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Publication Date

2024

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Ethnic Studies Course Taking and Degree Attainment
Among Students Who Are Racially Minoritized

By

MOLLY M. HECK, MSW
DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

in

Educational Leadership

in the

OFFICE OF GRADUATE STUDIES

of the

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

DAVIS

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2024

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ABSTRACT

Institutions of higher education have perpetuated and maintained Eurocentric systems, including curriculum, that can negatively impact students. The problem of inequitably graduating students who are minoritized by their racial identity is but one outcome of systemic racism in educational systems. This inequity in degree attainment exists for many reasons, among them curricular practices that fail to validate the cultural relevance of students' ethnic identities in relation to their academics. Although some institutional practices and policies have changed to address the problem of inequitably graduating racially minoritized students, the problem needs additional strategies to ensure more equitable outcomes for students who are racially minoritized.

The State of California has recently mandated that all students in the California State University system take an ethnic studies course as a graduation requirement. Advocates suggest that taking an ethnic studies course will benefit students academically and socially. Although research and advocacy in the past decades have helped ethnic studies to be increasingly seen as a relevant and necessary component of education, there is still much to be learned about the relationship between ethnic studies course taking and degree attainment for students who are racially minoritized in university settings.

This study is timely in that there is little information about the relationship between ethnic studies course taking and degree attainment in higher education. The findings add to a growing need to understand how to support students who are racially minoritized in curriculum that continues to be primarily white centered in undergraduate educational settings. This study used a descriptive quantitative design to investigate associations between ethnic studies course taking—both in the first year and anytime during a student's college career—and degree attainment for students who are racially minoritized. A six-year dataset (2013-2019) from a mid-

sized university in the California State University system was used. Key findings included a slightly higher average time to degree for students who took ethnic studies anytime in college and a slightly higher GPA at the end of the first year for students who took ethnic studies in their first year of college. This study contributes to the conversation about the role of ethnic studies course taking—including associations of ethnic studies course-taking to GPA in the critical first year, and associations of ethnic studies course-taking with time to degree. Using equity frameworks to analyze the data allowed for discussion about why students who take ethnic studies may take approximately one more semester to graduate compared to students who do not take ethnic studies including: feeling validated by ethnic studies courses, choosing to add or change a major or minor, and/or connections to ethnic studies faculty.

Keywords: ethnic studies; degree attainment; equity gap; racially minoritized; validation.

Acknowledgements

First, to Taschen, who was 4½ years old when I started this journey and who did so well letting his mama go on so many “Davis weekends.” I am proud of you, my buddy, for sharing me with Davis, for giving me the best hugs when I got home, and for cheering me on to become Dr. molly heck.

To Dr. Faheemah Mustafaa, my advisor, who believed I could complete a fully quantitative study even though I am a complete novice. Your patience, guidance, and humor helped me to keep moving forward amidst significant confusion and doubt in myself. Thank you for the time and commitment you shared with me.

To Dr. Susan Roll, whose mentorship and support helped me to recenter my thoughts, iterate and reiterate my ideas, and keep me focused. Our walks around campus will be treasured memories of this wild journey.

I am so grateful for the 16th cohort of the UC Davis CANDEL program, sweet 16, for creating a community that I was proud to be a part of, for challenging me to be better and do better especially in relation to anti-racist practice, and for consistently lifting each other up. And to the faculty, including my committee members, Dr. Marcela Cuellar and Dr. Gloria M. Rodriguez, whose equitable and empowering pedagogical approaches and tremendous care for our learning was clear from the start.

To Dr. Marney Randle and Dr. Inez Anders, two incredible women who were simply and powerfully there for me when I needed them. Finding your friendship through our doctoral journey means so much to me. I am so very glad that you are leaders in exactly the way you are.

Lastly, to my village, without whom I could not have reached this place. To my parents, Tim and Jennifer Heck, who have created the safety and security I have needed to take risks. To

my siblings, Serra Wells and Nate Heck, who encourage me to play even when I'm busy. To my partner, Alex Brown, for bringing energy and laughter to all things. I am grateful to you all for the encouraging texts about statistics, for early readings of drafts, for listening to ideas and frustrations, and for all the emotional support. Thank you to you the rest of my village, including my brother-in-law, niece, nephews, aunt, and friends for the love and care you showed both Taschen and me while I worked these last several years and for reminding me that community holds me up.

