HERE FOR A REASON
1969 to 2019: Fifty Years of Ethnic Studies at Cal Poly
Creative Works

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We acknowledge the land on which we have formulated this publication as situated within yak tit'u tit'u yak tiłhini Northern Chumash homelands. The yak tit'u tit'u people are Indigenous to the San Luis Obispo region. They have lived in areas from Ragged Point to Carrizo Plain, Santa Maria to Morro Bay, since time immemorial and into the present. We acknowledge the colonialism upon these lands and are grateful to these lands upon which we are guests.

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HERE FOR A REASON
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1969→2019  50 years of Ethnic Studies at Cal Poly
This exhibit commemorates 50 years of Ethnic Studies student activism and the program's development. In 1968, students protested across the nation and at Cal Poly against institutionalized racism and educational inequities, leading to the establishment of the first Ethnic Studies programs. Cal Poly’s Ethnic Studies Department was created in Fall 1969 as a culmination of these students' efforts to recruit and retain students and faculty of color and to transform the curriculum to serve the community. The department disappeared in the 1980s but, again, through student organizing and movement building, was reborn 25 years ago in 1994. The magnitude of student protests at Cal Poly in spring of 2018 reminds the university that Ethnic Studies is here for a reason: to provide a relevant education for all students.
1931. Roberto Alvarez vs. the Board of Trustees of the Lemon Grove School District (Superior Court of San Diego County). The first successful school desegregation court decision in US history.

1947. Mendez v. Westminster (US 9th Circuit Court of Appeals). First case to hold that school segregation itself is unconstitutional and violates the 14th Amendment.

1954. Brown v. Board (US Supreme Court) unanimously held that the racial segregation of children in public schools violated the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment.

1966. First Black Student Union founded at San Francisco State College.

March 6, 1968. East Los Angeles Walkouts or Chicano Blowouts start. Students were protesting inequity in Los Angeles United School District high schools.

April 4, 1968. Martin Luther King, Jr. is assassinated.

1974. In Lau vs. Nichol, the US Supreme Court decided that not providing language instruction in public schools for students with limited English proficiency violated the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Cal Poly

July 1, 1970. David Sanchez becomes full-time head of Ethnic Studies Department.

1980. Grand Opening of MultiCultural Center in the University Union at Cal Poly.

1990. Cal Poly


Cal Poly

Spring 1993. Cal Poly student protests, demanding recruitment of students and faculty of color, training for faculty, curriculum.

2010. Cal Poly


2010


August 2017. HB 2281 ruled unconstitutional on the grounds that banning of Mexican American Studies was motivated by racial animus.

February 2019. California State Assembly bill is introduced that would require ethnic studies course as a CSU graduation requirement.
**Fall 1968.**
Mexican American Studies Program is established and coordinated by Dr. Ralph Guzmán, an assistant professor of government at Cal State L.A. The program is the first ethnic studies program created.

**November 6, 1968.**
San Francisco State College student strike begins.

**March 21, 1968.**
San Francisco State College TWLF strike ends with a signed agreement and creation of the first School of Ethnic Studies.

**March 1969.**
El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán is adopted by the First National Chicano Liberation Youth Conference in Denver, Colorado.

**Cal Poly**
**August 1969.**
Richard Martinez appointed Ethnic Studies program coordinator and EOP director.

**Cal Poly**
**September 1969.**
Ethnic Studies appears in Cal Poly Course Catalog.

**November 1969-June 1971.**
American Indian Movement (AIM), founded in July 1968, participates in occupying Alcatraz.

**March 21, 1969.**
San Francisco State College TWLF strike ends with a signed agreement and creation of the first School of Ethnic Studies.

**1996.**
California Proposition 209, anti-affirmative action measure, passed as a constitutional amendment to California constitution prohibiting public institutions from discriminating on basis of race, sex, or ethnicity.

**June 2, 1998.**
Proposition 227 passes, ending bilingual education in California.

**2000s**

**Cal Poly**
**May 5, 2005.**
Ethnic Studies major at Cal Poly approved.
In 1968, Black students voluntarily taught Ethnic Studies off-book classes.

1969

At Cal Poly, Martinez, a 25-year-old Mexican-American who graduated from Tucson's Pueblo High School, will head an Ethnic Studies Program based on an interdisciplinary approach. Announced by the college last spring, it includes a total of 44 courses offered by various departments of the college's five instructional schools. Typical of the courses are "Teaching the Culturally Deprived Child," "Afro-American Literature," "Latin-American History," "History of East Asia," "American Minorities," "Ethnic Music of the World," and "Culture of the Brown American Pre-School Child."


