

**Discussion of Essential Learning in Ethnic Studies Requirement Courses  
March 11, 2010**

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## I. Executive Summary

In March, 2010, UW-Madison's Ethnic Studies Subcommittee invited faculty and academic staff who teach or influence the most frequently taken ESR courses to meet and talk about student learning in the requirement. The objectives of the event were threefold: first, to bring faculty and staff together to learn what goals ethnic studies courses share across campus, second, to discuss pedagogical aims and best practices, and third, to create a forum where ESR instructors could connect and begin to build stronger lines of communication. With these objectives in mind, organizers developed two questions for consideration:

Question #1: In view of the many types of courses that meet the ethnic studies requirement, what common expectations do we have about what students get out of these courses? These expectations likely transcend the specific content of the individual courses, and reach toward longer-term life and social goals - what should endure from students' experiences in ESR courses?

Question #2: What do you do to help make these things happen in your courses? Are there particular strategies or techniques you use to achieve these goals? Do these strategies change depending on classroom size, student level, or other factors?

36 principle respondents from across campus attended the event. After introductions, participants broke into groups to discuss the questions with support from 12 faculty and staff facilitators.

Beginning with the fundamental assumption that mastery of the content is the primary goal of any course, participants responded to **Question #1** with a set of learning goals that transcend specific content areas and instead speak to common objectives among ESR courses offered in a wide variety of topics:

**Awareness of History's Impact on the Present** - As part of an effort to engender awareness in their students, respondents argued that learning goals in ethnic studies should highlight precisely how certain histories have been valued and devalued, and how these differences have promulgated disparities in contemporary American society. This idea was expressed early and often in the discussion by teaching staff and administrators involved in small and large ESR courses across campus.

**Ability to Recognize and Question Assumptions** - As part of a theme of recognition and application of critical thinking skills, respondents repeatedly mentioned the importance of teaching students to harbor a healthy skepticism towards knowledge claims, whether in the form of media, political, or popular representations. Respondents also believed that, as part of this process, the ESR should challenge students to question their own assumptions and preconceived notions.

**A Consciousness of Self and Other** - Awareness of self, in the view of many participants, is inextricably linked with awareness of and empathy towards the perspectives of others. In constructing a space for this kind of discussion in their classrooms, participants argued that ESR gives students a unique opportunity to think about identity issues, including their own identity, as well as the connections they might have to people "outside" their focused social circle.

**Effective Participation in a Multicultural Society** - Students' "lives outside the classroom" were a predominant theme in the discussion, and many participants agreed that pursuing the objectives above should not only lead to student behavioral change, but to *action* in the real world. In the minds of many participants, the ESR should ultimately engender in students the ability to participate in a multicultural society more effectively, respectfully, and meaningfully. This participation may be as mundane as being able to discuss race with a colleague or friend, or to recognize inequities in interpersonal, institutional, or other contexts.

Participants also stressed that the ESR, in keeping with UW-Madison's tradition of exposing students to a diverse array of subject matter, helps to educate students about the presence and legitimacy of academic disciplines (e.g. those related to minority arts and literature) that they may otherwise not have encountered.

In response to **Question #2**, an inquiry geared towards fostering a discussion of pedagogical aims and practices in the ESR, participant discussion broke down into two macro-level categories: "Pedagogical", which encompassed participant suggestions relating to the approach and methods of individual faculty members in their ESR courses, and "Structural", which included suggestions that were more closely related to ESR policy and administration on campus.

*Pedagogical strategies* incorporated different teaching philosophies, including **an emphasis on facilitation over lecturing**, a more **direct, straight-forward, and intentional approach to teaching**, and a mindfulness for the discomfort that comes with **openly confronting inequalities and identity issues** in ESR classrooms. They included syllabus-centered tips like **introducing the ESR** itself in early lectures and **using student journals and student-suggested discussion topics** as the main organizational pillars of the course. Participants also discussed specific project ideas, including **active learning exercises, student reflections and free-writing, community-based interaction and research, and comparative analysis**, to better meet ESR goals and preferred learning outcomes.

While many of these strategies proved helpful to participants, there was consensus that the appropriate practices and pedagogy for any course ultimately depend on the individual instructor - and the structure and content they have chosen for their specific ESR course.

Question #2 also elicited *Structural suggestions* regarding macro-level policy, resources, communicating the ESR vision, and optimization of class size and structure. **Policy suggestions** included not allowing the ESR to be taken pass/fail, requiring that ESR be taken within the first two years of study, introducing different ESR course levels, from introductory to advanced, requiring two ESR courses, improved institutional recognition of instructor efforts in the ESR, and creating more First-Year Interest Group (FIG)-like experiences in the ESR as a whole.

Calls for more directed instructional, advising, facility, IT, and TA and assessment training **resources**, and a better **communication strategy** regarding the ESR requirement and its benefits, were also a significant part of the second question's discussion. And finally, participants spoke to the importance of **optimizing the size and structure of ESR courses** to best meet the requirement's goals.

