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Undergraduate

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Mandatory Ethnic and Gender Studies in High School

In 1947, five Mexican-American families challenged the ‘separate but equal’ education that their children were getting in non-caucasian schools in the Supreme Court case *Mendez vs. Westminster*. In Orange County, California, these five families refused to accept this education system that discriminated against their children by considering them “special needs” because they spoke Spanish. Although the Westminster Elementary School allowed the Mendez children to attend their school, they did not allow any other child with Mexican-American descent. The Mendez family denied their offer and continued to sue where Governor Earl Warren would sign a law to end all segregation statutes in the state of California. Although schools were physically desegregated, the academic curriculum is still widely one-sided especially through the readings and history that is taught. Today, people of color are still forced to endure these segregated teachings that are focused on white culture, while never going in depth about their own culture. Instituting an ethnic and gender studies course would end the mainly white prominent course material and would improve high school graduation rates among

People of Color (POC), promote embracing oneself, inform others about different cultures, and provide a positive impact on racial attitudes.

Some might argue that an ethnic and gender studies course would cause racial division and bigotry throughout the students of a high school. They feel as though caucasian students do not need this class and will learn plenty about other cultures through a regular world history class. In Arizona, the republicans Tom Horne and John Huppenthal initiated the ban on the Mexican American Studies program because they believed that, “[an] ethnic studies promote resentment towards a race or class of people,” (2010) and also that it provided a “very toxic effect ... in an educational setting,”(2010). Many Caucasian families viewed this course as specifically targeting the white race because the classes were identifying whites as the oppressors. Caucasian families feared that the class would mainly teach that whites are the oppressors of all races/ethnicities and, therefore, oppose the idea of having a mandatory ethnics studies course.

Although students will learn a basic understanding of cultures from their world

1. Mendez vs. Westminster (1947) <https://kansaspres.ku.edu/978-0-7006-1719-7.html>
2. Shawn McGuffey, a professor of sociology and African & African diaspora studies. <http://bcheights.com/2015/10/30/race-based-forum-spotlights-white-privilege-in-academia/>

history classes, Northern Arizona University defines ethnic studies as "... the interdisciplinary study of race and ethnicity, as understood through the perspectives of major underrepresented racial groups in the United States," (Northern Arizona University 2017). An ethnic studies class will not cause a division between races but will allow students to embrace each other's cultures and create unity and acceptance between students. To further back the claim that ethnic studies will have not cause racial division, a recent study in three San Francisco high schools placed an ethnic studies program in 9th grade courses, saw improvements of the students taking the course than those who did not. Similarly, in a recent Stanford University study of the implementation of ethnic studies in high school, Stanford found that, "Taking a ninth-grade ethnic studies course boosted the grades, attendance and course completion rates of San Francisco students," (Ethnic Studies Classes in S.F. Surprisingly Successful 2016). After seeing a surprising increase in overall student performance, it is clear that an ethnic studies course would only have benefits. This further proves of how ethnic studies should be mandatory and will not cause racial division because it has had no impact between races in the schools that have been placed it.

In cases where the ethnic studies course has been implemented in high schools, not only has there been an increase in average grades of the students, but there has also been a drastic increase in the graduation rates among the students of color. Ron Espiritu, an ethnic studies high school teacher, began teaching a Mexican-

American studies course in Tucson, Arizona that would teach students the history and culture of the Mexican culture. While teaching this class, Ron Espiritu saw an improvement among Mexican-American students' graduation rates, "93% of the students in the Mexican Americans studies were graduating from high school and 85% of them were getting accepted into college," (Espiritu 2014). Although this program was banned in 2010, Ron Espiritu did not give up on teaching ethnic studies because he saw such amazing improvements in the students. After this program was banned, Espiritu moved this course to a school in South Los Angeles where the 2012 Cabrera studies found that students were outperforming their peers in reading, writing, and math. The program was allowing students to develop that intellectual identity because they were able to learn about their culture and history other than hearing it in a World History textbook, which would only graze over their history. This course allowed students to embrace who they are, and they were able to succeed overall in their classes.

