

“Palatable” ethnic studies: “Racial preferences” in community college cultures

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In 2020, the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges (ASCCC) adopted Resolution 9.03, making it mandatory for all community colleges in the state to offer at least one Ethnic Studies course to fulfill the newly created Area F (now Area 7) category for both graduation and transfer pathway to a University of California or California State University (ASCCC, 2024). The Student Senate for California Community Colleges (SSCCC) similarly passed Resolution S21.01.05, which advocated for ethnic studies graduation requirements (California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office, n.d.). Both bills also created new minimum qualification requirements for professors who can teach ethnic studies, changing the landscape of historically tenured professors and lecturers who taught ethnic studies but are no longer qualified to do so.

As professors at a community college with four different ethnic studies programs, we found it important to understand the long history of complicated relationships that exist with other departments, similar to many other programs across the state. Where does ethnic studies fit? In history? Sociology? Humanities? How will different colleges fulfill the new ethnic studies requirements for transfer? Why are some ethnic studies courses more popular than others? And what does it mean to mandate an equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) course on campus while supporting the program with adequate resources? These are some of the questions raised as we began to explore research projects on our campus and other local campuses in San Diego County.

The Outtake

At Southwestern College, located in southern San Diego, ethnic studies courses have been offered for over 20 years in the History Department. Three major “fields” of ethnic studies were offered: African American Studies, Asian American Studies, and Mexican American Studies. Note, here we are using “ethnic studies” and not “Ethnic Studies.” They are two different fields of studies with varying methodologies of research, paradigms, and epistemological approaches to the study of race, ethnicity, nationality, and other minoritized identities. The study of race, as a historical context that critiques the historiographies of American racial constructs, is “ethnic studies.” The interdisciplinary study of race, as it intersects with other marginalized identities and its inter-community relations, is “Ethnic Studies.” This has been a growing conversation in various academic fields, with the Critical Ethnic Studies Association (n.d.) making a claim of how such classifications are imagined, but also the demand for “critical analysis” versus the study of linear historiography that differentiates the two.

Ethnic studies at Southwestern College was connected to history, whereas Ethnic Studies came from an interdisciplinary approach between history and sociology. While students were able to major in African American, Asian American, or Mexican American studies, the number of graduating students between 2020 and 2024 for all three local majors was below 10 students. Being housed mainly under history, these courses also did not expand the available courses to address a wide range of intellectual projects such as African American politics, Asian American media, and Mexican American literature.

Figure 1

Department Status for Academic Year 2024-2025

College Name	African American / Black Studies	Asian American Studies	Chicana/o Studies	Native American Studies	Pacific Islander Studies	Ethnic Studies
Cuyamaca*	F		F	F*		F
Grossmont	F	F	F			C
Mesa	L,T	F	L,T	L,T		
MiraMar	F	F	F			
Mira Costa	F		F		P	F
Palomar	F		F	C,T		F
San Diego City	L	F	L	P		
Southwestern	L	L	L	F	P	

Note. C = certificate; L = local major; T = transferable major; F = Area F requirement/stand-alone courses (may be housed in a specific department; P = proposed/being created.

** Cuyamaca College has Native American studies within its ethnic studies program, but also has a stand-alone Kumeyaay Studies Department*

Our research, which began at the start of the 2024 Fall semester, sought to compare the programs and courses offered throughout the various community colleges in San Diego for the 2024-2025 academic year. More importantly, we wanted to determine how different colleges fulfilled the newly-implemented Area F (now Area 7) category that requires at least one completed ethnic studies course to transfer. Our initial findings (Figure 1) reinforced our primary concerns: While statewide policy shapes

programs and curricula, colleges are left with the monumental task of building and implementing programs that are attuned to the needs of diverse student populations.

