



Internal review: Most ethnic studies courses are meeting university's content guidelines

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The vast majority of courses that students can take to fulfill UW–Madison's ethnic studies requirement are meeting university guidelines for ethnic studies content, an internal evaluation (<https://uwmadison.app.box.com/s/go86i1qgf0r2y9p2tef2ibnypybr8y3y>) has found.

A subcommittee reviewed 225 syllabi for ethnic studies courses and determined that 209, or 93 percent, meet the guidelines and have the capacity to support the learning outcomes for ethnic studies courses.

In the remaining cases, university officials are working with instructors to align their syllabi with the guidelines.

Since 1989, all incoming freshmen and transfer students have been required to take at least one, three-credit ethnic studies course before graduating. The intent is to better equip UW–Madison students to participate effectively and respectfully in a multicultural society, including in the workplace.

In August 2016, Dean John Karl Scholz of the College of Letters & Science charged the Ethnic Studies Subcommittee of the University General Education Committee with ensuring that all courses designated as satisfying the ethnic studies requirement adequately fulfill that mission and support four essential learning outcomes (<https://uwmadison.app.box.com/s/drwc5acrrk8jgdatprpkzj21e2pzf9wy>). Those outcomes are: awareness of history's impact on the present; ability to recognize and question assumptions; a consciousness of self and others; and effective participation in a multicultural society.

The learning outcomes and a set of content guidelines are used to determine when a course satisfies the requirement. For instance, a course must demonstrate that it "illuminates the circumstances, conditions, and experiences of racial and ethnic minorities in the United States," according to current university guidelines.

In addition to the course review, the subcommittee identified areas of concern, recommended (<https://uwmadison.app.box.com/s/yj0ugpk5cnn7jkyg96vrsx9y304lk6ct>) 17 ways to bolster the ethnic studies curriculum, and released findings from a survey of ethnic studies instructors.

The subcommittee's report is scheduled for discussion at the Sept. 14 meeting of the University Academic Planning Council.

"This was important work, and I want to thank the subcommittee and its chairwoman, Professor Cindy I-Fen Cheng, for doing such a thorough, thoughtful job," says Provost Sarah Mangelsdorf, who requested the review. "I'm pleased that so much of what we are doing is working well, and I'm committed to finding ways to address those areas that need strengthening."

The review was part of a regular internal assessment schedule but took on heightened importance given a recent string of campus incidents that brought renewed attention to the role the ethnic studies curriculum can play in improving campus climate.

The subcommittee evaluated syllabi from all 178 active ethnic studies courses.

The courses are spread across campus in multiple academic departments and programs. Only a portion of the 178 are offered during any one semester. This breadth and variety made the review challenging.

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The number of syllabi reviewed by the subcommittee — 225 — is larger than the number of courses because some courses are taught by more than one instructor. Each instructor has his or her own syllabus.

No course lost its ethnic studies designation due to the review. The few courses that were found to fall short of the guidelines will be monitored for several years to ensure they meet the university’s goals going forward. In a handful of additional cases, a department or an academic program has asked that the designation be removed from a course because the course is unlikely to be offered again.

Cheng, a professor of history and Asian American studies, says she was impressed with the degree to which the four ethnic and indigenous studies units anchor the ethnic studies requirement.

“Though small, these four units are the foundation of the requirement and the conduits for diversifying and growing the ethnic studies course array across the campus,” Cheng says.

Of the 178 courses, 114, or 64 percent, are offered by the four units.

The subcommittee identified several areas of improvement. Among its recommendations:

- Revise the current guidelines to more effectively capture the intent of the ethnic studies requirement. Notably, require that courses be “centrally focused on,” not just “illuminate,” the circumstances, conditions and experiences of persistently marginalized racial and ethnic minorities and/or indigenous people in the U.S. Also, for the few courses that explore the experiences of racial and ethnic minorities and indigenous people in a comparative international context, require that instructors devote at least half of the course, or 7.5 weeks, to examining the experiences of persistently marginalized groups in the U.S. The current guidelines require only 25 percent, or 3.75 weeks.
- Permanently allocate teaching assistantships (TAs) to American Indian studies, Asian American studies and Chican@/Latin@ studies and increase the allocation of TAs to the Department of Afro-American Studies. This would boost their enrollment capacity. A spring 2017 pilot project supported by Provost Mangelsdorf found strong demand from students for the additional course capacity made possible by an increase in TAs.
- Develop a new tenure-track faculty line for the Chican@/Latin@ Studies program, where the hiring is administered and conducted by Chican@/Latin@ Studies.
- Develop a focused, university-wide training program for graduate students interested in being TAs for ethnic studies courses, and allocate resources to support ethnic studies instructors in the distinct challenges that come with teaching ethnic studies courses.

Additionally, the subcommittee recommends that it begin designing a way to assess whether the ethnic studies requirement is achieving its learning goals.

The survey revealed that instructors believe their own courses do, indeed, help students achieve the ethnic studies learning outcomes. However, many added that the true measure would require assessing student learning relative to the four learning outcomes — a task that will build on what's been learned from the review of the ethnic studies course array.