Photograph: David Sanchez, longest serving head of Ethnic Studies. Courtesy of University Archives.
1973

ETHNIC PROGRAMMING BOARD

POLYTECHNIC STATE UNIVERSITY

BLACK STUDENT UNION

CHINESE STUDENTS ASSOCIATION

NATIVE AMERICANS

TOMO DACHI KAI

MECHA
Ethnic Programming Board logo, circa 1973-74. The Ethnic Programming Board was formed in 1972 to support five Cal Poly minority student clubs. To “better meet the cultural needs of students,” ASI provided funding to the board for events and programming.

Courtesy of University Archives.
A new Ethnic Studies department and minor is formed. Dr. Robert Gish, director and professor; Yolanda Tiscareno, administrative support coordinator; Dr. Willi Coleman, professor, 1994.

Courtesy of Ethnic Studies Department.
Faculty from the College of Liberal Arts believe the major will increase awareness and eliminate racial misconceptions.

Amanda Samonte

Cal Poly may have a new ethnic studies major as early as next year. Curriculum requirements are already in the works, after a 16-to-one vote by the College of Liberal Arts department chairs in favor of the program.

Ethnic Studies Department Chair Robert Ku said he came to Cal Poly this year with the idea of the new major.

“Ku has made it clear that he has come on this campus with the idea of making ethnic studies a full-fledged program,” Journalism Department Head George Ramos said. “The proposal, as he has outlined it, has received incredible support among his colleagues in the College of Liberal Arts.”

Ku is also enthusiastic about attracting students from different ethnic backgrounds.

“Remember the movie ‘Field of Dreams?’” Ku said. “Build it and they will come. Build a strong ethnic studies major, and people will not only come to Cal Poly, Cal Poly will welcome them with open arms.”

College kids are “hungering for diverse experiences,” Ku said. This major will, “give better understanding to diverse perspectives of all people.”

According to the 2002-03 Cal Poly fact book, more than 60 percent of Poly students are white. Only 6.6 percent of the student body is Latino, as opposed to more than 30 percent living in California. Less than 12 percent are Asian, and Blacks make up only 0.9 percent of the student population (roughly 160 students out of 18,000).

Industrial technology sophomore Curtis Thomas, a Japanese-African-American, said: "I would have liked to see something like this major when I was here. Ethnic studies would have been a great addition to the curriculum. It’s great to see it now."

The lead up to a possible ethnic studies major:

- First Japanese-American student
- First Chinese-American student
- First Filipino-American student
- First Latino-American student
- Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers is formed
- Ethnic studies program developed

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Ethnic studies major coming in fall

Major will be offered as a bachelor of arts degree and will require 76 major units

Amanda Strachan
MUSTANG DAILY

Beginning next fall, ethnic studies will be added as a major at Cal Poly. The subject has been a minor for years, but for the last two quarters officials in the department worked to get it added as an official major.

“The idea has been there for about 12 years, since the origination of the ethnic studies department,” said interim dean for the College of Liberal Arts Linda Halisky. “The major has passed the Academic Senate and will now be forwarded to the Chancellor’s office for approval there.”

The major will start small, focusing on internal transfers and build from there.

“We are looking at possibly 12 students the first term (fall ’06), moving to 42 by year three and on to 50 in five years,” Halisky said.

In the current budget crunch the addition is not expected to create more financial strain.

“In terms of funding, this major is a great bargain for the university,” Halisky said. “Essentially we can do it with only one additional position.”
2008

Protestors at the University Union against hate speech at the crop house, a university housing complex for horticulture and crop science students. Image source: “Revolt in face of racism.”

In 2017, over 20 student clubs march “against hate, bigotry and white supremacy” displayed on Free Speech Wall. Image source: “History of Social Activism at Cal Poly.”

April 2018 Open House student protests. Courtesy of Stephen Heraldo.

Courtesy of Grace Yeh
Department photo.