## II. ESR Background

In July 1987, in response to escalating concerns about intolerant behavior on the UW-Madison campus, then-Acting Vice Chancellor Phillip Certain appointed and directed a Steering Committee on Minority Affairs made up of students, faculty, and academic staff to examine issues of racial and ethnic sensitivity at the University and offer recommendations for action. The Committee's December 1987 report recommended that the University adopt a "mandatory six credit ethnic studies course requirement and create and develop various Ethnic Studies Programs." The Committee concluded that "these measures will recognize the contributions of ethnic minorities of American society and promote cross-cultural understanding and respect among the entire student body."<sup>1</sup> After considering the viability of the proposed requirement in terms of the campus' existing course capacity, the L&S Curriculum Committee recommended that it be reduced to three credits.

In November of 1987, the Faculty Senate Committee on Academic Affairs of Minority/Disadvantaged Students (MDC), also working on issues of race and ethnicity, presented its first annual report to the UW Faculty Senate. The report called for the creation of a list of courses with "an ethnic cultural and human relations focus" and recommended that "a list of these courses be developed and distributed to appropriate advising units across campus and that all students be advised to include one or more in their undergraduate education."<sup>2</sup> February 1988 saw the *Madison Plan* published, which proposed an ethnic studies requirement for all undergraduate students to help them "more easily recognize, understand and appreciate cultural differences."<sup>3</sup>

In April of 1988, the L&S Faculty Senate formally adopted a three-credit ethnic studies requirement (ESR) to be effective for students enrolled in the College starting in the fall of 1989. Other UW-Madison schools and colleges adopted the L&S ESR over the next several years, and in 1994 the UW-Madison Faculty Senate approved a three-credit ethnic studies requirement for all incoming freshmen and transfer students. The Senate approved the intent and course description adopted by the L&S Faculty earlier that year, which underlined three goals:

- (1) *Increase students' understanding of and capacity to value the unique cultural and ethnic backgrounds and contributions of groups not integrated into the mainstream;*
- (2) *Facilitate understanding of what it means to live in a society which may display hostility to the individual on the basis of stereotypes of fundamental, frequently unalterable characteristics of race, religion, sex, or national origin;*
- (3) *Equip students to respond constructively to problems of our increasingly pluralistic American society*

To determine which courses at the UW-Madison should satisfy the requirement, the Senate approved three criteria:

- (1) *The study of the experience of discrimination by some ethnic, racial, or religious group so affected in American society; or*

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<sup>1</sup> Report of the Ethnic Studies Requirement Review Committee, July 18, 2002, page 7.

<sup>2</sup> UW-Madison Faculty Document 725, November 2, 1987, as quoted in Report of the Ethnic Studies Requirement Review Committee, July 18, 2002, page 7.

<sup>3</sup> Report of the Ethnic Studies Requirement Review Committee, July 18, 2002, page 8.

- (2) *The thorough examination of aspects of the culture and historical experience of an ethnic, racial, or religious group that remains on the margin in the United States; or*
- (3) *The study of discrimination, cultural differences, and ethnicity in other settings in ways which help in the understanding of cultural and ethnic problems in the United States*

In May 1998, the UW Board of Regents adopted *Plan 2008: Educational Quality Through Racial and Ethnic Diversity*, which issued requirements in the area of ethnic studies for the UW System that were much more limited than UW-Madison's requirements. With these changes in mind, Dean Certain of L&S appointed the Ethnic Studies Review Committee (ESRC) to review UW-Madison's requirements in light of the recent *Plan 2008* in February 2000, ten years after the first ESR had been implemented. He charged the committee with evaluating the requirement, both in terms of whether and how it had met its original goals, and asked them to look into how the requirement's administration could be improved, to develop, define, and offer e-courses across Letters and Science and other schools on campus.

July 2002 saw the release of the ESRC's report, which recommended that the ESR be retained with important modifications, including (1) replacing the existing UW-Madison ESR with a much more narrowly defined statement; (2) encouraging students to fulfill the ESR during their first two years of study; (3) expanding the number, pedagogy, and diversity in size of ESR offerings, as well as their ability to meet breadth requirements. The committee also recommended several administrative adjustments including increased publicity, the foundation of an oversight regime, periodic review of e-courses, and the creation of a committee, to be housed in L&S, to oversee the implementation of the revised requirement.

