Without any understanding of the diaspora, without understanding the struggles it took to get here and labor through, we can't speak to the social issues or resiliencies of today. Really I would argue that black history is



Photo by Michael Nathe

Professor Prince Wells, left, and Dr. Sandra Weissinger, center, being interviewed by Aldemaro Romero Jr.

American history, but we have excluded it or not spoken to it as much as is needed."

Wells said that he thinks that scholars, regardless of race, are much more open to looking at the African-American experience today than they were in the past. And given all the different academic disciplines that intersect with black studies, one wonders if being interdisciplinary is a challenge or an opportunity. "An opportunity," Weissinger quickly responded. "We are putting forward diversity and inclusion, and part of that, not just through

teaching lessons to the students, is showing them how that operates, whether it be diversity by race or diversity by discipline. So I feel like if I were to work with a music person like Professor Wells, we would have a really phenomenal course. I would teach the social justice issues, but he would show us how jazz and other musical forms were part of the movements, and in fact they were a movement within themselves."

A common misconception outside the walls of the university is that these

courses are taught only by, and only to, African Americans, but that is not the case. "We recently have heard about a new Ph.D. program on the outskirts of Chicago," said Weissinger. "I believe it's at Northwestern, for black studies, and there you will find black students, other students of color and white students as well. Even when I was in school there were people who would teach black studies courses who would identify as white. As I said before, this should not be something that is only for black students. This

Aldemaro Romero Jr. College Talk

is American history, which means I don't see why we would not want more and more diverse students in the black studies program."

Given the recent events in Ferguson, Mo., one wonders if they are changing the tone and subject matter in the conversation in black studies courses. After all, a recent survey published in The New York Times shows a huge divide in perception of what happened in Ferguson, depending on whether the respondent was black or white.

"I think it is the lack of education and the lack of familiarity of the history of African Americans here that helps create a divide like that," said Wells. "I just find it hard to believe that if people really knew the plight of African Americans in this country that they would not readily see what these people are protesting and what they are talking about." Wells has also seen changes in academia when it comes to race relations.

"I think the attitudes towards race here on campus pretty much reflect the attitudes in this region," he said. "I think the difference is that here on campus we are in a position to create policies and practices that kind of address different disparities and so forth. We have dialogues and we have classes and academic areas like black studies, women studies and African studies."

"When I was here in 1971, it was not a place that was sensitive to the interests of black students," said Wells. "We socialized amongst ourselves because there was nowhere else. We would go to East St. Louis, or St. Louis. You generally didn't have entertainment geared toward the black community. So the university is a lot more sensitive to diversity now."

Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.