ES chair Denise Isom, October 2019.
Department photo.
STILL WE RISE

HERE FOR A REASON

1969 → 2019
The 1960s is arguably one of the most tumultuous decades in the 20th century with regard to the long fight for civil rights, including the fight for greater inclusion, access, and equity in our educational systems. Generations of earlier struggles laid the groundwork for changes at the university level such that the first ever university ethnic studies program, Mexican American Studies, was established in the fall of 1968 at California State University, Los Angeles. Later that year, the Black Student Union and the Third World Liberation Front protests at San Francisco State College led to the establishment of the first School of Ethnic Studies in the United States.
As these student protests and demands spread throughout the nation, members of Cal Poly’s Black Student Union met with Cal Poly president, Robert E. Kennedy in 1969 to discuss the need for more Black instructors and students, a full-time Black Studies curriculum, and separate classrooms and dorms for Black students (Mustang Daily, April 2, 1969). United Mexican American Students (UMAS) also met with Kennedy to raise several points: that the new Ethnic Studies coordinator be Mexican American, that student and community leaders should be on the Ethnic Studies Committee, and that there should be Chicano representation on the Anti-Discrimination Committee (Mustang Daily, May 2, 1969). The Ethnic Studies Department at Cal Poly was established in Fall 1969 as a result of these students’ efforts.

Richard Martínez, who also led the newly formed Educational Opportunity Program at Cal Poly, was the first Ethnic Studies coordinator. While initially promising, the program required a lot more institutional investment, development, and support. It was also criticized because the courses for the program were drawn from already existing courses in other departments throughout the University and all of these courses were taught by white faculty. Students concluded that such a program was an attempt at the “[pacification] of the Third World and other minority groups.” They added, “It will remain so until the curriculum of the ethnic studies department is made up through consultation with all Third World students on campus and the power of self-determination in curriculum is provided for them by the administration” (Mustang Daily, May 7, 1969).

The university responded by making some changes and, in 1970, Martínez moved to EOP as its full-time director and David Sánchez was hired as the full-time coordinator of the Ethnic Studies department. Under Sánchez, the first Ethnic Studies courses were introduced in 1973. They were Introduction to Ethnic Studies (Eth S 105) and Racism in American Culture (Eth S 114).
San Francisco State College student strike poster
1968. Screenprint, 20 x 26 in.

SF State Third World Liberation Front’s 5-month strike led to the creation of the first College of Ethnic Studies and inspired a coalition of student organizers across the state to demand that their institutions make education relevant for all students.
1994.

Motto for the formation of the Ethnic Studies department and minor. Collection of Ethnic Studies Department.
WE'RE STILL HERE
Remarkable political shifts happened during the late 1970s through the 1980s, ushering in a reactionary series of events that threatened to undo the progress made during the 1960s movements. The 1980s, in particular, sees the election of Ronald Regan, the rise of “multiculturalism,” the culture wars, and various efforts to scale back social and educational programs like those established in the Great Society programs. It is in this context that Ethnic Studies is listed as a program for the last time in Cal Poly’s 1979-1981 University Catalog. By 1982, the department disappears.

Part of the issue during this period is the focused discourse on “multiculturalism,” which celebrated diversity but assumed everyone was simply part of the fabric of the U.S. in equitable ways. Multiculturalism even situated race as “cultures” that were marketable, therefore sidestepping the issues of differential access to resources or power along racial lines, which was made central by Ethnic Studies’ formation.

Though the department no longer existed, student activism and efforts to diversify Cal Poly continued and the Ethnic Studies Department soon reemerged.

1980s
“It’s a shame that for three years in a row, students have had to come here and plead and make their case known for respect. Such a small thing as respect. The Cultural Pluralism requirement which was worked on so hard for two years by a student coalition was passed in December. Nothing was done by this body for five months with that resolution. It was remanded to me last week to handle as I could with one week left in the term. I am not casting blame. I’m simply using that as an example of where this kind of consideration is on your priority list... This is something that the entire campus must embrace. It’s a wonderful opportunity... When the students wanted to talk to the President, there’s no reason to have plain clothes security agents and squad cars waiting down the street. These are students, not gang members. Even if they were gang members it’s questionable whether that kind of treatment should be extended to them... Even though the Cultural Pluralism resolution was passed unanimously, under the surface the subtext was a sort of begrudging passage of that. These are vibrations that many felt. The Educational Equity Commission came to you wanting you as a Senate to approve, in principle, the passage of a Ethnic Studies minor. It was summarily dismissed, no further discussion... This is where the frustration lies. It’s in attitude. It’s in obstructionism. It’s not in money and budget. That’s part of it, but it’s not the main concern.”

— Gish

(Academic Senate meeting minutes, June 1, 1993).