The ESRC restatement of the Ethnic Studies Requirement, which was adopted with only slight modification by the University Academic Planning Council (UAPC) and University Senate in 2003, read as follows:

*The University of Wisconsin-Madison is committed to fostering an understanding and appreciation of diversity, in the belief that doing so will:*

- *Better prepare students for life and careers in an increasingly multicultural US environment,*
- *Add breadth and depth to the University curriculum, and*
- *Improve the campus climate.*

*One of the University's overarching goals is to infuse the curriculum in all disciplines with diversity, including those where traditionally it has been absent. The Ethnic Studies Requirement (ESR) is one of several key elements in reaching this goal. This is a requirement that all students take a 3-credit course that considers ethnic/racial minorities that have been marginalized or discriminated against in the U.S. Because issues of ethnic diversity and religion are often intertwined and cannot easily be separated, courses that focus on religion may, where appropriate, fulfill the ESR.*

*All courses that the implementation committee approves as satisfying the requirement must provide evidence that the course material illuminates the circumstances, conditions, and experiences of racial and ethnic minorities in the United States.*

*(Adopted by the UAPC January 23, 2003;  
excerpted from Faculty Document 1736)*

Operational guidelines for the implementation of the requirement followed five purposefully *descriptive*, as opposed to *prescriptive*, criteria:

1. *ESR courses must be offered for a minimum of 3 credits.*
2. *Evidence (e.g., syllabus, reading list) must be provided demonstrating that the course material illuminates the circumstances, conditions, and experiences of racial and ethnic minorities in the United States.*
3. *Courses that explore the circumstances, conditions, and experiences of racial and ethnic minorities in a comparative international format must devote at least 25% of the course (lecture, discussion, reading materials, etc.) to the experience and/or theoretical understanding of the means by which persistently marginalized groups in the US negotiate the conditions of exclusion or marginalization.*
4. *Courses that explore the condition of U.S. ethnic groups that were at one time marginalized but which have since been widely assimilated into the dominant U.S. culture must devote at least 25% of the course to the experience and/or theoretical understanding of the means by which persistently marginalized groups in the US negotiate the conditions of exclusion or marginalization.*
5. *In cases where religion is intertwined with respect to ethnic/racial minorities that are persistently marginalized or discriminated against in the U.S., courses that focus on religion may fulfill the ESR.*

In 2005, the Ethnic Studies Implementation Committee's (ESIC) report to Provost Spear outlined the committee's efforts, between September 2003 and April 2005, in implementing the ESRC's recommendations. While much of the committee's work involved applying the new ESR criteria to the existing course array and approval process, its analysis also provided a valuable examination of continuing, systemic challenges to the effective implementation of the ESR and their connection to larger and more fundamental diversity issues on campus.

In a nod to these realities, the ESIC made several recommendations of its own, calling for increased recognition of ESSR faculty and instructional staff, the formation of a permanent ESR subcommittee, the increased dissemination of information relating to the reasoning and goals behind the ESR, and the creation of more e-courses, all to make the requirement more meaningful to students and to increase its status on campus. Later that year, administration of the university-wide ESR was formally incorporated into the duties of the University General Education Committee (UGEC), and the Ethnic Studies Subcommittee was established to review and add courses to the ESR curriculum.

### III. ESR Event

With these criteria and processes established, however, much room for interpretation still remains within ESR guidelines. As the University General Education Committee and Ethnic Studies Subcommittee move forward, assessment and program review requirements, as well as a desire to help students better understand our expectations for their learning outcomes in this area, have increasingly pointed to the need to create a forum in which ESR instructors and staff can communicate common goals, methods, and practices in their ethnic studies courses.

It was in this evolving context that UW-Madison's Ethnic Studies Subcommittee invited faculty and academic staff who teach or influence the most frequently taken ESR courses to meet and talk about student learning in the requirement in March 2010. The goals of the event were threefold: first, to bring faculty and staff together to learn what goals ethnic studies course share across campus, second, to discuss pedagogical aims and best practices, and third, to create a

forum where ESR instructors can connect and begin to build stronger lines of communication with one another.

Following the framework employed to successfully facilitate a campus-wide discussion on Essential Learning Outcomes in 2008, organizers developed two questions for consideration to help instructors and staff communicate undergraduate student learning outcomes in their ESR courses and their techniques for achieving these outcomes:

Question #1: In view of the many types of courses that meet the ethnic studies requirement, what common expectations do we have about what students get out of these courses? These expectations likely transcend the specific content of the individual courses, and reach toward longer-term life and social goals - what should endure from students' experiences in ESR courses?

Question #2: What do you do to help make these things happen in your courses? Are there particular strategies or techniques you use to achieve these goals? Do these strategies change depending on classroom size, student level, or other factors?

The event was held on Thursday, March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2010 between 8:30 and 11:00am in the Main Lounge of the Memorial Union (second floor), and was attended by 53 university staff and faculty in total.<sup>4</sup> 36 principle respondents participated, including lecturers, administrators, chairpersons, and other staff involved intimately in the ESR. 12 faculty and staff facilitators and note-takers worked among the respondents, and five speakers and L&S administrators observed the proceedings and took part in the group discussion. Respondents, facilitators, and note-takers were spread out among six tables, with 7-9 at each table, for small group discussions. After discussing the questions for 10-15 minutes as a small group, each table reported to the larger group on their main discussion points.

