

From: Jean Lee
Sent: Wednesday, August 14, 2019 11:46 AM
To: Ethnic Studies
Subject: Support Ethnic Studies in High School Curriculums!

Dear California Instructional Quality Commission and State Board of Education,

I am writing to implore you to stand strong in your support of Ethnic studies in California high schools. Please continue to shore up inclusivity, social justice, and civic responsibility in your schools and students. In times such as these, where white supremacy, xenophobia, homophobia, and anti-intellectualism degrade our collective capacity to show reason, empathy, mercy, grace, and compassion, ethnic studies is a deeply transformative and powerful means of rescuing our students from the basest impulses rooted in fear, corrupted power, and racism.

I'm a professor of Asian American and Black diasporic literature at Western Washington University. I have had the privilege of teaching Asian American, Caribbean, and multi-ethnic literature courses at the University of Illinois and The College of Wooster. In all of these settings, my students have expressed deep gratitude for not just the content of my courses, but the critical thinking skills that are necessary to approach the content. They have also often expressed frustration that they were not taught the histories of ethnic communities in the United States earlier, especially in high school.

I share their sentiments. I only learned ethnic studies in college and graduate school, and began the long process of healing and rebuilding my identity through this field far too late. For students who are immigrants, the children of immigrants, or the neighbors of immigrants, ethnic studies demonstrates that whiteness is not the default setting for cultural belonging in the United States. This alone is deeply affirming and goes against the grain of the blatant racist language of our current presidential administration. It also teaches students that the best values in the US would be constantly eroded if it weren't for the cross-racial alliances amongst people of color in the United States--particularly students! The history of ethnic studies is a powerful message of hope for young adults: they are crucial in making a difference for the better.

However, ethnic studies is not just for students of color. Ethnic studies is a field that is interdisciplinary. It brings together political theory, economics, history, literature, art, and anthropology/sociology. Students engage with these fields and their ways of knowing (methodologies) to develop a fuller picture of social, legal, cultural, and economic life in the United States. It also teaches students to look at history "from below," and understand that dominant ways of knowing are not always the most just. The culmination of these methods and perspectives is the self-reflection about how one's positionality and identity are formed by various contexts. This self-reflection allows students to appreciate more deeply universal and cosmopolitan values while also cherishing the particularities of different communities. It empowers students to resist becoming entrenched in xenophobic and white supremacist nationalist ideologies that may feel like common sense to, unfortunately, many.

Please do not be swayed by the detractors of Ethnic studies who only think to maintain, and devolve, the status quo. Students need to understand how capitalism, law, race, gender, sexuality, and works in this country. Ethnic studies brings all of these processes together and affirms that diversity is a strength, not a liability. Ethnic studies also gives students the tools to evaluate and intervene in injustices in the United States, and hone their civic duty to make America a more perfect union. As our country becomes increasingly diverse, and must navigate the consequences of its imperial intervention abroad as many refugees and asylum seekers arrive at our borders, ethnic studies provides the foundations of engaging with a changing world, and making it better for all.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,
Jean Lee