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Ethnic Studies: The Cyclical Fight, Conquer, and Struggle

Queenena Hoang

In 1968, the San Francisco State College Third World Liberation Front made history for the longest student strike in America. Armed with a growing self-awareness and a determination to end Eurocentric biases in the classroom, students of Color rallied in a five-month battle for the first School of Ethnic Studies. These were the first moments of making history and creating a future of stories and voices for those unheard. Forty-three years later, American K-12 and higher education school systems have come full circle with new legislation such as Arizona's House Bill (HB) 2281. Ethnic studies departments are constantly caught in a stage of struggle for academic legitimacy (Chen, 1989). This article explores the criticism and critiques of ethnic studies courses, namely focusing on HB 2281. I will also discuss the value of these courses and the ways in which they can positively influence campus climate, in addition to how ethnic studies has personally affected my journey into higher education and student affairs.

Spring quarter, senior year. I had finally completed the required courses for my major and would only need this last class to fulfill unit requirements: Asian American 157- Asian American Education. I remember sitting in that classroom thinking, “Only 10 weeks of this class and I can graduate. This will be an easy A.” Fast-forward 10 weeks and did I stand corrected. I had never been so challenged to think about education as an Asian American student. We had a majority of Asian American students in the class, but we also had White, Black, and Latino students, and international exchange students from England and Australia. With each class, we explored identities, discussed theories, and shared stories. Not only was this class *not* an “easy A,” but, by the end of the 10 week trimester, I wished we had another 10 or 15 weeks to delve deeper into the topics of the model minority myth, typical Asian American stereotypes, meritocracy, and the unending debate of ethnic studies courses. I felt empowered to continue the conversations outside the classroom with my student affairs colleagues, and motivated to connect the

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theory to practice.

Libertating the Learner: Privilege in Higher Education

Education is one of the chief obstacles to intelligence and freedom of thought.

- Bertrand A. Russel (1872-1970)

In the ongoing debate of what courses are being offered in K-12 classrooms and on college campuses, I ask, “Whom is the institution serving?” Is academia meant to follow the conventional American history track of Columbus and the New World, or is it meant to educate scholars to raise questions and think critically? Will scholars always stand on shoulders of giants or stand firm on their own beliefs and values? Students are not paying for just the degree, but to be taught and to learn the pluralistic truths of history. Ethnic studies can liberate students from the confined boxes of Eurocentric and hegemonic history and liberate faculty members through new pedagogical subjects and styles. I aim to be an advocate for my students so that they may find meaning for themselves through ethnic studies courses, as I found meaning during Professor Samura’s Asian American Education course.

The Evolution of Ethnic Studies Programs

The great aim of education is not knowledge, but action.

- Herbert Spencer (1820–1903)

The development of ethnic studies and its relationship within various levels of formal education in the United States has been subject of much discussion and debate. However, little attention is paid to historical developments that shaped the ethnic studies movement prior to 1960 (La Belle, 1996). Issues of unequal access to education in the United States for subordinated racial and ethnic groups have stemmed back as early as “separate but equal” for African Americans, Asian Americans, and Native Americans. As one response to limited access to education in the 19th century, some ethnic groups established separate institutions and a system of higher education also known as group-specific education. These educational efforts were organized by immigrant groups and ethnic groups to preserve their languages and heritages, as well as efforts to assimilate to dominant group culture and economy. As the number of African American, Latino/Latina, Asian American, and other underrepresented student groups grew on campuses, group interests turned from increasing access to increasing power within the universities (La Belle, 1996). As years progressed, students wanted to diversify topics of conversation, honor multiple voices, and have more control over programs and curricula.

On November 6, 1968, San Francisco State College students marched with demands for an academic education that was more reflective and relevant to their

communities (Umemoto, 1989). This five-month strike engaged college students, faculty, and administrators; the police; and politicians. The students faced physical violence, including batons and pepper spray, but this only encouraged them to be determined and steadfast. Inspired by the civil rights movement and born out of activism, ethnic studies programs were created with the goal of highlighting and understanding the convergence of struggles—civil rights, women’s rights, student voice, and oppressed nationalities.

Almost 30 years after its founding, the field of ethnic studies is now in a paradoxical state, priding itself for long-established programs and departments across campuses, yet still intellectually marginalized (Hu-Dehart, 1995). Today, the field of ethnic studies is seen, but not heard; taken, but not discussed. Student activists have continuously risen in response to the unfair treatment and lack of respect for ethnic studies courses, but only so much can be done until backlashing consequences occur. It is time for faculty and administrators to stand up and speak out strongly about their second-class status (Hu-Dehart, 1995) and to be rewarded for their contributions to higher education through research and scholarship. Faculty members deserve to share their research and knowledge with students that desire to learn this information.

Today’s Criticisms of Ethnic Studies

Education makes a people easy to lead, but difficult to drive: easy to govern, but impossible to enslave.

