

Dialogue in Pan African Studies: Interviewing Emeritus Professor David Covin

by

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IMZ: First tell us when or how you arrived at California State University in Sacramento, hence; also please give us a brief biography of yourself (David Covin is Emeritus Professor of Government and Pan African Studies at California State University, Sacramento)?

DC: I was born in Chicago and raised in Evanston, Illinois. I graduated from the University of Illinois, Urbana/Champaign, in 1962, with a major in political science. I received an M.A. in political science from Colorado University in 1966. While I was at CU, I was co-Chair of the Boulder chapter of CORE. I did voter registration work in Jackson, Mississippi and Birmingham, Alabama. I also participated in the March on Montgomery in 1965. From 1965 - 1967, I taught political science, social science, and U.S. history at Bakersfield College, in Bakersfield California. I was married in Boulder, Colorado, and our two daughters were born in Bakersfield. I received a PhD in political science from Washington State University in 1970. At WSU, I was one of the founders of the Black Student Union (BSU), one of the founders of the Black Studies Program, and I designed and taught the first course in Black politics taught at the university. I was one of the original faculty members of the university's Black Studies Program.

In the fall of 1969 I was interviewed for a teaching position at what was then Sacramento State College. For the college to make a job offer, I had to have the approval of the government department, the Black Studies Program, and the BSU. While the government department would make the offer, the position would be a joint appointment in Government and Black Studies. Nevertheless, the organization which had the final say over whether I would receive an offer or not, was the BSU. I was hired in the late Spring of 1970.

While classes didn't start at Sac State until late September, I wanted to get involved in the Black community as soon as possible, so I arrived in Sacramento in early June. Within a week, facilitated by one of the BSU members, Grantland Johnson, I was deeply engaged in neighborhood organizing. I also used the connections I developed in that work to build community involvement into the classes I would design and teach at the college.

Six of us were hired into the Black Studies Program that year. There were already seventeen Black faculty members on campus, so our hiring increased the Black faculty by slightly over a third. Of the earlier Black faculty at the college, eleven had some degree of affiliation with the Black Studies Program. Most of the seventeen had been hired during the previous two years. The six of us coming in at one time had a tremendous impact, both on the campus, and on Sacramento, as all of us were hired full-time, in tenure-track positions. We all had strong community-based orientations, and we brought them into the program with us. Of the twelve of us who had full-time joint appointments in Black Studies, four were African nationals, one-third of the total.

IMZ: In retrospect, how do you think the activities at CSUS at the time reflected or was unique to the regional and national thrust to implement 'Black Studies' into the curriculum of higher education in the U.S.?

DC: The efforts to implement Black Studies at Sac State were very much a part of the national and regional efforts to incorporate Black Studies into the curricula of higher educational institutions across the state and country. The BSU was the driving force in the process at Sac State. The new faculty hires - most of whom had been engaged in similar struggles elsewhere - were also part and parcel of the movement. All of us came from outside of Sacramento, and outside of California, so we represented - in our persons - the national and international scope of the movement. Here, we became immersed in a very definite local effort which was - nonetheless - very well aware of, and influenced by events in the statewide, national, and international arenas.

IMZ: What was the social-political climate before Pan African Studies arrived at CSUS?

DC: Immediately before Black Studies arrived at Sac State, the atmosphere was one of upheaval, ferment, change, and challenging established patterns - which is precisely what led to the arrival of Black Studies. Prior to the late sixties, the atmosphere was as placid as it was elsewhere. Yet the same factors that were germinating the incipient elements of a new and dynamic social and political consciousness were at work in Sacramento, and all over the land: the Civil Rights Movement, the Free Speech Movement, growing opposition to the War in Viet Nam, the Women's Movement, the Black Power Movement, the Long Hot Summers, and other social forces arising at the time.

IMZ: I read 'Pan African Studies' as the title of the program at CSUS, why was that emphasis selected and how has it served the overall objectives and mission of the program?

DC: Pan African Studies was adopted as the name of the program in 1972 so that the name would more accurately reflect what we were doing. Four of us were from Africa, teaching courses, and doing research on Africa: Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania. All of us were at least partially aware of the scope of the African diaspora, and actively engaged in learning more about it.

Finally, we conceived of ourselves - regardless of our origins - as being African peoples. We believed that African influences had immense impacts on shaping us and our views of the world. We also believed that at that time, early in the development of the discipline, in a country which viewed itself as the center of the world, that it was easy for people to associate "Black Studies" as a discipline which dealt solely with African descendants in the U.S. We wanted to make it explicit that our vision was much broader than that. We understood the African presence to span the globe. That was the mission we expressed to the external world and to ourselves. The BSU became the Pan African Student Union (PASU) and the Black Studies Program became the Pan African Studies Program.

IMZ: As you merged into the leadership of Pan African Studies, in what ways were you able to enlist the aid and support of people to build the program?

DC: Both at the time when our program began, in 1969, and when we were added to it, in 1970, it was easy to build support for the program for two principal reasons: (1) The BSU roots in the community and continuing intense and widespread engagement in the community; and (2) it was in the air - the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power Movement, the Black Student Movement, the anti-war movement, the Women's Movement. People went to hear political speakers the same way they later went to rock concerts. Moreover, then - even the music was political - "A Choice of Colors," "What's Goin' On?" The whole environment induced participation. We aggressively encouraged that participation. When the university administration (Sacramento State College became CSU Sacramento in 1972), attempted to crack down on PASU and PAS, we did not hesitate to invite community people into the President's office, his Conference Room, Faculty Senate meetings - and they did not hesitate to come. They were game changers, and the University administration, the Faculty Senate, and reactionary students, backed off.

