



## Ethnic Studies and the Enduring Legacy of Movements for Racial Justice in California

Nicholas F. Centino

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*An interdisciplinary field, ethnic studies examines race, ethnicity and indigeneity with a special focus on four groups that have been historically racialized in the United States and beyond: African Americans, Asian Americans & Pacific Islanders, Chicanas/os & Latinas/os, and Native Americans.*

*The historic passage of California's Assembly Bill No. 1460 (AB1460) in 2020 calls for all incoming students across the California State University (CSU) system to complete a course in Ethnic Studies in order to graduate. For many supporters of Ethnic Studies, the signing of AB1460 into law is a long overdue recognition of the impact of Ethnic Studies to better prepare university students for a Twenty-First Century world that still grapples with systemic racism and inequity.*

*Rooted in the racial justice struggles of the 1960s, proponents of Ethnic Studies argue that the field's pedagogical and epistemological tools allow for the self-representation of communities that have been historically mischaracterized and misrepresented. As such, Ethnic Studies prioritize equity and agency by its empowerment of students of all backgrounds to be voices for change.*

### My Journey in Ethnic Studies

A common story about Ethnic Studies is the way in which the classes, professors and experiences transform the lives of the students in profound ways. Documented extensively by Ethnic Studies scholars like Jennie Luna (2019), Collette Chapman-Hilliard and Samuel T. Beasley (2017), and others, Ethnic Studies has made a positive impact on students at both the secondary and higher education levels. I, certainly, am no exception. I grew up far away from the cultural epicenters of Los Angeles and the Bay Area, in the small farmworking community of Lompoc, California. Growing up in a mixed Asian and Chicana/o-Indigenous home, I had a sense of cultural difference, yet found difficulty in articulating language to describe the challenges my working-class family faced.

Admitted to UCSB as a declared history major, I stumbled upon Chicano Studies (now Chicana and Chicano Studies) whose classes opened my eyes to the ways in which the challenges and barriers my family had faced for generations were linked to more than just poor judgement on their behalf. I learned about how historically the exploitation and disempowerment of communities of color in the state of California were the results of intentional policy in service of enriching those who already held positions of power. Declaring a Chicana/o Studies major changed the trajectory of my life, as it allowed

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me to develop meaningful mentorship relationships with professors, forge solidarity and peer support networks with fellow majors, The close working relationships and shared theoretical underpinnings with other Ethnic Studies departments such Black Studies, Asian American Studies and Indigenous/Native American Studies opened my eyes to the scholarship and tools of critical analysis honed across the diverse field of Ethnic Studies.

As a first-generation college student, I knew nothing of graduate school, nor did I have any sense of what it took to earn a masters or PHD. It was through the mentorship of my ethnic studies trained professors that I could see myself in their shoes, impacting and encouraging students just like myself. The centering of the experiences of people like me kept me engaged and committed to my classes, driving me to challenge myself to achieve and convincing me to pursue a graduate degree. Now, a little over 20 years later, I have come full circle, teaching in the Ethnic Studies discipline of Chicana/o Studies at CSU Channel Islands, not too far from my hometown that I left in pursuit of my educational and career goals. In this way, my story is just one of many of experienced by students impacted by over fifty years of ethnic studies in California.

## What Is Ethnic Studies and How Was It Created?

The genesis of the academic disciplines that make up Ethnic Studies lie in the movement of students fighting for racial justice in the 1960s. In California, the Black Student Union at San Francisco State University was joined by other student-of-color organizations to form the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF), a student coalition fighting for demands such as the establishment of courses that examined the experiences of Native Americans, Chicanas/os/xs, African Americans and Asian Americans. (CSU Task Force on the Advancement of Ethnic Studies, p. 12). Since then, Ethnic Studies programs and departments have been established nationwide. On college and university campuses, as well as K-12 institutions, Ethnic Studies exist in the form of a singular comparative Ethnic Studies department/program, or as independent Black Studies, Chicana/o/x and Latina/o/x Studies, Asian American and Pacific Islander Studies, or Native American Studies departments/programs, respectively. In recent years, many programs and departments established in the discipline's infancy celebrated their fiftieth anniversary, including San Francisco State, whose College of Ethnic Studies traces its roots to the TWLF strike in 1969.

While Ethnic Studies programs and departments may have different names from campus to campus, a handful of core tenets are held to by all those trained in the field. First and foremost, Ethnic Studies is more than just a focus on historically racialized groups. In other words, just because a course may examine a minoritized group, it does not mean that the course automatically qualifies as Ethnic Studies. Crafted over five decades and drawing on intellectual traditions both new and ancient, Ethnic Studies has evolved and developed its own approaches to research and pedagogy. Hallmarks of Ethnic Studies research are “the self-reflexivity of the researcher and educator, a refusal to demonize subject communities, a political concern for subaltern peoples, an acknowledgement of intersecting hierarchies of power, and the eschewing of universal claims in order to focus on situated knowledges” (Centino, 2021, p. 16). Above all else, is the centering of voices of people of color to frame and narrate their own experiences in research and pedagogy crafted in the Ethnic Studies tradition.