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A Note on Language

Language is powerful and ever changing. The words we use matter. The education system, like any other institution, has been impacted by white supremacist language norms and the meanings we attach to the words we use. The purpose of this note on language is to give voice to the personal and political impacts of the words we use and to explain my intentions around some of the linguistic choices I made for this project.

There have been many cases in which scholars resisted the terms prescribed by dominant culture in order to present a linguistic system that recognizes not a single story but multiple stories of how words can be used and what they can mean. This has included the work of Gloria Anzaldúa (2002), who utilized the concept of “conocimiento” to describe culturally specific ways of knowing and spiritual activism that we can engage in our learning. It includes the work of Eve Tuck (2009), whose letter to colleagues urged us to resist damage-centered language and instead approach our research from desire-based frames. My background in feminist theory included the work of Audre Lorde (1984) who reminded us that we cannot continue to use the “master’s tools” (oppressive and hegemonic ideologies and systems), including the master’s language, and expect to see anything but inequities perpetuated.

My positionality regarding language use includes the many ways that my whiteness, my womanhood, my feminism, and my position as an educator in higher education inform my choices to use language intentionally. It also includes my ignorance about ever-changing, culturally relevant language used among minoritized communities as my privileges insulate me from the requirement to know. My status as an outsider from the communities who are minoritized by race, who are the central focus in this dissertation, creates distance between me and the language that people who are part of these communities use both publicly and privately.

As an undergraduate student in women's studies, I was introduced to the ways in which the English language centers maleness and thus creates woman as an "other" (de Beauvoir, 1949). Feminist activists and scholars ensured that as a place to begin my analysis of language, I had a framework to dismantle and problematize the general use of the term "man," as in "mankind," to mean all humans. This framework then extended to learning to complicate and interrogate the many other ways that white supremacy and supremacist values shape the language of dominant narratives. This framework encouraged me to practice, with humility and willingness to correct my mistakes, the centering of historically marginalized voices in my work.

I have intentionally chosen terminology in this study that attempts to address my belief that white and male supremacist perspectives, including their existence in language, are problematic and need to be reckoned with. The language we use has been constructed by dominant narratives and forced on our social systems, including the educational context of this dissertation. I will describe my beliefs on the terms "racially minoritized" and "underrepresented minorities" as these terms are used throughout the dissertation.

However, I recognize that my descriptions will be incomplete and limited based on my own knowledge and the reality that language is changing as I write. I also recognize that there is great diversity in the terminology people use to describe themselves and their communities. For example, I use the term Hispanic/Latinx to refer to the community that comprises a diverse group of people from around the world. This choice was a challenge based on the many ways that people, both in and out of academia, refer to themselves and their community, including Hispanic, Chicano/a/x, Latino/a, Latinx, Afro Latino/a, Latiné, Latin*, and many others. Ultimately, I chose the term Hispanic/Latinx based on my own experiences with how students identify themselves at my own institution as well as from examples of published works (Garcia

& Cuellar, 2023; Garcia & Okhidoi, 2015; Salinas & Lozano, 2019). This is a powerful reminder that there is no possible way for this short note on language to have finality on which terminology to use as terms change and evolve within communities. Instead, I humbly recognize that part of what is important is that as someone who identifies as a lifelong learner, and someone who benefits from white privilege, it is my responsibility to consistently learn and consistently practice resistance of the master's tools (Lorde, 1984), attempting to resist colonizers' terms and use terminology that people use for themselves.

The term "racially minoritized" will be used as much as possible in this dissertation to recognize the social construction of racial supremacy in U.S. society, including educational systems (Harper, 2013). This is in contrast to the term "racial minority," which claims a static identity as opposed to actions that are maintained and perpetuated (Harper, 2013). In a similar way, the term "historically racialized" is used in some parts of this dissertation to acknowledge the complex ways in which race has been constructed and used throughout history and into the present to define sociopolitical existence. Shaun Harper (2013) describes the use of "minoritized" in this way:

"Minoritized" is used instead of "minority" ... to signify the social construction of underrepresentation and subordination in U.S. social institutions, including colleges and universities. Persons are not born into a minority status nor are they minoritized in every social milieu (e.g., their families, racially homogeneous friendship groups, or places of religious worship). Instead, they are rendered minorities in particular situations and institutional environments that sustain an overrepresentation of whiteness.