The findings below are based on data gleaned from (1) each discussion group's note-taker, and (2) the notes of observers who followed the large group discussion. Each set of notes was first separated into individual data-points for the two discussion questions and marked according to its table number. A team of four L&S researchers next classified the data points through manual coding, first by overall theme, and then into more specific, interpretive categories and sub-categories in order to draw out important patterns and trends in the data.

#### IV. Question #1 Findings

Question #1: In view of the many types of courses that meet the ethnic studies requirement, what common expectations do we have about what students get out of these courses? These expectations likely transcend the specific content of the individual courses, and reach toward longer-term life and social goals - what should endure from students' experiences in ESR courses?

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<sup>4</sup>Academic department attendees including representatives from Afro-American Studies, American Indian Studies, Anthropology, Asian American Studies, Chemistry, Chican@ and Latin@ Studies, Communication Arts, Comparative Literature, Educational Policy Studies, English, Folklore, Kinesiology, Medical History and Bioethics, Music, and Sociology. Academic support units represented at the event included Academic Planning and Analysis, the Center for the First Year Experience, the College of Letters and Sciences, Enrollment Management, First Year Interest Groups, the Offices of the Provost and Vice Chancellor for Teaching and Learning, and Pharmacy Academic Affairs.

Beginning with the fundamental assumption that mastery of the content is the primary goal of any course, Question #1 aimed to illuminate learning goals across the ESR that went beyond specific content areas and spoke to common objectives amongst courses with a wide variety of themes and topics. Participants responded with learning goals which broke down into several categories of critical and analytical thinking skills but which, in combination, would lead to the ultimate goal of cultural competence and effective participation in a multicultural society.

Please note that response categories are not monolithic and some points necessarily overlap between and among these larger thematic groups.

### Awareness of History's Impact on the Present

Participants responded to the first question with a set of learning goals couched in a language of "awareness", arguing that students should be made aware of host of different contextual realities that affect their day-to-day lives. These realities, in the respondents' view, include facts, figures, statistics, and perspectives and disparities that are rooted, above all else, in historical circumstances. Consequently, the importance of students coming away from ethnic studies courses with an understanding of *history* as the foundation for current events and social and political circumstances was considered a crucial learning goal. This idea was expressed early and often in the discussion by teaching staff and administrators involved in small and large ESR course from across departments:

"Students need to learn that life happens in changing contexts and is couched in history. Something I would like to endure in my students is an awareness and appreciation of the subtext."

"Students are part of an historical set of events and they need to understand that the past continues to have an effect on the present."

"We need to think about the past and present, to see how the past has shaped where we are now. This is a question about all of us."

Respondents did not consider these contexts, subtexts, and their historical foundations as value-neutral. As part of an effort to engender awareness in their students, respondents argued that learning goals in ethnic studies should highlight precisely how certain histories have been valued and devalued, and how these differences have promulgated disparities in contemporary American society. This point was made in several different ways:

"Students need an awareness of what was missing in the history they were taught, of the cultural amnesia of American histories in general. If students don't have that experience, they're not engaging."

"The course should make students critically assess historical motivations of the majority and understand the concept of structural racism."

"All histories have value. We need consciousness-raising about racial and ethnic disparities in the United States historically and today."

In the view of many respondents, fostering the awareness in students of structural inconsistencies in the historical and social record is essential to a more nuanced understanding of relationships of

power and identity, which in turn is indispensable to functionality in contemporary life. “Understanding the impact” of these competing values and interests, as one respondent noted, “is important for appreciating the world you live in.”

### Ability to Recognize and Question Assumptions

With a not unrelated connection to “awareness” abilities, many participants also spoke of the importance of helping students develop critical thinking skills that would allow them to *recognize* and *interrogate* knowledge claims and, in the words of several respondents, enjoy asking the question “Why is it we believe what we believe?” Respondents agreed that while it is impossible to be an expert in every subject, it is important to give students the critical and analytical tools through which they can analyze new information and claims:

“Discovery. It’s important to teach students that we don’t know everything, but that they can learn how to explore questions with sustained critical thinking.”

“I think my job as an instructor is to give students the tools and allow them to explore what they think is important, to deal with these issues.”

“I teach students to recognize and apply social processes and use their critical thinking skills.”

As part of this theme of recognition and application of critical thinking skills, respondents repeatedly mentioned the importance of teaching students to harbor a healthy skepticism towards knowledge claims, whether in the form of media, political, or popular representations. Respondents also believed that, as part of this process, the ESR should challenge students to question their own assumptions and preconceived notions:

“Students have to learn to question assumptions. Instructors have to get them to challenge their own preconceived notions and turn a more critical eye to media representations of past and present.”

“We need to deconstruct social, emotional, and intellectual barriers. I want students to recognize the very personal and subjective nature of much ‘objective’ analysis.”

“Students need to interrogate the ‘feel-good’ narrative of progress and have an awareness of their own attitudes and behavior. Whiteness is constructed. Categories are constructed and they mutate and shift.”