The Impact

The growing concerns of how to address ethnic studies and offer courses that are both relevant and engaging for the students, but also adhere to the mandates required by the college system, then became the main topic of discussion. The conversation occurs mainly between faculty who come from the 1960s and 1970s model of ethnic studies and Ethnic Studies faculty who have been trained in comparative, intersectional, and interdisciplinary Ethnic Studies. In many community colleges, race-specific programs exist, with African American/Black studies and Chicano/a studies being some of the oldest programs throughout the state. With more Asian American and Native American studies being established throughout the state, we notice a recurring pattern of student populations who are taking these courses and how the various institutions support these aforementioned programs (Figure 2).

Figure 2

IGETC Area 7- Ethnic Studies Approved Courses

College Name	African American/ Black Studies	Asian American Studies	Chicana/o Studies	Native American Studies	Ethnic Studies
Cuyamaca	E,L		E,L		E,H,S
Grossmont			L		E,H,S
Mesa	O	O	O	O	
MiraMar	O	O	O	H	
MiraCosta					E
Palomar	O		O	O	
San Diego City	O	O	O	O	
Southwestern	H,O	H,O	H,O	H,O	

Note: H = history; S = sociology; E = ethnic studies; L = English/literature; O = own department/discipline.

Thus, we use the term “palatable ethnic studies” not to reduce the field into an act of consumption, but to comment on the consumable actions done as a mere digestive act to pass college and transferable requirements. Our findings (see Figure 3; Figure 4) highlight how different community colleges in San Diego County have to piece together courses and programs in unique and different ways, utilizing cross-listed courses and other department resources, to fulfill state mandates.

Figure 3

IGETC Area 7- Ethnic Studies Approved Courses with American Institutions Requirements

College Name	African American/ Black Studies	Asian American Studies	Chicana/o Studies	Native American Studies	Ethnic Studies
Cuyamaca					
Grossmont					1,2,3
Mesa	1,2,3		1,2,3		
MiraMar	1,2,3	1,3	1,2,3		
MiraCosta					
Palomar					
San Diego City	1,2,3		1,2,3		
Southwestern	1,2	3	1,2,3		

Note: 1 = U.S. historical development of American institutions and ideals; 2 = U.S. constitution and government; 3 = California state and local government.

Similarly, the national conversation on critical race theory in education has centered around African American/Black studies and Chicano/x (sometimes referred to as “Raza”) studies, with little to no conversation around Asian American studies and Native American studies. To summarize the fight against critical race theory, African American/Black studies has been seen as “too racial” and makes White populations address their identities, while Raza studies is seen as anti-American and address “too much about illegals.”

Figure 4

*Courses That Teach Ethnic Studies (IGETC Area 3 - Humanities, 4 - Social & Behavioral Science, 7 - Ethnic Studies) Including Cross-listed Courses***

College Name	African American / Black Studies	Asian American Studies	Chicana/o Studies	Native American Studies	Pacific Islander Studies	Middle Eastern American Studies	Study of Race
Cuyamaca	A,E,H,M		A,E,H,S	A,E,O,S		A,R	A,E,H,P,R,S,Y
Grossmont	A,H, L, M	L,H	H,L,S	H	X,Z	X,Z	A,E,M,P,R,S, T,Y
Mesa	O	H,M,O	O,S	H,N	X,Z	X	L,S
MiraMar	O	H,O,Y	O		X,Z	X	L,S
MiraCosta	H,S	S	H,S		E	E	E
Palomar	O		O	O			
San Diego City	L,O	A,H,L,O	L,O,S,T	N	X,Z	X	L,S
Southwestern	H,M,O,T	H,O	H,L,M,O	H,O	X,Z	X,Z	L,G,M,S

Note. A = art and humanities; E = ethnic studies; G = geography; H = history; L = English/literature; M = media, music, and film; N = anthropology; O = own department/discipline; P = political science; R = religion/theology; S = sociology and social work; T = theater and dance; Y = psychology; X = incorporated into history; Z = incorporated into Asian American studies.