Also, we actively built the community into the Program. The drama troop, the Sons/Ancestors Players, was composed both of student and non-student participants - as actors, musicians, set designers, set builders, technicians, make-up artists. The productions were not just university productions, they were community productions. They brought huge influxes of Black people onto the campus, not only to participate in creating the plays, but also to see them, to delight in them.

IMZ: How did you create a way for people to contribute to making something extraordinary happen at CSUS via Pan African Studies?

DC: Poets from the university - students and faculty - went into classrooms and public settings all over the area. PAS initiated public Kwanzaas in Sacramento. A Beautiful and moving Kwanzaa ritual was written by the PAS poet, Eugene Redmond, and was performed every year - in the community - by the Sons/Ancestors Players. PAS Poets recruited non-university poets and musicians to participate in all their readings and performances.

I taught a class called “Black Community Political Action.” Students in the class had to become active participants in Black organizations (non-Black students had to participate in non-Black organizations or public sector entities which supported Black initiatives). Each student also had to conduct a study of the organization she or he participated in, and provide a copy of the study to the organization. PASU encouraged Black students to participate in Black community organizations and Black political campaigns, and encouraged the organizations and campaigns to recruit Black student participants and to accept them as interns.

We spoke all over the community, at every imaginable type of gathering, and sponsored many ourselves. We actively participated in community organizations. We joined in the formation of many community organizations. We advised political campaigns and worked in political campaigns.

On campus, the Black Staff & Faculty Organization became an active and effective advocate for Black employees and students. We emphasized collaborative efforts between staff, faculty, and students, in which each of us had the others’ backs.

IMZ: During your time at the university, what university or off campus/community resources were at the university to help you build the Pan African Studies program at California State University at Sacramento?

DC: We used every resource available to us - both on and off campus. Off campus we used the State Legislature, the California Legislative Black Caucus, state administrative offices which were supportive of us - for much of that period Wilson Riles was the State Superintendent of Education. Mervin Dymally was first a state legislator and then Lieutenant Governor of the state. He also was one of our students. He got his Master’s Degree from Sac State. We used the resources of local governments which were accessible to us through Black office-holders. The anti-poverty program in its myriad dimensions was a valuable resource. On campus, we used programs such as PAS and EOP, and individual faculty and administrators who were supportive of our objectives to provide valuable support, material and non-material. First BSU, later PASU, were not only supportive, but were integrated into our operations - often leading them. We recruited, hired, and absorbed various support personnel, offices and other meeting spaces, travel funds, and library purchases. We supported each other for promotions, funding, travel opportunities, grants, and in grievances.

IMZ: Do you think the original mission of community service has been diminished in ‘Black Studies’ over time; and if no, why, and alternatively, if yes, why?

For the most part, Black Studies programs and departments have become less community oriented than they were initially. There are many reasons for this. One is that the departments have become more incorporated into the academic structures and procedures of colleges and universities, more integrated into the “standard model.”

Faculty members no longer have to answer to Black communities and Black student organizations. Students no longer play a significant part in the recruiting and hiring of Black faculty and staff. Indeed, Black student organizations of the character of the BSUs of the late 1960s and early 1970s, for all practical purposes, no longer exist on college campuses. Faculty and staff report to deans, other administrators, and to faculty and administrative committees. Their careers are controlled both by university hierarchies and their respective academic disciplines - particularly those disciplines deemed to be appropriately rigorous (which for most of academia ,excludes Black Studies). Additionally, the external environment has changed dramatically. Most of that change has not been beneficial to Black studies - whether it is the prevailing conditions and moods of the Black population itself, Black popular culture, the extreme right-wing domination of the country's political dialogue and program, or the triumph of both oligarchy and unfettered individualism.

IMZ: How do you envision the future of Pan African Studies in the academy in relationship to the current political dynamics of the U.S.?

DC: My analysis is that we, ourselves, best control our own destinies. In order to do that, and to do it in the midst of this oppressive environment, we must fully develop our own collective capacities - at the local, state, national, and international levels. It is imperative both that we self-consciously invest in ourselves - time, energy, money, intellect, and belief; and that we invent ways to communicate and cooperate, our many variations, contradictions, and rivalries notwithstanding.

At the same time, we must fend off the vast range of external threats to our well-being, which would drive us into an intolerable future. We must use every political, economic, social, ideological, and cultural tool at our disposal, to keep the wolf from our throats, while we create of ourselves such a presence, and such a dynamic and innovative force, that we will no longer, and nevermore serve as a stepping stone for tyrants.

IMZ: What advice do you have for those who would like to be a leader in a Pan African Studies program or department?

DC: For anyone who wants to be a leader in Pan African Studies, I would suggest a careful examination of motives. Don't get into it unless you are totally committed, and have a vision for our people that encompasses our full complexity and variation, and unless you are willing to engage in struggle - both over the best courses of action to take, including the need to heed the wisdom of others; and with the external demons who would tear the flesh from our bones, and the hope from our spirits.

IMZ: Thank you, I am sure our readers will gain a new insight into the workings of Pan African Studies inside the academy and within the community.