

Small Altars: Ethnic Studies in California and a Living Disciplinary Archive

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Background

Ethnic Studies- the study of communities of color in the U.S. centered on African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Latinx, and Native Americans- is now required to graduate from any of the 116 schools in the California Community College system. In July of 2021, the California state legislature passed AB-1040 which will affect 1.2 million students in the world's largest public education system.

The discipline of Ethnic Studies was the product of the Third World Liberation Front strike at San Francisco State University. Activists demanded increased enrollment of minority students, hiring more minority faculty, and the creation of Black Studies program. Essential to Ethnic Studies is the connection between activism and education.

The California state legislature's adoption of Ethnic Studies as a required course happened after George Floyd's murder and the nationwide protests over police brutality anti-black violence in the summer of 2020. While legislation was already in draft stages, the national reckoning over race provided the final impetus.

In my institution, Santa Rosa Junior College (an hour and a half north of San Francisco), the creation of Ethnic Studies was impelled by the college's Black Student Union (BSU) who demanded the creation of a black ethnic studies department. In September 2020, the College convened a "Black Studies and Ethnic Studies Taskforce." Among the group's recommendations was the creation of a Department of Ethnic Studies consisting of four programs (organized along the categories in the state legislation): African-American Studies, Asian-American Studies, Chicanx & Latinx Studies, and Native American Studies. In November 2020, the College accepted the Taskforce's recommendations. By November 2021, a Founding Chair had been appointed who led an 8 member team of faculty who created introductory courses in each constituent area (plus an introductory course in Ethnic Studies). Five tenure track faculty will be hired by the end of May 2022 and the department will launch in August 2022 with a catalog of 5 original courses, 25 sections, and 13 cross-listed courses.