“Whose Academic Senate is this? Who are you here to serve? Yourself or the students? What is the university for? Yourself or the students? That’s the first problem. We got all racists in here. All racists in here. No one hear anything about diversity. No one hear anything about change. Just wanna hold tight to... their old ideas... We come here today to impress upon your minds the importance of this... to show you how important this is to us... We’re not here to apologize. You should be apologizing to us. The President has admitted that you guys have failed. He admitted that he failed... So what do you expect us to do? Come here and apologize, say ‘please mister! please give us something!’... No! That’s not how I’m coming. I’m coming here demanding it! Demanding it! And I’ll find a way to get it. You can believe that. That’s all I have to say.”

— Student (not identified by name)
ETHNIC STUDIES 2.0

In the 1990s, students at Cal Poly intensified the long fight in advocating for more diversity and representation at the university.

In May 1993, students sent a letter to the university president, state senators, state assembly members, and the Cal State University Chancellor requesting a formal plan to address issues of diversity at Cal Poly (Mustang Daily, May 27, 1993). Twenty-five years after the student protests in 1968, students were making the same demands for recruitment of staff and students of color, Ethnic Studies as a general education requirement, and mandatory diversity training for ASI members.

Shortly after the letter was sent, approximately 100 students, along with Director of Ethnic Studies Robert Gish, led a protest from the University Union Plaza to Cal Poly President Warren Baker’s on-campus home. As reported in the Mustang Daily, “Protestors chanted ‘Poly’s all white, that’s not right’” (May 28, 1993). Five days after the march to President Baker’s home, student protesters also took over the Academic Senate to voice their discontent (Academic Senate meeting minutes, June 1, 1993).

In January 1994, Cal Poly took an important step in supporting diversity and inclusion at the university and approved an Ethnic Studies minor, making Cal Poly the last campus in the California State University system to offer this minor.

“The thing that’s happening at UCLA--the hurdle--a few old white men in the Academic Senate... It seems to me the recurring theme here is the Academic Senate. Not all of you. There’s a lot of you in here who are very sympathetic to students. And who will openly voice out your opinions to the rest of your colleagues and probably will be ostracized for it because that occurs. That’s the reason why the colored faculty that come to this campus leave. Look around you in this room. You don’t think there’s anything wrong right now? How many people of color do you see sitting here who are representative of us? And you, all of you here, are supposed to know what we want and what we need and what we have to face on this campus. We came and asked. We didn’t get it. We’re coming in here and we’re demanding it because nothing else has worked and we’re angry and we’re frustrated and it’s gonna get worse because you guys do not, this university does not, represent the demographics of California. The CSU system is supposed to serve the people. We will soon be a majority and you can look around you right now and realize you’re not serving us. Our parents pay taxes, just like everybody else, and we’re almost the majority and we’re not represented on this campus... You have to face up to these issues instead of ignoring and asking us, asking the rest of your colleagues, who runs this? You serve us and that’s the only reason we’re here. We want a voice on the Senate. We want our issues to be discussed and not to be ignored and not to be pushed back time after time after time, because that keeps occurring.”

— Student (not identified by name)
A New Major
A NEW MAJOR AT CAL POLY

Comparative Ethnic Studies becomes a major at Cal Poly with the Chancellor’s Office approval in 2005. In Fall 2006, the department welcomed its first majors.

The creation of the major was part of the ongoing effort to provide a relevant education, increase diversity, and attract more faculty and students of color. In 2000, more than 60 percent of the student population was white — not too far off from today. During its Western Association of Schools Colleges (WASC) review in 2000, Cal Poly was warned that it had to be more aggressive in diversifying the university to better represent the demographics of California.

The major was designed with several aims in mind. One aim was to take a comparative approach to Ethnic Studies, in contrast to many programs in California which focus on a particular racial or ethnic group. Another aim was to foreground issues of race, ethnicity, and gender central to science and technology, especially relevant to a comprehensive polytechnic university. As well, the program would help “in unearthing of valuable and emerging discoveries hidden beneath the buried past (and present) of Cal Poly’s surrounding areas” (“Proposal Highlights,” 2005).
Recurring racist incidents on campus — and student protests against them — reiterate that racism on campus was and continues to be institutionalized. Incidents of hate speech, Greek life parties with racist themes, public display of noose with racist and homophobic epithets, and other racist acts happen with frustrating regularity. In 2015, a student and SLO Solidarity organizer even received death threats.

