UH students advocate for black-studies expert

It’s high time to fill the role of African-American specialist vacant since 2013, some say

By Susan Essoyan
.sessoyan@staradvertiser.com

Rallying behind the slogan “Black Studies Matter,” students at the University of Hawaii are pushing to fill a faculty vacancy for an African-American specialist in the Ethnic Studies Department.

Jacques Brunvil, co-founder and president of the Afrocentric Society of Hawaii, a new student group at UH Manoa, said it might be tough to fill the position, but many people feel it’s vital both for students and the broader community.

“When it comes to ethnic studies, you would think that especially during our time of ‘Black Lives Matter,’ and when we have our first black president and all these different racial issues, that such a position would be the most important to provide in the department,” he said.

“It is not just something for ethnic-studies students, and it’s not just something for the African-American community,” added Brunvil, a senior majoring in political science. “We can also learn from the different color dynamics

Please see STUDIES, A7
Studies

Continued from A1

come from racism against blacks, in the same way we have racism against Micronesian here."

The position has re-
mained empty since Elisa
Joy White, a tenured associ-
ate professor at UH, left in
July 2013 for a faculty post
at the University of Califor-
nia, Davis. A lecturer cov-
ered one of her courses the
following year. And then last
year came a hiring freeze at
UH Manoa.

Denise Konan, dean of the
UH College of Social Sci-
ciences, said a lack of funding
has prevented filling the
position, which is one of nu-
erous faculty vacancies at
the college. The base budget of
the college has been re-
duced by about 12 percent,
or $1.8 million, since 2009, while salaries and other costs have been going up, she said.

"Since 2011, 10 instruc-
tional faculty positions have
been cut from the college,
and we have additional va-
cancies of 22.5 positions
that we have not filled be-
cause of budget con-
straints," she said. "It is a
collegewide challenge."

The Ethnic Studies De-
partment, founded in 1970,
grew out of the civil rights
struggles of the 1960s. It fo-
cuses on issues of race, eth-
nicity, class and migration.

"Since the Ethnic Studies
Department was estab-
lished, African-American
studies was a core part of
what we offered, and it re-
ally is a fundamental part of
any ethnic-studies program
in the nation," department
Chairman Ty Kawika Tengan
said.

While the department has
managed to cover some
courses, it is not the same as
having a full-time profes-
sor doing original research
on the intersection of the Af-
rican-American and Hawaii
experiences, and supporting
students dealing with racial
and inequality, he said.

"Students are really hun-
gry for this opportunity to
reflect on the Black Lives
movement and how it af-
fects them here," Tengan
said. "If the university is
committed to diversity and
social justice, then it needs to
make sure that there is
space for African-American
students and African-Ameri-
can studies."

In filling positions, the col-
lege focuses on three priori-
ties, Konan said. One is
areas where there is high
student need for courses.

The second is for special ex-
eralists that is important for
a discipline. The third is for
areas where the university is
uniquely positioned to be
outstanding.

"So, for example, this year
we hired in the area of Na-
tive Hawaiian and Pacific
island archaeology, which is
an area where we have a
world-class reputation, and
in addition there is a high
student demand," she said.

"For ethnic studies an Af-
rican-American specialist is
really core for their disci-
pline, so we have that as a
priority, too."

Even with the vacancy, the
ratio of faculty to students in
ethnic studies, one of the
smallest departments, is far
higher than some other de-
partments in the College of
Social Science, according to
data from the Manoa Insti-
tutional Research Office.

Ethnic studies has 7.5 fac-
ulty positions and had 31
student majors in the fall. It
granted 11 bachelor’s de-
grees in fiscal year 2015.

By contrast, the sociology
department has 11.5 faculty
positions and had 213 stu-
dent majors and 98 bache-
lor’s degrees in the last fiscal
year, the data show. Psychol-
ogy has 16 faculty members
and had 298 majors and 195
bachelor’s degrees.

Regardless of the num-
bers, Konan said, the cam-
pus needs African-American
expertise.

"While the courses may
not be heavily subscribed, I
do truly value that we have
on our faculty expertise in
this area of the Af-
rican-American experience," she said. "It is an important
aspect of race in our nation
and here in the state of Ha-
waii as well."

While the courses may not
be heavily subscribed, I do
truly value that we have
on our faculty expertise in
this area of the African-
American experience. It is
an important aspect of
race in our nation
and here in the state of
Hawaii as well.

Denise Konan
Dean of the UH College of
Social Sciences

"Having that expertise
doesn’t add to our diversity,
but having someone in that
field that can speak to the
issues of the African-
American experience
even here in Hawaii but
also nationally is of strong
value beyond the class-
room.

An external review of the
course programs is under-
way, and departments have
been asked to provide their
priorities and rationale by
mid-April, she said. The bud-
get is still up in the air.

Students have been try-
ing different tactics to bring vi-
bility to the issue. They
marched in the Martin Lu-
ther King Jr. Day parade and
have been circulating peti-
tions.

The Ethnic Studies
Student Association and the
Afrocentric Society held a
well-attended “talk story”
session titled “Black Studies
Matter” on campus last
month.

Student delegations have
met with the dean as well as
Chancellor Robert Bley-Vro-
man. Resolutions urging the
university to fill the position
have been introduced at the
Legislature.

White used to teach
Courses including “The Afri-
can American Experience”
and “Contemporary African
Descendants” in ethnic studies.
The former has been offered
intersessionally, and the latter
has been reclassified as "Con-
temporary Diasporas" since
her departure, Tengan said.

Other departments at the
university also offer various
relevant courses, including
“African American History”
in the History Department
and “African American Lit-
erature” in the English De-
partment.

Christian Stettler, who is
earning a master’s in social
work, is taking an interdisci-
plinary class called “Ameri-
can Punishment” this
semester. The last several
sessions will be taught by
civil rights activist Angela
Davis, a professor emerita at
University of California,
Santa Cruz.

“it is alarming that UH Ma-
noa has decided to leave the
Ethnic Studies Department’s
African-American specialist
untitled,” he said. “Consider-
ning that a budget is basically
a list of priorities, we should
be extremely concerned by
this regression. With civil
rights legend Angela Y. Davis
on her way to campus for an
extended stay, we ought to
be embarrassed.”

http://staradvertiser.newspaperdirect.com/epaper/services/PrintA...900000000001001&paper=A3&key=B8f5Vxbv0C/qDDun+2xPzw==&scale=true