- Peter Brougham

Arizona House Bill 2281

On May 11, 2010, Arizona House Bill (HB) 2281 was signed into law by Arizona Governor Jan Brewer, formally prohibiting K-12 courses that may “promote the overthrow of the U.S. government; promote resentment toward a race or class of people; are designed primarily for pupils of a particular ethnic group; [and/or] advocate ethnic solidarity instead of the treatment of pupils as individuals” (H.R. 2281, 2010). Arizona HB 2281 was signed less than one month after the Arizona Senate Bill (SB) 1070, an anti-immigration bill also known as “Support our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhoods Act.” Although HB 2281 was intended to specifically target the Tucson Unified School District’s Chicano Studies program, in which 3% of the district’s 55,000 students participate, it affects much more than just Latino students. It includes advocates and students of Color participating in the Chicano Studies courses (Calefati, 2010). Critics argue that these laws are “responsible for creating a climate of intolerance and suspicion against ethnic minorities and their allies” (Sobti, 2010).

Tom Horne, superintendent of the Tucson Unified School District and advocate

of SB 1070 and HB 2281, targets and outlaws course materials including Rodolfo Acuña's *Occupied America* and Paolo Friere's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* from Chicano Studies programs, of which he says: "Those students should be taught that this is the land of opportunity...they should not be taught that they are oppressed" (Ethnic Studies Week, 2011, para. 4). Horne goes on to state that this law is an aim to prevent "ethnic chauvinism, to not infuse them with knowledge of one particular race, nor teach them narrowly just about the background and culture of the race that they happened to have been born into" (Hing, 2010, para. 2). Although Tucson school district also offers courses in African American Studies and Native American Studies, neither has been singled out for elimination or audit like Chicano Studies. Although HB 2281 specifically targets K-12 education, the Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán, or MEChA, (2010) explains that the bill also impacts ethnic studies programs in higher education by undermining its importance in education and further disenfranchises People of Color by refusing to acknowledge the historical impacts of racial and social inequalities in the United States educational system.

A Need For Change: Positive Outcomes of Ethnic Studies Courses

Education is for improving the lives of others and for leaving your community and world better than you found it.

- Marian Wright Edelman (1939)

Despite the arguments against ethnic studies programs, there have been many positive outcomes from courses on campuses across the country. Today, there are over 700 ethnic studies programs and departments in the United States that have continuously "revitalized, reorganized, and reconceptualized" academia (Hu-Dehart, 1993). The field provides perspectives students would not receive in a traditional Eurocentric American history course. It emphasizes the roles ethnicity and race play in history and culture, and it defines the issues behind a colorblind society. Most campus administrators understand that they need ethnic studies, as an ethnic studies program is the surest way to demonstrate a commitment to diversity. It immediately puts color into the curriculum (Hu-Dehart, 1995). In an era of increasingly diverse college and university campuses, faculty, staff, and administrators have to continually assess what they are doing to prepare students to know, appreciate, and interact in a world of ethnic and racial complexity (La Belle, 1996).

Changing Campus Climates Through Classroom Experience

According to La Belle (1996), discussions of multiculturalism and ethnic studies emphasize the growing diversity of higher education and the increasing numbers of students of Color, women, immigrants, and older adults who are attending colleges and universities. Predominantly White institutions need not think of these

programs as only for “them” – the African American, Asian American, Native American, or Chicano/Latino students. In actuality, White students also need the exposure, the knowledge, the change in attitudes, and the recognition that we live in a multicultural, diverse society and that these courses and programs can help educate students of all backgrounds (Carter, 1996). University and college student affairs administrators and educators should be the initial agents in creating those opportunities, and then it would be up to the faculty and students to engage in conversation and create a profound in-class experience.

With a commitment to diversity through multicultural and ethnic studies programs, an institution potentially creates a more inclusive and diverse campus climate. Faculty and students become empowered to facilitate social change through opportunities of emancipatory education (Chan, 2000). Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, and Allen (1998) support the concept that increasing structural diversity of an institution is an important initial step toward improving the climate. He also found that when students feel that faculty and administration are devoted to their development and success, they are less likely to feel racial and/or ethnic tension on campuses.

Ethnic studies courses should offer students a safe space to learn, share, and debate. With mutual respect, students can engage in conversations they may not have elsewhere. Faculty should be open to answering questions that counter the subject and students should be open to being challenged by the questions that are raised.

Conclusion

As much as educators would like to believe that the American education system has grown to become more inclusive and diverse, HB 2281 indicates the system is slowly progressing towards acculturation and assimilation. People are afraid to acknowledge and address differences and are dangerously turning towards a colorblind society. Educators – faculty, administrators, and even students – must ask themselves what role they wish to play in transforming American society. As the education system takes one step forward in recognizing the importance of ethnic studies courses, Arizona HB 2281 is a recent demonstration that some education systems have taken two steps backward. Will students ever really be liberated by the truth in education, or will they continue to be deceived by the confinement of history?

“Education is a social process; education is growth; education is not preparation for life but is life itself.”

- John Dewey

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