All of these incidents built on one another, creating tension, until in April 2018 when the campus reached a boiling point. Images surfaced on social media of Lambda Chi Alpha members dressed as gang members, including one in blackface, during Cal Poly’s PolyCultural Weekend.

Students came together to create demands, protest and show the administration that they were fed up with the way it has responded to a history of racism. The Black Student Union, the Drylongso Collective, the Ethnic Studies Department, and other organizations released statements addressing the incident and demanding changes from the administration. Students held a town hall and silent protests. More than 40 cultural organizations comprising of over 200 students boycotted Open House, drawing national media attention.

The student demands, like the demands 25 years and 50 years prior, include implementing a graduation requirement to take an Ethnic Studies or Women’s and Gender Studies course, creating an endowed chair of Ethnic Studies, and increasing the recruitment and retention of students and faculty of color.
As we celebrate 50 years of Ethnic Studies at Cal Poly, we reflect upon how much has changed yet stayed the same. Whereas the 1980s was marked by backlash against the growing diversity of the State of California, Ethnic Studies is now taught in grades K-12 and is a high school graduation requirement for some schools and districts. From our first four graduates in 2009 to over 100 graduates ten years later, Cal Poly’s Ethnic Studies Department has grown as students seek an education relevant to understanding and serving their communities. And our graduates are making us proud: they are placed in top-tier graduate and professional schools, practicing law, working at non-profits, teaching a new generation, and more.

The history of our department and of student protests draws attention to how Cal Poly still struggles to keep pace with the changing demographics of California. Currently, over 70% of children born in the state are people of color, and yet Cal Poly has the distinction of being the whitest public university in the state (Tribune, April 19, 2018). Student demands in 2018, and 25 and 50 years before that, have asked for the same things: access for historically underrepresented students and a relevant education. What has also stayed remarkably the same over these periods is the power of students when they organize and their ability to imagine and bring forth a better Cal Poly and stronger communities.

OUR DEPARTMENT HAS BEEN, IS, AND WILL ALWAYS BE DEDICATED TO THESE STUDENTS.
Ethnic Studies is an intellectual and political project that uses inter- and multidisciplinary approaches to understand and transform enactments of power, to which, in the modern era, productions of race and ethnicity have been central.

We understand “race” as a dynamic ideological and institutional framework through which exercises of power and oppression as well as struggles for liberation and self-determination are articulated and enabled. “Ethnicity” refers to a group identity based on a presumed common ancestry, language, history, and cultural practices.

The aim of the Ethnic Studies curriculum is to provide students with an understanding of the historical processes (including slavery, capitalism, genocide, colonialism, nativism, war) that form the United States as a nation-state and as an imagined community, and their differential impact on diverse communities within local, national, and global contexts.
Ethnic Studies critically attends to research methodologies and frameworks of knowledge in order to examine how these legacies impact access to political power, allocate economic resources, and influence cultural expression. We understand that dominant Western modes of inquiry in the sciences and humanities constrain what kinds of questions we ask, what kinds of studies we pursue, and how we interpret phenomena. To challenge these constraints, Ethnic Studies courses draw from and engage with a number of academic fields, including: post/decolonial studies, cultural studies, human rights studies, Indigenous studies, migration studies, legal studies, environmental studies, gender studies, sexuality and queer studies, and science and technology studies.

Through a critical and comparative study of interlocking and intersecting systems of oppression embedded in the formation of the U.S. nation, students develop a greater understanding of the legacies of racism, discrimination, and inequity in the United States as well as of the movements for social justice. Students also learn about diverse peoples of America, specifically Indigenous Peoples, Latinx, and the African and Asian diaspora who have been historically displaced, disenfranchised, and silenced.

Emerging as a challenge to the university as an apparatus for reproducing relationships of power and rooted in decolonizing movements in the 20th century, Ethnic Studies seeks to provide a relevant education—one that has a deep commitment to justice, equity, and social and institutional transformation.
Acknowledgements

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The Ethnic Studies Department of Cal Poly acknowledges our campus is built on the traditional lands of the yak tityu tityu yak tilhini, Northern Chumash Tribe of San Luis Obispo County. We recognize these are unceded ancestral territories called tilhini, the Place of the Full Moon, by the Northern Chumash peoples. We give thanks to them and their ancestors for the unbroken and careful stewardship of these beautiful lands.
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Department of Ethnic Studies
José Navarro

2018 Protest images courtesy of:
Stephen Heraldo