To many instructors and administrators, teaching that many “common sense” notions are instead social or cultural constructions has a significant effect on students. This was a theme iterated again and again throughout the discussions, and one that seemed crucial to respondents’ view of what the ESR should aim to instill.

### A Consciousness of Self, Other, and Difference

Recognizing assumptions, and honing the critical thinking skills not only to judge claims on their merits but to integrate learning into ongoing individual development, also plays an important role in a third set of themes participants discussed: consciousness and identity. As with the second set of themes, this set of ideas speaks to the importance of instilling a strong sense of self-awareness

in students. But it also requires building in students a sense of positionality, a consciousness of “difference” and identity, and the ability to empathize with those from a variety of cultural backgrounds:

“Students need to understand where other people are coming from. They also need to be conscious of their own position, ethnicity, and cultural frame of reference.”

“I have been asking students for years what they think is most important about the ESR course. They say it is empathy, or putting yourself in others’ shoes, to be able to imagine multiple world views rooted in multiple histories.”

“I try to get my students to understand what it means and feels like to be considered ‘different’, and to understand that the rest of the world isn’t like where they come from.”

“We need to invite and challenge students to walk in other peoples’ shoes, to get them outside themselves, to see their own culture from the outside and feel empathy for other people.”

Awareness of self, in the view of many participants, is inextricably linked with awareness of and empathy towards the perspectives of others. Participants talked of developing a positional awareness in students so they could understand that they, as individuals, fall into certain “presets” on a social scale. In constructing a space for this kind of discussion in their classrooms, participants argued that ESR gives students a unique opportunity to think about identity issues, including their own identity, as well as the connections they might have to people “outside” their focused identity circle. Many instructors suggested this kind of understanding could likely lead to more successful negotiations of the “cross-cultural divides” students would encounter in life outside the classroom.

### ‘Change’ Goals: Effective Participation in a Multicultural Society

Indeed, students’ “lives outside the classroom” were a predominant theme in the discussion, and one on which ESR instructors and administrators said they had spent a considerable amount of time and energy. Many participants agreed that pursuing the objectives above should not only lead to student behavioral change, but to *action* in the real world. In the minds of many participants, the ESR should ultimately engender in students the ability to participate in a multicultural society more effectively, respectfully, and meaningfully:

“Experience is important to behavioral change, of course, but performance, action, and experience are really significant to a students’ learned response. It’s about action.”

“The courses should change behavior. They should try to get people to live together in a multicultural setting, to give them the tools to deal with multiculturalism.”

“I want to give my students the confidence to talk about these topics and the language they can use to talk about these topics.”

Awareness that comes from recognizing the role history plays in our everyday lives, from having a nuanced understanding of race, privilege, and identity issues in American society, and using critical thinking skills to analyze knowledge assumptions and positionality, should remove barriers to understanding and lead to individual transformation. For many of the ESR Event

participants, “transformation” involves not only the students’ future participation and engagement with society, but their continual engagement with the learning process:

“The course should be transformative, lead to personal and social change. Students should continue to learn after they leave the university. ”

“I emphasize that learning occurs beyond the walls of and after time spent at the University. After that, you hope the course will help them develop an awareness of the multicultural reality that permeates our entire life.”

“I want them to find a good balance between the heart and mind. I don’t want them to look at the world in the same way again. We need to give them the inspiration to continue exploring and pushing their own intellectual and experiential boundaries.”

There are a host of practical benefits to this kind of training, of course, and a number of participants pointed out that future employers highly covet employees with the kind of intercultural skills learned through ESR courses. The ESR’s importance in this regard should not be underestimated.

Participants also stressed that the ESR, in keeping with UW-Madison’s tradition of exposing students to a diverse array of subject matter, helps to educate students about the presence and legitimacy of academic disciplines (e.g. those related to minority arts and literature) that they may otherwise not have encountered.

Many participants concluded, however, that the skills’ greatest value lay in their capacity to give students holistic, not just professional, success. Active and informed engagement, along with a continually developing aptitude for learning, will serve the students and those who they live and work with for the rest of their lives. For many participants, the institutional and societal change engendered by students of the ESR, after their time at UW-Madison had come to a close, was the most powerful and potentially significant goal of the program.

## V. Question #2 Findings

Question #2: What do you do to help make these things happen in your courses? Are there particular strategies or techniques you use to achieve these goals? Do these strategies change depending on classroom size, student level, or other factors?

The second question of the event was geared towards fostering a discussion of pedagogical aims and best practices in the ESR. With so many experienced respondents in attendance, the event offered an unprecedented opportunity for professionals to come together and communicate with one another about their work and to pool their knowledge on differing methods and approaches to meet learning goals.

During the subsequent conversation on Question #2, participant discussion broke down into two macro-level categories. The first, which we have labeled “Pedagogical”, encompassed participant suggestions relating to the approach and methods of individual faculty members in their ESR courses. The second, labeled “Structural”, includes suggestions that were more closely related to ESR policy and administration on campus. Once again, please note that some points necessarily overlap between and among larger thematic groups.

