



DR. STEPHEN MIDDLETON

Four years and growing

MSU's African American Studies program attracts more students and steady footing

BY SLIM SMITH



(1ST ROW) LEFT TO RIGHT: LINDA MILLER, ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT; AARON ROLLINS, GRADUATE TEACHING ASSISTANT; JEANICE LOUINE, GRADUATE TEACHING ASSISTANT
 (2ND ROW) LEFT TO RIGHT: JASON WARD, HISTORY PROFESSOR; DONALD SHAFFER, AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDIES AND ENGLISH PROFESSOR; MICHAEL WILLIAMS, AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDIES AND HISTORY PROFESSOR; STEPHEN MIDDLETON, DIRECTOR AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDIES, PROFESSOR OF HISTORY
 (3RD ROW) LEFT TO RIGHT: K. C. MORRISON, PROFESSOR AND HEAD, POLITICAL SCIENCE AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION/SENIOR FELLOW, AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDIES; KWEKU AINUSON, PROFESSOR, AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDIES AND POLITICAL SCIENCE; MATTHEW HUGHEY, PROFESSOR, SOCIOLOGY

A farmer wouldn't scatter his seed one day, then return to the field the next day and wonder why the corn isn't as high as an elephant's eye. So it is with the African American Studies program at Mississippi State.

This spring, six MSU students will graduate with a minor in African American Studies, a number that might sound small but delights program founder Dr. Stephen Middleton. "It's the highest number we've had so far," he says.

MSU's African American Studies program, the first in the state, is approaching the end of its fourth year. And while the "crop" might seem modest, Middleton says those half-

dozen students represent the leading edge of a department that is growing steadily.

"It's been a very interesting process," says Middleton, who taught at North Carolina State for 18 years before being lured away by then-MSU President Robert "Doc" Fogle-song to create the African American Studies program.

"President Fogle-song came from a military background," says Middleton, who officially began at MSU on July 1, 2007. "He had been in the Air Force for more than 30 years and, as you know, the military is one of the most diverse bodies in America. When he came to Mississippi State and there was no African-American studies program in a state

that has a large percentage of black people and a state that has a historic past when it comes to civil rights, I think he really saw it as an opportunity. He encouraged the faculty to establish an African American Studies program."

In many respects, Middleton was an ideal candidate. Not only was he a noted scholar in African-American studies, he could draw from his own experiences growing up near Charleston, S.C.

"I was from that sharecropper era," he says. "I was picking cotton when I was 6, plowing behind a mule when I was 14. I went to a segregated school."

Under most circumstances, leaving North Carolina State would have been difficult for Middleton, who was a professor of history.

"I had a great job at North Carolina State. I had worked my way through the ranks for 18 years and they tried hard to keep me there," Middleton said. "But when President Foglesong called, I realized what a rare opportunity it was – a chance to help Mississippi State establish something that did not exist."

The African American Studies program began offering courses in 2008.

"At first, it was just me," Middleton recalls. "We had no staff, no office space. At first, we were able to identify some courses that were already being offered in other departments – courses in history and literature – and make them a part of our program. It was the start."

Today, the African American Studies program features 10 courses, including history, literature and psychology. The program recently hired a social psychologist. In addition, an adjunct professor teaches a course in African Americans and the law.

The program now has five teaching positions, including Middleton's, that are exclusively assigned to the A.A.S., plus two adjunct professors and three affiliated faculty. In addition, the program's graduate-degree focus allows for graduate students in other disciplines to teach courses. In return, those students are qualified to teach in their fields of expertise but also in African American fields.

To earn a minor at MSU, a student must complete 18 hours in the program. Middleton says the ultimate goal is to offer A.A.S. as a major.

The steady growth of the program is not something that

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Middleton takes for granted. In fact, not long after he arrived at MSU a crisis emerged that could have ended the program in its infancy.

"Six months after I got here, President Foglesong was gone," says Middleton. "In fact, that first year, the university president, our dean and our provost were all gone. Naturally, that creates some concern."

But while the faces changed, the support for the program did not.

"I can say, without reservation, that we've had wonderful support from our administration," Middleton says. "We have a budget, staff, the things we need. Our administration has been nothing but supportive."

He did encounter one unusual hurdle.

"It's a unique situation in the sense that the idea for the program did not germinate among the student population," Middleton says. "So all of the sudden there is a program that students didn't even know existed. They had to catch up."

Today, MSU offers three Introduction to African American Studies courses each semester, and they are all filled.

But the focus of the program is not only on students, Middleton says.

"Mississippi State is a unique opportunity for us," he says. We are a land grant university and, by definition, the people's university. So one of the things we are trying to do with our program is to reach out to our state and community, especially the African American community.

"The white community is aware that this is their university, but I think maybe some of the African Americans here, especially the older ones, might still think of this as the big white school in the state. We are reaching out to the African American community and we are encouraged by what we are seeing in that area."

In addition to building the program along conventional lines – adding courses, offering a major and expanding its popular scholar-in-resident program – Middleton wants to ensure that what is being taught and learned can help the larger community as well.

"We want people to benefit from the production of knowledge in our program," he says. "That's why we do research. It's a part of our land grant mission: We want to extend our research beyond the walls of our university." ■