The Fields and Functions of African American Studies and Public Policy

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If detrimental effects on African American communities are to be neutralized, they must be countered by an effective Afrikan American controlled network. This network must provide “the powers that be” in the Afrikan American community with the relevant information, intelligence, strategies and tactics for advancing the community’s interest and for liberating African peoples.

Amos N. Wilson

Public Policy . . . is whatever governments choose to do or not to do.

Thomas Dye

This chapter is a preliminary discussion of the role(s) African American Studies (AAS) and Public Policy (PP) can assume through applied research, public discourse, policy formation, and community partnership. On the basis of our experiences in African American studies and public policy, we can explore the dynamic ways in which African American social scientists and policy leaders can collaborate to formulate, implement, and evaluate policies relevant to African American communities. The accomplishment of this goal requires the intersection of both disciplines to extend and challenge the traditional boundary confines of both academia and community. African American studies and public policy can provide the framework to interpret the social political dynamics among decision makers in communities, universities, governmental agencies, and other organizations.

African American Studies and Its Social-Community Responsibility

The core principles of African American studies embrace a commitment to serve the community. The discipline of African American studies focuses on
(1) experiences; (2) problems and solutions; and (3) prospects of individuals and groups whose heritage, wherever they may be, is African. The experiential dimension of the discipline examines the historical record of black people in Africa and the African Diaspora. African American studies also examines the sociological, philosophical, and psychological problems confronting African Americans and Africans (seen as independent and interacting groups). In addition, the discipline deals with theoretical questions including (a) conceptual theory and thinking for the best approach to studying the black experience; (b) analytical theory or sets of ideas and concepts for studying the black experience; and (c) strategic or social change theories. As in any discipline, the academic and intellectual components in African American studies frequently overlap since it is impossible in practice to completely isolate them from one another.

African American Studies

Since its institutional beginning, many perspectives on the purpose and function of African American studies have been presented. According to Nathan Hare, “The main motivation of Black Studies is to entice Black students to greater involvement in the educational process. Black Studies is, above all, a pedagogical device.” Vivian Gordon states that “the curriculum of Black Studies must help the student develop his or her skills in the use of the tools which are important to both a critical analysis of interaction of the past and present and to the students’ future participation in the analyses of factors which affect the life of Black people in America.” Other scholars in the discipline (Adams, Azibo, Karenga, Pentony, Turner, and Walters) argued further that black studies should develop and facilitate racial awareness and pride among black people. In the 1970s and 1980s Cruse, Daniels, Gordon, Kershaw, and Hare argued that black studies must be communally based, community controlled, and committed to be a vehicle for social change. After more than four decades, these arguments are still relevant to the purposes of African American studies. In a sense, part of the growth and development of African American studies comes from the fact that we have been traditionally left out or neglected from public policies debates and decisions. Today, there is still an indisputable need for African American studies to develop theoretically grounded, empirically sound, and cutting-edge research covering all aspects of African Americans’ lives to formulate public policy to change their life experiences.

African American Studies as a Research Enterprise

Research should be conducted to identify what is needed to improve the condition of our communities. If research is to provide reliable knowledge that can guide and support our discipline, African American studies researchers will need to have skills of research, evaluation, and will have to use theories of the discipline to analyze and solve the problems facing our communities. The focus