## Pedagogical

Suggestions in the “Pedagogical” category were concrete theories and practices that could be implemented and controlled at the individual faculty level within an ESR course. These suggestions can be further divided into three categories, from the more philosophic to the mechanical, including (1) Teaching Philosophy, (2) Use of the Syllabus, and (3) Specific Projects and Teaching Strategies.

Please note that while many of these strategies proved helpful to participants, there was consensus that the appropriate practices and pedagogy for any course ultimately depend on the individual instructor and the structure and content they have chosen for their specific ESR course. Some options may or may not work in a given ESR course depending on a wide variety of factors. Suggestions are therefore not meant to be ‘normative’, but suggestions.

### *Teaching Philosophy*

In explaining strategies and techniques they use in helping students achieve learning goals, participants began by highlighting the teaching philosophy or philosophies they’ve used in organizing their individual courses. A few key themes came up repeatedly.

Many participants suggested that **ESR courses call for more of an emphasis on facilitation than lecturing, and that students should be encouraged to actively engage in the course goals and assignments.** Not only should students be given more input on the course’s direction and assignments, but they should be prodded to, as one participant put it, “take more ownership” for the course and its objectives. Engagement comes through participatory exercises, group work and collaboration, and, as another participant noted, a willingness to acknowledge that one can always learn more on a subject (a phenomenon her ESR students and instructors called “crossing the bridge”). As a corollary, instructors of large course sections underlined the importance of discussion sections in getting students to create, act, perform, and engage in the material in ways that they wouldn’t be able to in large lectures.

Many participants also agreed that a **direct, straight-forward, and intentional approach to teaching** works best in ESR courses. In the view of a number of the discussion groups, ESR courses must allow for open analysis and argumentation in the classroom. Why are the students there? What do they think they will learn? Working through various thoughts, feelings, and assumptions on the material, in an honest space and with a supportive group, can help students make tremendous strides. Part of creating this kind of environment, many participants suggested, is accepting that “the instructor is just one voice and there are many others” and that there will be as many perspectives, identities, and experiential-based personal histories as there are students in the ESR classroom.

**The subsequent discomfort that comes with directly and openly confronting inequalities and identity issues** was nearly a response category within itself, and it came up repeatedly as

forum participants discussed their teaching philosophies in the ESR. Many agreed that the very nature of the requirement, and the engagement and transparency that many classroom topics demand, inspire a wide range of emotion in students and instructors, including anger, sadness, shame, guilt, and, in the view of many, depression. Many participants suggested that instructors need to have an awareness of the ways in which gender, race, ethnicity, age and other factors will factor in to how class members relate to one another and the material. Just as many noted, though, that instructors can use discomfort to motivate students in constructive ways, and that confrontations with emotional subject matter can provide even greater impetus and inspiration for students to reexamine assumptions.

### *Use of the Syllabus*

Teaching philosophies are borne out in the syllabus and through practical scheduling, project, and pedagogical strategies. Participants suggested a number of ways to use the syllabus as a principle means of expressing the course's and instructor's goals.

In order to communicate expectations clearly, a number of participants suggested **confronting the Ethnic Studies Requirement aspect of the course immediately** in the syllabus' course schedule to help create a climate of transparency and honesty on the goals of the course and the broader requirement. Many said that they devoted an entire lecture and interactive discussion to the ESR within the first few class days. One instructor said that "everybody gains" from a full-day discussion on "what ESR is, why we're here, why it matters to students of color and white students". "This kind of discussion addresses how the class will address the ESR goals and helps students shed resistance", she continued. It also, another participant noted, outlines the "positive steps necessary to change" and meet goals. Along these same lines, another instructor said he used a specific article, "The Goals of a Liberal Education" by Bill Cronon (1998), to get students talking about the perceived costs and benefits to students of these kinds of requirements.<sup>5</sup>

To help students take ownership of the course, several instructors talked about **using student journals, writing reflections, and student-suggested discussion topics as the main organizational pillars of their courses**. Several participants suggested models centered on student-created content to underline students' individual identities and responsibilities as well as to create an action-oriented focus. One instructor, for example, said that he organizes his course schedules to use 15 minutes at the beginning of every session to discuss current events and issues in the news. The instructor gives students the responsibility of finding contemporary topics, in the form of articles and multi-media news stories, which will be the subject of this discussion. The ultimate goal, in the view of event participants, is to emphasize that course subject matter is not strictly limited to the academic realm. It's important in the real world, and is based on real world experience.

### *Specific Projects and Teaching Strategies*

While a course's organization, priorities, and overall philosophy could be communicated effectively through the syllabus, participants also discussed a number of specific projects and strategies that they employed in their ESR courses to help students meet learning goals. These

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<sup>5</sup> William Cronon, "The Goals of a Liberal Education," *The American Scholar*, (Autumn, 1998), 73-80.

broke down into a few categories of common suggestions, including active-learning and role-playing, reflection and/or free writes, community-based research, and comparative work.