To embrace yourself, means to freely accept your identity and what exactly makes up who you are. Many teenagers are going through a time where they don't love who they are because they do not know how. An ethnic and gender studies course is vital for these teens who are still learning how to love themselves because it allows them to gain a deeper understanding of their ancestry and how they got to where they are today. One author that students would read in an ethnic studies class and would be able to identify with aspects of her is Gloria

Anzaldúa, a woman focused on speaking out for her Mexican-American nationality and her queer sexual identity. Anzaldúa states in her novel *Borderlands, La Frontera*, “She communicates that rupture, documents the struggle. She reinterprets history and, using new symbol, she shapes new myths... Deconstruct, construct,” (Anzaldúa 104). Gloria Anzaldúa speaks of a woman who deconstructs who she is to analyze and focus on the struggles each part of her is. When Anzaldúa describes this woman and who she becomes after her reconstruction, she illustrates a positive view on this woman’s life and how this woman is finally in control of who she identifies as. For students struggling with either trying to assimilate to a white culture or hiding their true sexual identity, Gloria Anzaldúa allows for students to find a way to accept who they are through reading her struggles. An ethnic studies class would allow students to deconstruct who they are by obtaining knowledge of where they came from and allowing students to understand all their ancestor’s struggles and what has formed their culture/race to be what it currently is.

Another writer who describes the importance of self-identification is bell hooks, who writes in her essay *Keeping Close to Home: Class and Education*, “Yet [my mom] gave me sources of affirmation and nourishment, sharing the legacy of family history, of her incredible way with words,” (hooks 91). While attending Stanford, which was over 2,000 miles away from her home in Kentucky, hooks found it very difficult to stay close to her roots because she was not surrounded by people of her race. Although, when her mother

would speak about her history, bell hooks was able to experience her culture which eventually led her to embrace who she is and speak of it to others and become who she wanted to be instead of assimilating to a white culture. In bell hook’s *All About Love: New Vision*, a book describing the aspects of love in today’s society, bell hooks discuss how, “schools for love do not exist. everyone assumes that we will know how to love instinctively...despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, we still accept that the family is the primary school for love,” (hooks 26). Self-love is not something that bell hooks finds to be provided by family, but is needed to be taught to children in school. An ethnic studies class will allow students to embrace their culture and will teach students of color how to love who they are through the readings and writings of people of their race. With both Gloria Anzaldúa and Bell Hooks speaking out about their culture, they were able to not only embrace who they are, but also promote the idea of loving one’s culture and one’s self.

Not only would a mandatory ethnic studies class allow one to embrace who they are, but it would also inform others about different cultures and create a positive impact on racial attitudes between one another. Robert E. Slavin, an American Psychologist, studied racial cooperative learning techniques where he noticed that, “There is some evidence that fostering interracial cooperation is by far the most effective means of improving racial attitudes and behaviors in schools,” (Slavin 336). Slavin studied educational and academic issues that appeared to be consistent

throughout schools, and in his article *Cooperative Learning*, he was able to examine the interracial benefits. Although Slavin wrote this article in 1980, it still widely applies to current day education. He found that students have better racial attitudes towards one another was a major effect of the multiracial collaboration in classrooms. Interracial collaboration relates to having an ethnic studies class in high school because it shows that students experiencing other cultures have better racial attitudes towards one another. Stow Persons, who was a professor of history emeritus at University of Iowa, studied the ethnic studies in University of Chicago and documented, “[The professors] looked backward in assuming the importance of assimilating minorities to the dominant Anglo-American culture, and forward in elevating racial minorities...” (Persons 1). While evaluating the teachers who were teaching ethnic studies, Person's noticed that the teachers were more uplifting towards the minorities after teaching this class. This relates to why an ethnic studies course should be mandatory because the teachers were able to be more accepting towards

minorities then it is likely that students will have that similar mindset of creating a more accepting community.

A mandatory ethnic and gender studies course would not cause racial division or create hatred of the white community, but instead would only provide benefits. Through evidence from San Francisco and Ron Espiritu teaching a Mexican-American studies course it is clear that an ethnic studies classes only promotes benefits and allow students to thrive in a more accepting community. The idea of deconstructing and learning more of one's culture has been proven to be beneficial for self-love and self-empowerment through Gloria Anzaldúa and bell hooks. Interracial collaboration would only help unify races and would be beneficial to Caucasian students shown through Robert E. Slavin's studies. Instituting a mandatory ethnic studies and gender course would only be rewarding for the students because it allows for students of color to understand their background which will help them grow as an individual and will also educate other students of many cultures through a more in-depth course than a world history class.

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