The concept of ethnic studies and the Title 5 language that requires community colleges to offer courses that address the subject have caused confusion in various ways throughout the state. Two resolutions in recent years have asked the Academic Senate to look into issues surrounding this requirement and the degree to which colleges are meeting it. Resolution 9.05 S08 asked that the Academic Senate “examine Title 5… along with its original intent, and the various current statewide practices for implementing the requirement to offer Ethnic Studies and report back to the body its findings and recommendations.” Resolution 9.01, S 09 “encourage[d] local curriculum committees to review the Title 5 requirements with respect to the ethnic studies requirement and assess whether or not their practices are compliant and, if issues are found, consider ways to meet the requirements.”

In partial fulfillment of the first of these resolutions, the Academic Senate raised the question of interpreting the current Title 5 language and reached quick agreement that colleges are required to offer “ethnic studies” courses as an optional aspect of their general education requirements, but there is no Title 5 expectation that colleges require students to take these classes. Colleges may offer ethnic studies curriculum as a course or courses devoted to the topic or by embedding ethnic studies content as an aspect of existing courses. In order to provide more information to curriculum committees around the state, this year’s Curriculum Committee organized a breakout at the 2009 Fall Plenary Session to discuss various ways in which colleges can meet this requirement and fulfill the needs of their students.

What is Ethnic Studies?

Title 5 does not define the concept of ethnic studies; instead, it simply follows its definition of the four primary areas of general education by stating, “Ethnic Studies will be offered in at least one of the areas required by subdivision (1).” Ethnic studies does appear in the Disciplines List of Minimum Qualifications required to teach in a California community college, but the wording in this document is similarly unhelpful: “Master’s in the ethnic studies field OR The equivalent OR See Interdisciplinary Studies.” Some faculty associate ethnic studies with multiculturalism or global awareness, while others insist that these are
very distinct fields. The intent of the original language, some argue, is to provide opportunities in the curriculum for students to focus on the experience of those groups who have traditionally been marginalized in American culture, but such a definition is nowhere indicated in official language.

The current accreditation standards also include language that may be relevant to the concept of ethnic students as a component of general education: “A recognition of what it means to be an ethical human being and effective citizen: qualities include an appreciation of ethical principles; civility and interpersonal skills; respect for cultural diversity; historical and aesthetic sensitivity; and the willingness to assume civic, political, and social responsibilities locally, nationally, and globally” (ACCJC 2002 Accreditation Standards, IIA.3.c, emphasis added). However, while many would argue that the terms “cultural diversity” and “globally” imply ethnic studies, the words “ethnic studies” do not actually appear in this statement. The same issues regarding a definition of the concept thus remain.

Colleges have attempted to address the vaguely defined ethnic studies requirement in various ways. Currently more than 40 colleges offer not just courses but degrees in ethnic studies, including African American, Asian, and Chicano/Latino/Mexican Studies. Other colleges, instead of developing complete and separate fields of study, have sought other methods of meeting the demands of both Title 5 and accreditation. Without clearer and more direct definition, colleges are left with various avenues for offering students an ethnic studies option that will fulfill the broad language of the Title 5 requirement.

How Should We Teach Ethnic Studies?

Individual colleges around the state have developed a variety of methods for meeting the ethnic studies requirement. Some colleges, as noted above, have developed courses and programs that explicitly and specifically address the subject. Without more specific definition of the requirement, a single course addressing a particular cultural group can serve as an appropriate option for students to meet the Title 5 language. Such an approach can allow students to focus in detail on learning about the cultural group being studied, perhaps deepening the level of their understanding in this specific area.

While a single three-unit course available as an option allows a college to meet the Title 5 requirement, some faculty believe students are better served by a course that allows them to analyze the experience of marginalized groups in a comparative setting. For example, Santa Monica College’s History 10, “Ethnicity in American Culture,” examines the experience of various historically marginalized groups as well as women and different waves of European immigrants. Such an approach allows students to consider the subjects of ethnicity and culture in a broader context and to gain knowledge about a wider variety of ethnic groups.

Yet another, often invisible, option students have for learning about ethnic studies comes from course sections whose course outlines do not specify but can easily incorporate content relevant to a variety of cultures and ethnicities. Most colleges offer numerous sections of composition and literature classes whose course outlines focus on the skills to be acquired but leave to the discretion of the instructor which specific texts will be read, and some faculty take advantage of this situation to select texts that focus on the study of ethnicity and culture. For example, a typical introduction to literature course focuses on ways to discuss and understand various literary genres, but most course outlines do not specify the particular works that will be discussed. Thus, instead of studying Shakespeare as an example of drama, an instructor could choose Lorraine Hansberry or David Henry Hwang; instead of poetry by Keats and Tennyson, one could use Langston Hughes, Gary Soto, or Joy Harjo. A course section designed in this manner could easily be recognized by a local curriculum committee as meeting the ethnic studies requirement in a broad and comparative way. Instructors at many colleges may already design their courses in such a
manner, and thus their class sections might be designated as qualifying to meet the ethnic studies requirement simply by alerting the local curriculum committee and changing the course description in the schedule of classes.

Faculty may assume that courses in history, sociology, or literature most readily lend themselves to incorporating ethnics studies, but during the Fall 2009 Plenary Session breakout Beverly Shue of Harbor College discussed the value of spending time in science classes discussing the contributions to scientific knowledge made by Asian-American, African-American, and other traditionally marginalized American groups. When the classroom includes many students from these cultural backgrounds, the value of such an approach is not only that it informs all students about the diverse contributors to scientific knowledge, but also that it encourages the students’ belief that they too can contribute to the ongoing development of knowledge in their field of study.

A final technique discussed during the plenary session breakout is the development of an ethnic studies component in learning communities. Learning communities can be defined as any group of students who share and collaborate in a linked set of two or more courses for a common purpose. The purpose, of course, is enhanced student success. Learning communities often lead to increased student success because of the social bonding that occurs when a cohort of students take multiple classes together, but the opportunity for a deepened understanding of the issues in ethnic studies is also enhanced when students are asked to examine the ways that different disciplines examine questions of exclusion and marginality. The Autobiography of Malcolm X and Taylor Branch’s history of the Civil Rights movement provide different but equally valuable perspectives on a crucial period in American history, and in a learning community setting students can learn more about history, autobiography, and the civil rights movement all at the same time.

While English and history seem to be courses whose content and outcomes could link naturally, other learning community links are also possible and valuable, such as psychology and sociology. In this link students not only learn the psychology of different ethnic groups, but also the sociology of those groups in the current society. They begin to understand how the psychology of a group shapes its socialization. The Academic Senate encourages faculty to consider possibilities for linking all types of courses in order to enhance student success.

Clearly colleges and faculty have many options through which they can educate students about ethnic studies while meeting the requirements of Title 5 language. These options should be considered and adopted as appropriate to the specific missions and communities served by our colleges across the state.

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