A large number of participants spoke of strategies harnessing **active learning and role-playing** to enhance learning in the ESR classroom, including holding debates, asking the students to argue multiple sides of an issue and to role-play, and generally organizing a course in which students undertake group work and exercises during almost every class session. Several participants spoke of scheduling mock debates in which students are purposefully asked to argue positions that are contrary to their own beliefs. One instructor said she asked her class to split into two groups, assigning one group the role of “people for whom race is an issue every day” and other as “people for whom it is not”, then asked the students to hold a discussion in their roles. Still another instructor said he arbitrarily assigned roles and asked students to perform a ‘person on the street’, Jay Leno-style interview in front of the class. Participants seemed to agree on the importance of asking students to research all sides of a topic so they could view the issue from multiple perspectives.

Many participants also said they relied heavily on **student reflections and free-writing** based on literature, museum visits, current events, film (documentary or otherwise), television, and other media sources. Some have compiled lists of texts and other learning materials for this purpose, while others ask students to bring learning aids to class and to structure the content themselves. Other instructors used literature and short texts, for instance, to broach complex questions of social location, history, and identity, to make students aware not only of the context of the story, but their own context as they read the story. One participant explained that this kind of reading can lead to potentially far-reaching class discussion and reflections. What life factors, conditions and privileges allow the reader to be able to sit down and read, to be able to go to college and learn about literature, or to sit in class and discuss literary techniques? Another instructor said that she asked students to conduct a free-write in which they researched, wrote about, and then discussed in class one word (black, white, woman, man, etc.). According to participants, these kinds of reflective learning exercises not only foster imaginative conversation in the classroom, but challenge students to communicate with one another and understand different perspectives in a more meaningful way.

Another project strategy that many participants employed in their courses was **community-based interaction and research**. As part and parcel of an ESR teaching philosophy based on engagement and active learning, instructors stressed the importance of sending students into the community for service learning exercises and field trips that would connect experience with lesson work. This connection tracks closely with the university’s “Wisconsin Idea” that education should influence and improve people’s lives beyond the classroom, and can provide students with an idea of the practical and real world application of academic learning.

Finally, several instructors suggested using **comparative work** to help students better understand domestic issues. Beginning with material from outside the U.S., one instructor noted, “makes it easier to begin the engagement from a distance, and can make it easier for some students to talk about privilege and inequalities that might hit close to home.” Another participant suggested that a comparative analysis can help students reexamine and gain a fresh perspective on issues of social and cultural diversity.

## Structural

During the conversation for Question #2, aspects of participant discussion more easily fit into another category, labeled “Structural”, which included suggestions that were more closely related to ESR policy and administration on campus as opposed to theories and practices that could be implemented at the individual faculty level in the classroom.

“Structural” suggestions fit into five different areas of concern, including (1) Macro-Level Policy, (2) Resources, (3) How We Communicate About the ESR, and (4) Faculty and Department Optimization. Each one of these categories could be distinguished based on which level of the institution the specific concern could be taken up or, more precisely, at which level ESR-concerned university actors would be able to speak to the issue. We’ll start with administrative/committee-level suggestions and move to those that would be handled at the departmental and faculty level.

### *Macro-Level Policy*

Many participants had suggestions regarding the ESR that would be handled at the committee, senate, and/or college administrative level. Starting from the most commonly suggested, policy concerns were as follows:

- The requirement should not be taken pass/fail
- The ESR should be taken within the first two years of undergraduate study
- There should be different ESR levels, from introductory to advanced; the nature of ESR courses is necessarily remedial and many instructors would like to develop more in-depth course offerings for the requirement
- Students should take two ESR courses (or a higher number of credits)
- The policy has to recognize that there are different levels of ES learning
- There should be more institutional recognition of instructor efforts in the ESR
- We need to create more First-Year Interest Group (FIG)-like experiences in the ESR; it would be especially helpful to integrate the ESR experience with large courses
- Prerequisites for the ESR have to be set and enforced
- The ESR policy needs to be re-written and re-thought, as the ESR is set up to teach white students; white people have ethnicity and aren’t all alike

### *Resources*

Many participants voiced concerns about the amount and kind of resources provided for ESR and the effects these provisions had on student learning. Resource-related suggestions fit into four categories, including Instructional, Advising, Facilities, and Information and Technology (IT), and would be handled at an intersection or in negotiations between faculty, departments, and university administration.

**Instructional resources** were a leading concern. Participants had a number of suggestions in this regard, the foremost being a call for increased opportunities for faculty and services collaboration between departments and across campus. Others suggested increasing ESR instructor pay, training faculty in pre and post-ESR assessment, TA training in ethnic studies, and coordinating pedagogy discussions amongst new instructors. One instructor suggested creating a “Knowledge Database” among instructors that would pool useful course resources, readings, and data and allow ESR instructors to communication among one another.

