

What Is Ethnic Studies?

By [Amanda Morrison](#), Ph.D.

SRJC Petaluma [Intercultural Center](#) Coordinator and [SSU Ethnic Studies Lecturer](#)

Ethnic Studies is an interdisciplinary field of critical race studies that focuses on the four most historically aggrieved racialized groups in the United States: African Americans, Native Americans, Latinas/os, and Asian Americans. Ethnic Studies is the umbrella term that encapsulates the following scholarly disciplines: African American Studies, Native American Studies, Chicanx and Latinx Studies, and Asian American Studies.¹ Although Ethnic Studies can be taught through a hemispheric, trans-Atlantic, and transnational lens, the focus has always been on communities of color in the U.S.

Ethnic Studies emerged in the Bay Area in 1968 as a result of the [Third World Liberation Front \(TWLF\) strike](#) at San Francisco State University led by the Black Student Union (BSU) in coalition with other groups representing Native American, Latinx, and Asian students; in 1969 the TWLF strike spread to UC Berkeley. Students' top demands were: 1) increased access to higher education for students of color; 2) increased hiring of faculty of color; and 3) the establishment of Black Studies and, more broadly, Ethnic Studies programs and departments. Following the TWLF strike, these demands were taken up by campus activists throughout the U.S., which led to dozens of Ethnic Studies departments being established in American colleges and universities.

Though interdisciplinary, [Ethnic Studies](#) is not the same as cultural anthropology, a discipline that historically placed greater focus on minoritized cultural and ethnic groups outside the U.S.² and has until recently ceded the study of urban American communities of color for the most part to sociologists.

Ethnic Studies draws scholars from more established and traditional disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, history, English, art history, communications, and political science when those scholars' research focuses explicitly on African American, Native American, U.S. Latinx, and/or Asian American populations.

Ethnic Studies today is widely taught through an intersectional lens in which issues of race and ethnicity are examined in relation to other axes of identity and oppression including gender, sexuality, socioeconomic class, religion, nationality, immigration status, language, and ability.

Ethnic Studies is the only academic field explicitly focused on race relations and ethnic identity in the U.S. from a humanistic, social-scientific, and social-justice point of view. It forces us to look at our history of racial subjugation and white supremacy. It gives us the tools to analyze, challenge, and dismantle the many forms of racism that exist today by incorporating insights from other fields while foregrounding the voices of communities of color.

¹ Occasionally Ethnic Studies departments include fields such as Arab and Muslim Studies and Jewish Studies or may articulate a global focus on Africana/African Diaspora Studies, but the emphasis on U.S. racial groups remains consistent.

² American anthropology has a robust history of scholarship on Native American culture, but that history is deeply enmeshed in the colonialist and Eurocentric ideologies from which the discipline of anthropology emerged in the 19th century.

Ethnic Studies scholarship is produced primarily by scholars of color, and Ethnic Studies classes are usually taught by scholars of color. This is key to the transformative power of the Ethnic Studies classroom: students who are both white and nonwhite engage meaningfully with course materials produced by people of color, and they are exposed to educators who have both scholarly expertise and lived experience as people of color.

There is substantial research establishing the fact that well-taught Ethnic Studies coursework is of profound benefit to students, including [this widely cited 2017 study out of Stanford University](#). For students of color, culturally relevant curriculum boosts educational attainment because, quite simply, it interests them. In addition to helping close equity gaps, Ethnic Studies classes foster critical antiracist thinking among white students by presenting multiple and non-hegemonic perspectives.

Over the past decade, an [increasing number of K-12 school districts](#) in the U.S. have implemented Ethnic Studies curricula. California is the hotbed of the Ethnic Studies movement in both K-12 schools and in higher education. Our state senate just passed [AB 1460](#), a bill requiring all CSU undergraduates to complete an Ethnic Studies course before graduating.

Historically undervalued and underfunded, the discipline of Ethnic Studies is finally being recognized by many Americans as a fundamental component of the fight against racism in U.S. society.