

# A Move Toward Black Studies

## Undeterred by critic, SUNY Old Westbury aims to create minor

By Olivia Winslow

STAFF WRITER

SUNY Old Westbury is working to develop a minor in African-American studies, undeterred by a SUNY trustee's controversial remarks that many such courses were merely feel-good programs carrying an anti-American bias and lacking in scholarship.

Old Westbury officials said the college has never had an African-American studies department, but has offered courses on various aspects of the African-American experience.

Aubrey Bonnett, vice president of academic affairs, said Old Westbury took a "mainstreaming approach" where black studies, among other subject matter such as women's studies and other ethnic groups, are "infused in everything we do."

Rosalyn Baxandall, chair of the American studies department who is coordinating the faculty effort to create an African-American studies minor, said professors "integrate it [African-American studies] all over the curriculum." For example, she said, "every history course we teach and every media course we teach has sections about African-Americans. All our literature courses read literature by African-Americans, so we don't really need a major."

Bonnett and Baxandall said the decision to offer a minor in black studies, which would most likely be available by spring 2003 after faculty approval, was a response to student demand from previous years. It was not, they said, a reaction to trustee Candace de Russy's critical comments earlier this year in which she panned black studies programs in general and called those at SUNY Stony Brook and Old Westbury lax. Her comments caused a furor among faculty throughout the SUNY system who called for her resignation.

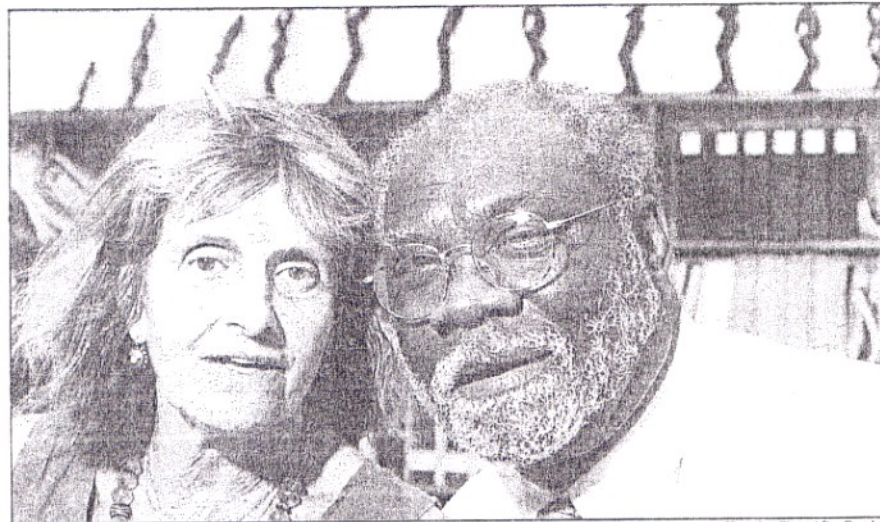
Faculty interest in establishing the minor, Baxandall acknowledged, however, did increase "somewhat" after publication of de Russy's comments in *Newsday* Feb. 4.

"I think de Russy's comments made us aware of a hole in our offerings," said Naomi Rosenthal, chair of Old Westbury's faculty senate. "Many of us at Old Westbury were struck by her assumption that because Old Westbury has a large number of so-called minority students . . . and because we have one of the highest percentages of faculty of color of any SUNY institution, that she just assumed that we're an inferior institution . . . And that is a sad commentary."

Baxandall was among those who suggested de Russy was ill-informed about how Old Westbury structured black studies courses. "She . . . assumed because we're a school that has a third of the students that are African-American, that we must have an African-American studies department . . . We don't even have it."

De Russy, of Bronxville, responded in a recent interview that she was aware that Old Westbury did not have a black studies department and that such courses turned up in several subjects. But of Old Westbury's decision to establish the black studies minor, de Russy said: "I do believe a better course of action would be solid scholarship and courses in the field continuing to be mainstreamed in the disciplines." She also suggested limited resources could be better spent in improving general education.

In firmly supporting the creation of the black studies minor, Old Westbury President Calvin Butts cited the "continuing discrimination in colleges and grade schools regarding African-Americans that causes us to take these positions, and rightfully so."



Newsday Photo / Jim Peppler

Rosalyn Baxandall and Aubrey Bonnett are both involved in the creation of a black studies minor at SUNY Old Westbury.



Candace de Russy