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In addition to bringing these attributes into the classroom, Ethnic Studies educators strive to empower their students to become voices for change on the intersectional challenges that face them. As Ethnic Studies professor Roberto D. Hernandez states, “Ethnic Studies is about the understanding of sociohistorical processes of racialization and other forms of domination, in order to not only challenge said processes but to collectively build a different way of existing in the world free of the various -isms that continue to divide us” (Hernández, 2021).

## Impact of Ethnic Studies

In a report of the National Education Association (NEA), the nation’s largest professional association representing 3.2 million educators across the country, the impact of Ethnic Studies was supported by several studies denoting a positive relationship between Ethnic Studies pedagogy and the academic achievement of students from minoritized communities. (Sleeter, year?). Among those studies are those conducted by S. A. Baptiste (2010); R. R. Daus-Magbual (2010); J. Lipka et al. (2005); L.J. Watahomigie and T.L. McCarty (1994); D.S. Pollard and C. Ajiro-tutu (2001) and many more (Tintiangco-Cubales, 2015).

Despite its origin in institutions of higher education, the report also documents studies pointing to the impact of Ethnic Studies in the K-12 system. As scholar Christine Sleeter writes, “although commonly perceived as touchy-feely and non-academic—even as lowering academic standards . . . Ethnic Studies curricula are academically based, usually designed to improve students’ academic performance, and sometimes explicitly focus on university preparation. (Sleeter, 2011, p. ?)” Despite the positive success of Ethnic Studies classes nationwide, a 2014 study examining the implementation of Ethnic Studies in the San Francisco school district found persistent impediments and opposition to Ethnic Studies in public education but also provided key practices to adequately prepare teachers to offer Ethnic Studies curriculum (Tintiangco-Cubales, 2014).

## Ethnic Studies in the 2020’s: Achievements and Threats

The beginning of the 2020’s saw both victories and challenges in the field of Ethnic Studies. Introduced by California Assembly member Shirley Weber, AB 1460 was signed into law by Governor Gavin Newsom in the summer of 2020. The legislation mandates the completion of, at minimum, one three-unit course in Ethnic Studies at all of the 23 campuses in the CSU system. Weber, who served as a professor in the department of Africana Studies at San Diego State, cites the positive benefits of Ethnic Studies in the bill’s language. Among other organizations, the California Faculty Association and Black Lives Matters LA endorsed the bill and lobbied for its passage. This Ethnic Studies graduation requirement commences with incoming students admitted for academic year 2021-2022 and is not mandated for students admitted in previous years. With the passage of AB1460, California is the first state in the nation to require a public four-year university system to offer Ethnic Studies as a graduation requirement. The passage of AB1460 follows the passage of Assembly Bill 2016 (AB2016) in 2016, which calls for the creation of a model curriculum for the implementation of Ethnic Studies in the public K-12 system of the state of California.

Shortly after the passage of AB1460, then-President Donald Trump issued an Executive Order (EO) in September 2020 to prohibit employee training that employs the use of Critical Race Theory (CRT) for all

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federal agencies and contractors. CRT examines policies and practices and the ways in which race and racism play a role in explicit and implicit ways resulting in societal inequity. As published in *The Ethnic Studies Review*, “One of the tenets of CRT is to challenge dominant ideologies that sustain power relations” (Campbell, et. al. 2019). As such, CRT is a prominent analytical framework used commonly in Ethnic Studies and is commonly used in professional equity and diversity trainings in both the public and private sector. This EO was rescinded by the Biden administration in January of 2021.

## Resources and Further Reading in Ethnic Studies

*Compiled by Dr. Jose Alamillo and the CSUCI Ethnic Studies Council*

Reading List on Ethnic Studies

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Jqua6pDP2vYcuoURBTmco-ZFdy2pP2eO/view>

AB-1460 California State University: graduation requirement: Ethnic Studies

[https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billStatusClient.xhtml?bill\\_id=201920200AB1460](https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billStatusClient.xhtml?bill_id=201920200AB1460)

Core Competencies for Ethnic Studies Systemwide Graduation Requirement

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1cTl83tjVw86Kdkw4i6LoWj1bEKwy8oWj/edit>

Historical Timeline of Ethnic Studies at CSUCI

[https://docs.google.com/document/d/1srcEE1YouAv8NNt6lKhEtiGXA3hErIC-O\\_gapPy70c/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1srcEE1YouAv8NNt6lKhEtiGXA3hErIC-O_gapPy70c/edit?usp=sharing)

CSUCI Ethnic Studies Speaker Series 2020-2021 Webinar Recordings

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1nE0CaEqzqNgZqDpgk8auDmFsWhCEjMzbs1aIJ5SGbzw/edit?usp=sharing>

To contact the Ethnic Studies Council at CSUCI please email: [ethnicstudiescouncil@csuci.edu](mailto:ethnicstudiescouncil@csuci.edu)

## About the Author

Born and raised on the central coast, Nicholas F. Centino, Ph.D., earned his doctorate in Chicana & Chicano Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Inspired by the alterNative youth cultures he encountered growing up in the rural farmworking community of Lompoc, Dr. Centino’s work examines the popular cultural practices of Chicanas/os & Latinas/os as strategies of survival and negotiation.

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