*** partial list as of Academic Year 2024-2025; may not reflect all courses offered.*

These statements and sentiments have imagined Asian American and Native American studies and identities to be “other” in the discussion on race and ethnicity—where they are not seen as a threat to American values and identities. This is because of two major factors—one is seen as the study of non-Americans, while the latter is seen as a study of the foundation of the United States. When talking to students we noticed that many White students come to Asian American studies looking for Asian history and cultural studies, often regulating the field to an imagined space of “over there” and imagined time of “back then.” Students have expressed their interest in learning more about the history of China and the Great Wall, the Japanese shogunates, pre-colonial Philippines, and Vedic spirituality via yoga.

On the other hand, Native American studies is seen as crucial to addressing the foundation of the founding of the United States, and the romance of Native American lineage for White students to connect to. Both these fields of studies play a crucial role in how many Americans, both White and non-White, see Asian Americans through an Orientalist lens and as perpetual foreigners, and Native Americans as relicts of American past and romanticized Nativist identities.

What now?

Initially, our research examined how community colleges structured ethnic studies courses to meet the new statewide transfer requirements. We analyzed which disciplines housed these courses and how different institutions categorized them for graduation and transfer credit. As we progressed, a larger issue emerged: The need to re-analyze the older epistemologies and paradigms of ethnic studies because contemporary ethnic studies has been very vocal about “the food groups” of race studies. We, therefore, aimed to address larger debates within ethnic studies, and how White students might see the different types of ethnic studies based on their own romanticized and demonized notions of (and on) race.

Additionally, our questions quickly shifted back to analyzing faculty and institutions themselves. For instance, when mandating ethnic studies in the community colleges, many were hired with no ethnic studies background and were cross-listed with other departments (see Figure 5). Many colleges hired professors and instructors, regardless of background, just because they have taught similar classes or because the professor identifies with the community; with many coming, again, from an ethnic studies perspective. For those who have done interdisciplinary ethnic studies and Ethnic Studies, as well as tying it to other academic fields such as gender and sexuality studies or cultural studies, it has become a point of tension for some schools as some see it as “taking away too much from race.” In our experience, even the mention of Kimberlé Crenshaw’s (1989) “intersectionality” has caused heated debates, with some denouncing it as “an attack on straight men of color.” Thus, we are now left asking more questions for future research: What is “approved” ethnic studies, and why is there fear of Ethnic Studies? What are professors teaching that caters to particular romanticized and demonized racial perceptions, and how to manage those perceptions? What happens when ethnic studies is also a check box for the professors and the institutions?

Figure 5

*Courses That Teach the Study of Race (IGETC Area 3 - Humanities, 4 - Social & Behavioral Science, 7 - Ethnic Studies) Including Cross-listed Courses***

	Cuyamaca	Grossmont	Mesa	MiraMar	MiraCosta	Palomar	San Diego City	Southwestern
Anthropology	A,C,E,M,N		N				N	
Art & Humanities	A	A,E					S	
English/Literature	A,C,N	A,C,S	E	E			A,C,E,S	C,E
Ethnic Studies		A	N	S	E,M,P			
Geography								E
History	A,E,H	A	N,S	S	A,C		S	A,C,E,N,S
Media, Music, Film	A	A,E	S					A,C,E
Own Discipline	N		A,C,S	A,C,S		A,C,N	A,C,S	A,C,N,S
Political Science	E	E						
Psychology		E	S	S				
Religion/Theology	E,M	E						
Sociology/Social Work	C,E	E	C,E	E	A,C,S		C,E	
Theater, Dance	E	E					C	A
Incorporated into History		M,P	M,P	M,P			M,P	M,P
Incorporated in Asian American Studies		M,P	M,P	P			P	M,P

Note. A = African American studies; C = Chicana/o studies; E = ethnic studies; M = Middle Eastern American studies; N = Native American studies; P = Pacific Islander studies; S = Asian American studies.

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