

August 14, 2019

Dear Assemblymembers Medina and Weber and other interested parties:

Subject: What is and is NOT Ethnic Studies

First, let me convey my appreciation to both of you and the continued support of the California State University (CSU) Council on Ethnic Studies for both AB331 and AB1460. We have been made aware of discussions that seem to be confusing and conflating the discussion of Ethnic Studies, the disciplinary area, and the study of ethnicity, race or other demographics by other disciplinary areas. I am attaching the original letter from our council in support of AB1460 and am expanding here on what it means to be Ethnic Studies and, probably more importantly what it means to NOT be Ethnic Studies. I will explain in reverse order.

Ethnic Studies is NOT any disciplinary study of ethnicity or race. As my colleague Professor Craig Stone from CSU Long Beach put it during deliberations for the [CSU Chancellor's Task Force on the Advancement of Ethnic Studies](#), (paraphrasing) if that were the case, modern Ethnic Studies would not have been created. Before 1968, many humanities, social science and science disciplines studied ethnicity and race, but they just did so poorly and in a manner dangerous to people of color, the various peoples who were considered non-White and were historically oppressed for being non-White in America, African, Asian, Latino and Native Americans.

Ethnic Studies is the discipline that grew out of the, yes admittedly political, and academic context to decenter White Studies, White Supremacy and the privileged White narrative of the American experience. Ethnic Studies re-centered the studies of people of color, African/Black American, Asian American, Latino/Raza and Native/Indigenous Americans to insure that the study of ethnicity and race in relationship to these peoples were done centered from the perspective, questions, needs and aspirations of the peoples being studied, in intentional counter narrative to that which centered the study of people of color from the perspectives, needs, questions, and aspirations of White Supremacy or Whiteness as some inherent norm for humanity. Ethnic Studies is, therefore, an explicit counternarrative to decolonize the academic narratives, which would speak or act on people of color without our permission and without our self-determined interest at the center of the studies. There are many other disciplines and studies with long histories studying ethnicity or race as central or secondary to their studies, but not with this disciplinary center. Thus, there are some studies that center or at least address the *topics of* race or ethnicity, but they do not center the experiences, intellectual traditions, and liberation struggles of people of color in America, where "people of color" is an idiomatic phrase referring to the peoples historically and continuously excluded from and oppressed by the project of Whiteness. We appreciate those other studies, but distinguish ourselves from them.

California State University (CSU) Campuses

Bakersfield • Channel Islands • Chico • Domínguez Hills • East Bay • Fresno • Fullerton • Humboldt • Long Beach
Los Angeles • Maritime Academy • Monterey Bay • Northridge • Pomona • Sacramento • San Bernardino • San Diego
San Francisco • San José • San Luis Obispo • San Marcos • Sonoma • Stanislaus

For example, any studies of European ethnic groups or groups assimilated into or overlapping with Whiteness are typically not within the scope of Ethnic Studies, except when centered in the experiences of people of color who are doing critical or comparative studies examining those experiences in the Ethnic Studies context. Therefore, the study of Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, or Polish ethnicities would fit within traditional White or Euro-centered curricula, not modern Ethnic Studies.

Specifically, we have been told that some legislators are arguing that Jewish Studies is in Ethnic Studies. Jewish Studies has over a century of tradition in the American Academy as either religious or cultural/multicultural studies, but it has no academic tradition inside of Ethnic Studies at any point in the 50-year history of the field. This does not diminish the importance of Jewish Studies; to the contrary, it simply respects its academic tradition. Jewish Studies for the most part was a project to understand the assimilation of American Jews into American Whiteness. The portion that was not assimilationist into Whiteness still did not focus on Jews of color, African/Black Jews, Asian Jews, etc., and definitely did not re-center Jewish Studies as a people of color, decolonial project. As a practical datum point, when the CSU Task Force on Advancing Ethnic Studies and polled the 23 Campuses for a listing of Ethnic Studies departments, units, or programs, not a single campus registered Jewish Studies among their Ethnic Studies offerings.

As an educator and scholar who allies strongly and regularly with Jewish Studies, has collaborated with a K-12 Holocaust studies program, chaired the committee that hired the first endowed chair in Jewish Studies, and was lead administrative support for San Francisco State's nationally heralded report on [President's Task Force on Inter-group Relations: Initial Focus on the Effect of Middle East Issues on Campus Life](#) (a collaborative work that included scholars and community members from the Arab, Jewish, and Muslim communities among others). I strongly support those who wish to advance Jewish Studies, but not by compromising the academic integrity of either Ethnic Studies or Jewish Studies. This argument is broader than Jewish Studies, but we are receiving specific questions about Jewish Studies and therefore wanted to address this directly. Jewish Studies and other studies not rooted in Ethnic Studies as defined above may be supported in their own and appropriate legislation, policy and practice. They can call on us as allies to assist them, as we call on them to support us now, but we must all resist having our academic integrity compromised by political expediencies, for the sake of all legitimate academic studies.

AB331, AB1460 and the Ethnic Studies Curriculum are all on the right track, staying focused on their core, Ethnic Studies. Other studies should be handled within their correct and well documented traditions. I strongly encourage you and your colleagues to remain focused on this great work as a model for how solid academic thinking and excellent legislation go hand in hand.

Sincerely,

Professor Kenneth P. Monteiro, (for identification purposes only)

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