Participants also raised concerns over **advising resources**. Many suggested that the ESR could benefit from updated school/college advising strategies that would highlight the importance of and reasoning behind ESR, the need to enroll in an ESR early in one’s undergraduate career, and the array of different ESR courses in which students could enroll. Most agreed that student advisors could play a major role in reframing “Ethnic Studies” from a grin-and-bare-it requirement to a unique opportunity for students to study important aspects of American society.

**Facility resources** were an area of additional concern. As was pointed out, the physical space given to ESR courses differs from one department to another, and even between ESR courses in a given department. While instructors need to use their given facilities to their advantage, participants pointed out that we need to be mindful of the role a physical space and setting can play in recreating hierarchies and reinforcing power dynamics both inside and outside the classroom.

Participants also suggested that more **IT and online resources** should be offered and utilized by ESR instructors, such as the Teaching and Learning Excellence website at <https://tle.wisc.edu/>.

### *How We Communicate About the ESR*

In trying to address ways to meet continuing ESR challenges, participants discussed the importance of faculty, department, and administrative leaders **communicating about the requirement and its benefits**, as well as the value of buy-in from all the university’s schools and colleges to the project’s goals.

In order to assuage lingering perceptions that the ESR is an unnecessary burden on undergraduates, participants agreed that it was important for all involved to help people understand the importance of the requirement, the reasons for its institution, and the benefits, both personal and practical, that students receive through their participation. Many pointed out that much resistance to the ESR would diminish if students, faculty, and administrators had this information.

### *Faculty and Department Optimization*

Our final category of structural concerns in ESR relates to optimizing the size and structure of ESR courses, a negotiation that occurs mostly at the faculty and department level. Many participants agreed that the size and structure of any course affects content, interaction, teaching

philosophy, and ultimately student learning. This dynamic is even more pronounced in the ESR, where student-centered engagement, discussion, and reflection are so important to learning outcomes.

Participants had different suggestions for optimizing structure and class dynamics. **Class size** was an especially important factor in the participants' deliberations about many of the other topics of the day, including classroom practices, TA training, and teaching methods and strategies in ESR. Most agreed that large classes pose a considerable challenge to student learning goals in ESR, but there were a number of suggestions for counteracting these shortcomings. Several participants said continually engaging students in small group work and pointed discussion in large classes could keep students from "drifting away", as one instructor put it, and keep them interested in the material. One instructor said that after she realized it was nearly impossible to get good conversations going in one of her large classes, she began to randomly select student responses which she would read aloud, anonymously, to provoke discussion among the students. Other participants pointed to the importance of close TA-coordination in large classes to ensure the teaching staff is working through the same set of objectives.

One table's discussion highlighted the experience of several instructors who had found the *timing* of ESR courses to be important, as well. One instructor noted that she had been pleasantly surprised by ESR courses she taught at night. Students were relaxed and the class had more time in each session to spend delving into issues, which in turn allowed for a more in-depth discussion and development of ideas. Another participant relayed a similar experience he had with a summer session ESR course. The schedule of the course allowed his students to engage in a much more profound way with the material than if they had shorter class sessions. This more immediate and intense confrontation with the subject matter made for a more beneficial experience for the students.

## Appendix A: Follow-up Discussion on ESR Event

In May of 2010, the University General Education Committee and Ethnic Studies Subcommittee asked all invitees and participants from the Essential Learning in Ethnic Studies Requirement Courses Event in March to meet once again and discuss key themes from the report and ideas moving forward.

16 respondents participated in the May 19th meeting, including 12 who had attended the original event and 4 who had not. 4 members of the University General Education Committee and Ethnic Studies Subcommittee attended as well to help facilitate discussion. The discussion included representatives of Afro-American Studies, American Indian Studies, Anthropology, Art History, Botany, Chemistry, Chican@ and Latin@ Studies, Communication Arts, Comparative Literature, English, Folklore, Journalism, Sociology, and Women's Studies.

Participants were given an Executive Summary handout underlining the common course objectives and themes and asked to reflect on whether or not the listed themes adequately corresponded to those originally aired at the event. The hour-long conversation was lively and constructive, with participants actively engaged in the substance and themes of the original March event. A number of revisions were suggested and have been summarily incorporated in the draft report.

There were several suggestions *moving forward* that came out of the meeting:

- Participants called for future meetings of ESR faculty to discuss pooling resources, creating working and collaborative relationships across disciplinary boundaries to help and educate one another.
- Participants felt that there need to be further discussions with regards to ESR resources, specifically in the form of financial incentives recognizing the toll teaching these courses takes emotionally and in terms of instructor feedback forms
- Several participants suggested holding a campus community “Big Read” on a book with racial subject matter to get discussion of race going
- TA Training was again raised as an important matter and several suggestions were made as to when to hold the training session and when to conduct it

Participants roundly agreed that they would like the conversation and flow of knowledge between instructors to continue.