



**RESISTING THE WHITE-WASHING OF ETHNIC STUDIES:
KEEPING COLOR IN LIFE AND LEARNING**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

THE ETHNIC STUDIES REQUIREMENT BILL, AB 1460, which will reach Governor Gavin Newsom's desk this week, will help determine not only the quality of higher education and campus life for decades to come in the CSU system. But it will also shape the quality of life conceived and built by students who will benefit from that education and use it to ground, enrich and expand their lives with mutually beneficial relations of learning, life, work and service. This bill, AB 1460, requires each graduating student to take ONE three-unit class in one of the Ethnic Studies disciplines – Native American, African American, Latino/a American and Asian American Studies. And all people who value the lives, learning needs, culture, history, intellectual traditions and life experiences of peoples of color and the indispensable and enriching contribution Ethnic Studies makes to creating an inclusive quality education should support this bill. Likewise, Governor Newsom should surely sign it when it reaches his desk.

AB 1460 was authored by Dr. Shirley Weber, D-79th District, San Diego; an educator par excellence; chair of the Black Legislative Caucus; member of the Assembly Education Committee and Higher Education Committee; former president of the premiere Black Studies professional organization, the National Council for Black Studies; former long-time chair of the Department of Africana Studies, San Diego State University; and active in faculty government at every level. She concluded from both a wide range of studies and professional experience that taking Ethnic Studies benefitted, not only peoples of color in academic, cultural and social ways, but also others. For it gives them a deeper and broader conception of the world, improves their grades and relations with others, and aids in preparing them to engage a multicultural and multi-racial society and world in successful, meaningful and contributive ways.

The bill has been approved by both the California Assembly and Senate with support of the Ethnic Studies Legislative Caucuses - the

Black Caucus, the Latino Caucus and the Asian Pacific Islander Caucus, in a laudable display of unity around a common ground issue. It has the support of the California Faculty Association (CFA) and the CSU Ethnic Studies Council (CSUESC). Also, it was recommended by the CSU Task Force on the Advancement of Ethnic Studies, of which I was a member, and which was commissioned by CSU Chancellor Timothy White, claiming to be in support of the advancement of Ethnic Studies. Finally, the CSU Academic Senate (ASCSU) passed a resolution supporting an Ethnic Studies requirement without dilution.

However, Chancellor White, going against recommendations of the Task Force, the CFA, and the CSUESC and the ASCSU resolution, recently lobbied the Board of Trustees to pass a policy that fatally alters the Ethnic Studies requirement and ultimately renders it irrelevant. For the Chancellor, himself, said that the "requirement" will not really require students to take an Ethnic Studies course, but will allow them the option to take any courses with a social justice content and claim without ever having to take an Ethnic Studies course before graduation. Calling this policy an Ethnic Studies/Social Justice requirement, White has not established a requirement for Ethnic Studies, but rather an option of Ethnic Studies or social justice. And given the campus culture that privileges White studies courses, we can reliably suggest where this imaginary requirement is going to take root and revel in its self-congratulatory liberalism and various White diversities.

White argued that the legislature should let him establish the Ethnic Studies requirement, that he did not want the legislature to set a precedent of mandatory classes. But the legislature set up the educational system, made various courses, like history and government, mandatory. So, it is not precedent, but an established practice. Moreover, the Chancellor's office has had over 50 years to make Ethnic Studies a requirement and did not do it. Indeed, he only pretended to do it to

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preempt the legislature's initiative and then to convince the Governor he no longer needed to sign AB 1460.

But let's be honest, the Chancellor's policy is not a requirement for Ethnic Studies, but another way to foreground Whiteness and White Studies, i.e., the study of White people in various identities and areas of life. This is White's white-washing in a most pernicious, deceptive, disabling and structurally disadvantaging way. It begins with begrudging and denying people of color *one* class when the whole curriculum foregrounds, privileges and praises Whites. It is a blatant appropriation of the category "Ethnic Studies" to deny the Ethnic Studies requirement. Indeed, it is offering a White studies requirement in ethnic dress with a transparent exploitation of the conception of social justice.

In sum, then, this is white-washing in its most basic and negative meaning. For it seeks to cover over an educational injustice of denying the Ethnic Studies requirement by offering the option of social justice which erases it. Also, it alters the original intent of the Ethnic studies requirement to favor, foreground and privilege White studies and White racialized reasoning while pretending to support Ethnic Studies. And it discolors, not just the content of the requirement, but also the possibilities for an inclusive quality education at a most critical time of rightful demands and struggle for an end to racist conceptions and practices of life and learning.

Thus, if it is not superseded and overridden by AB 1460, the policy will be a continuing racial and racist marginalizing of Ethnic Studies, freezeframing in its vulnerable and half-visible place, and denying it the structural and institutionalized real requirement it deserves and the university needs for any credible concept of an

inclusive quality education. Surely, White's white-washing goes against the needs and demands of the time, which raise a clarion call for institutional and systemic change to end racism in society at every level and in every area. The videoed public police killing of George Floyd and the massive defiant demonstrations in the U.S. and around the world against police violence and systemic racism, as well as the devastating disparities in the health and well-being of peoples of color further revealed by the COVID-19 pandemic, have brought in stark relief the ravages of racism and we cannot claim that our educational institutions do not bear a similar devastating imprint and impact.

THE HUB AND HINGE ON WHICH ALL THIS turns is how we conceive the university and by extension society. Are they to be seen and engaged as a White finished product or an unfinished ongoing multicultural, multiracial project? Clearly, the latter conception is the only moral, sustainable and promising way to engage each. In this context, we must steadfastly hold to the principle and proposition that each people and culture is a unique and equally valid and valuable way to be human in the world. And each people has the right and responsibility to speak their own special cultural truth and make their own unique contribution to how this country and the university are reconceived and reconstructed. This is the central message and meaning of the freedom and racial and social justice struggles we have waged historically, and which have been sweeping the country and reaching around the world. And this requires that the Governor signs AB 1460 and that all of us urge him to do so in the interest of an inclusive quality education and a just and good society. ▲

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