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### Ethnic studies increases student engagement and high school graduation

Targeting 9th graders key to program success

**Date:** September 6, 2021

**Source:** University of Massachusetts Amherst

**Summary:** New research shows that enrolling 9th graders who are struggling academically in an ethnic studies course greatly improves the likelihood those students will graduate from high school and enroll in college.

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#### FULL STORY

New research from UMass Amherst shows that enrolling 9<sup>th</sup> graders who are struggling academically in an ethnic studies course greatly improves the likelihood those students will graduate from high school and enroll in college.

Sade Bonilla, assistant professor in the College of Education, along with Thomas S. Dee of the Graduate School of Education at Stanford and Emily K. Penner of the School of Education at the University of California Irvine, conducted the research on the longer-term effects of ethnic studies requirements that was recently published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

In one California school district, 9<sup>th</sup> graders with a grade-point average of 2.0 or under were automatically enrolled in an ethnic study course. The research showed that enrollment in ethnic studies substantially increased high school graduation, attendance, and the probability of enrolling in college. Prior to this study, there was little causal evidence supporting the positive academic impact of ethnic studies. "A central contribution of our work is the causal evidence that anti-racist pedagogy and curricula promoted engagement and persistence in school," said Bonilla.

The team studied the records of nearly 1,400 students in San Francisco, Cali., where the board of education approved an ethnic studies requirement for academically struggling 9<sup>th</sup> graders in 2010. Following their academic journeys through both local and state records, the team found that low-income students and students of color enrolled in the ethnic studies course had improved academic outcomes. Students also were more likely to enroll in college following their graduation from high school, the team found.

Ethnic studies curricula, based on anti-racist principles, is designed to be a rigorous, college-prep course that emphasizes culturally relevant and critically engaged content related to social justice, anti-racism, stereotypes and contemporary social movements. In general, ethnic studies courses focus on the histories of historically marginalized communities, promote the students' critical awareness of social issues and encourages civic en-

agement and community-responsive social justice, Bonilla said. It helps students learn about different ethnic histories and the contributions of non-white ethnic groups. Supporters say it gives students a better sense of who they are and a sense of belonging in the larger American community.

"The current debate about critical race theory is regrettably dishonest and politically-driven," Bonilla said. "There is overlap between the theory and ethnic studies in that the curricula uses a critically aware and historical perspective of prior events and the systems we have in place today."

While there is increased interest in anti-racist education, it has been politically contentious, the researchers note. Anti-racist curricula and teaching methods represent a way for schools to better promote a just society and improve educational outcomes for low-income and students of color, they add.

"Our results point to this approach having important impacts on students' high school graduation and college enrollment which is critically important given the relevance of educational attainment on economic success and other socially relevant outcomes like civic engagement and mental health," Bonilla said.

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### Story Source:

Materials provided by **University of Massachusetts Amherst**. *Note: Content may be edited for style and length.*

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### Journal Reference:

1. Sade Bonilla, Thomas S. Dee, and Emily K. Penner. **Ethnic studies increases longer-run academic engagement and attainment**. *PNAS*, 2021 DOI: 10.1073/pnas.2026386118

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