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Union hosts annual conference for African Studies Association

By **Kate Collins** - Apr 16, 2015

Union hosted the 40th annual New York African Studies Association Conference on Friday, April 3. Academics from all over New York gathered to participate in the conference, focused on “Africa, Its Diaspora, and Laws.”

Along with Union, the Albany College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences and Albany Law School assisted in hosting the event.

The focus of the conference consisted of a broad area of relevant topics.

“Laws” were defined in the broadest sense, including not only the usual definitions of statutory, common, indigenous, religious and constitutional law, but also social and scientific laws, like economic laws and social Darwinism.

Topics for panels included: “Media and Africa,” “Performing Art and Africa” and “Gender Identities and Ethnic Identities in Africa.”

The organizing committee for the 2015 conference consisted of ACPHS Professor Kevin Hickey, Albany Law School Professor Peter Halewood, Associate Professor of French at Union Cheikh M. Ndiaye and Director of Africana Studies and Associate Professor of Sociology at Union Deidre Hill Butler.

Ndiaye enjoyed all of the panel discussions he saw, stating, “The ones I had the chance to listen to were all special I thought; each discussed an original topic with such passion.”

He added that Union students’ presentations, based on their senior research projects, were “brilliant.”

Union’s Victor Murphy ’15 and Erika Steuer ’15 each made personal presentations at the NYASA Conference. Steuer presented at both “Students Global Awareness: Union College Mini Term Programs” and “Union College Student Research Panel.”

She not only presented her thesis work for the first time, but also was also able to learn about two other Africana related theses.

When reflecting on the conference, she emphasized how much Union focuses on “challenging research and the importance of educating others on [her] personal research, especially in a lesser-known field such as Africana studies.”

She stated that listening to other people’s experiences abroad touched her personally, due to her passion for African cultures and the African Diaspora.

Both Ndiaye and Steuer accentuated how grateful they were that Union hosted the New York African Studies Association’s 40th conference, and how much it personally meant to them.

Each individually stated the conference’s continuous growth is a huge step in the right direction for Africana studies. According to them, NYASA has an extremely bright future.

According to the conference program, the beginning of NYASA can be linked to a variety of important events in history: the Cold War; the independence of various African countries; the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S.; and locally, the evolution of the SUNY system, the internationalization of the curricula at SUNY New Paltz, and the formation of the SUNY African Studies Faculty Association.

In the ’50s and ’60s, the concept of area studies developed in U.S. higher education. Coinciding with this was the growth of African studies programs with Title VI funding.

At this time, major African studies programs were emerging at universities such as Northwestern University, UCLA, the University of Wisconsin, Indiana University and Boston University.

Along with this, the ’60s saw a tremendous growth in public university education, as youths began enrolling fullforce into the SUNY system from across the United States.

At this time, leaders in New York were recognizing the need to internationalize thinking processes, according to the conference program.

This resulted in the infusion of information on Africa, Asian and Latin America studies at the high school level. At the university level, SUNY Central created ISWA, an International Studies and World Affairs unit, with some funding to initiate and support SUNY faculty associations, including African Studies.

At this time, a conference of various units of the State University of New York was held on June 1, 1968, at SUNY New Paltz, where the decision was made to form the SUNY African Studies Faculty Association.

The conference program states that that same year, the executive of the SUNY African Studies Faculty Association decided to hold a special meeting at the conference to “sponsor the formation of a statewide African Studies organization.” At the founding meeting on Nov. 2, 1973, the creation of the NYASA occurred.

On the topic of the transformation and growth of Africa and African American programs, Ndiaye stated that, “education in America is no longer Euro-centered.”

Specifically, at Union, our curriculum offers a variety of courses while also creating spaces for students' intellectual and personal growth.

He went on to talk about how there is always room to attract more majors, including interdepartmental majors and minors here at Union, in the Africana Studies Program.

With the support of major private institutions and the growth of African and African American programs elsewhere in the SUNY system, NYASA conferences have occurred from St. Johns University to RIT to SUNY Plattsburgh.