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BLACK STUDIES CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT COURSE EVALUATIONS

CONFERENCE I: HISTORY AND POLITICAL-ECONOMY

October 1-3, 1981

INSTITUTE OF THE BLACK WORLD  
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The Institute of the Black World  
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African History Course Syllabi Evaluation  
Report

by

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The opportunity to read the course syllabi of one's professional colleagues from across the country is a rare privilege indeed. The responsibility to evaluate the material requires a critical discussion of the subject matter but with a sensitivity to the diversity which is manifested in Black Studies nation-wide. I trust that this evaluation report on course syllabi in African history reflects both elements of the responsibility in a constructive manner that contributes towards advancing the quality of our field.

As an evaluator, some prefatory remarks are in order concerning my own credentials and perspective in the discipline of history and the field of African studies. My professional training has been in African history with a research specialization in the history of nineteenth-century Liberia and West Africa generally. I began teaching in 1970 as a member of the Black Studies Department at the California State University at San Jose. Since 1972 I have been on the faculty of the Department of Afro-American Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and a member of the African Studies Program at that institution. My conceptual approach to African history is informed by an emphasis on the linkage between Africa and Afro-American communities of the Diaspora. I perceive the significance of this linkage as part of the

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intellectual basis for the field of Black Studies and as such I believe courses in African history offered in Black Studies curriculums should reflect this fundamental theme. In fact, from my perspective, it is precisely in this area that Black Studies can make its most innovative theoretical contribution to traditional research and curriculum formulations.

Making judgments about curriculum content solely on the basis of an examination of course syllabi is an endeavour that can easily lead to erroneous assumptions and thus faulty conclusions. There is no nationally-accepted format for preparing a course syllabus; professors tend to develop their own approach influenced in part by departmental tradition at their respective institutions. Thus some syllabi are quite detailed - specifying course objectives, intellectual assumptions, subject themes, lecture topics, required as well as supplementary or recommended readings and even listing films, slides, and other teaching aids employed by the professor during the semester. By contrast, other syllabi are less comprehensive, in some cases offering only an outline of major themes to be covered. It would be a mistake to draw the conclusion that there is always a direct correlation between syllabi and actual course content. For example, a truly innovative and rigorous course might well be introduced on the first day of classes by a very modest, and even sketchy, syllabus. The following commentary is made with this caveat in mind.

Description of Course Syllabi

The course syllabi in African history that I examined for this evaluation fall into three broad categories: (1) syllabi for one-semester survey courses that span the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial periods; (2) syllabi for two-semester course sequences that cover the same chronology as the surveys but allow for a more in-depth treatment of the subject material than presumably would