The use of the term "racially minoritized" also attempts to place the burden of change on the institution rather than the student, which is a historically inequitable and victim-blaming approach. By using "racially minoritized" instead of "minority," I recognize that this status can change if we change our institutional systems, ideologies, and approaches, offering hope for a more equitable higher education experience.

Unfortunately, the term “underrepresented minority” (URM) is used, mostly in reference to data that has been collected by other researchers. This term has been used in higher education for many years to categorize students who have been minoritized throughout the educational pipeline. Additionally, the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) continues to use this term in data collection and analysis. As the largest dataset of its kind, the terms that IPEDS uses have influence in terms of defining student identity.

Similar to the use of the term “URM,” the term “nonresident alien” is used in the demographic information in the existing dataset to mean people who are not U.S. citizens and/or do not have a green card. I recognize both the deficit frame that is inherent in both “URM” and “nonresident alien” and the reality that they do not use person-first language, an approach to language that allows for a fuller recognition of the complexity of one’s humanity to be seen as opposed to defining people by a singular experience or characteristic. I acknowledge that people can experience harm when these terms are used, and although I have chosen to leave the term in the few demographic data tables for clarity, I make note of the problematic nature of the term as xenophobic in each table in order to demonstrate my perspective and encourage others to think about doing the same.

Similarly to the way that resisting assumptions and stereotypes in language creates space for inquiry about how people in oppressed groups want to be seen or referred to, critical quantitative (CritQuant) theory (Gillborn et al., 2018) is used to create space for complicating and questioning assumptions that may come from numbers, from the data that researchers use to tell stories. I discuss my humble understanding of CritQuant (I am also a novice quantitative researcher) in the Method section of this dissertation as another place for potential resistance of the master’s tools (Lorde, 1984).

It is a place of personal and professional discomfort to disagree with problematic terminology that other researchers use, to then choose to use those terms for clarity, and to simultaneously resist them by using other terms in other contexts. It is uncomfortable to know that my own positionality contributes to the ways that I may default to damage-centered frameworks to describe the phenomena I seek to understand. The discomfort is a necessary part of learning to use words and terms that make sense for the humanity and dignity of people in a white supremacist society, which is important work for scholars to take up. And yet, this dissertation did not take up the complexity of language beyond a most basic resistance.

I am not a language expert. For my own need to complete the project in a timely way for myself as a single parent, with humility I chose to address the topic of language, though I am no expert. I believe language is powerful and ever-changing. It is my hope to acknowledge this reality and do what I can to use language that centers people's own choices in naming themselves and to remind us of the socially constructed values and assumptions that these terms hold.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

A continued legacy of structural and systemic racial oppression creates inequitable educational systems and inequitable outcomes for racially minoritized students. National graduation rate data demonstrate that although 64% of white students graduated in 6 years or less with a bachelor's degree, only 54% of Hispanic students, 40% of Black students, and 39% of American Indian/Alaska Native students graduated in this same time frame (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). These statistics make apparent that the broad social goal of racial equity must include the realization of racial equity in the attainment of college degrees as a specific goal for higher education. Although a high school diploma may have been the primary educational goal for generations past, it has been replaced by the relatively popular notion that a college degree is the new standard for gainful and self-sustaining participation in our capitalist society (Johnson & Stage, 2018). Because of the intersection of racism and classism that creates systemic barriers for self-sustaining and gainful employment in a capitalist system, college degree attainment is a valid goal for many people, but particularly for students who are racially minoritized, who often bear the socioeconomic consequences of these systemic and institutional harms.

Despite years of acknowledging this pattern of inequitable degree attainment in higher education, the problem of inequitably graduating students who are racially minoritized persists. This gap in degree attainment has been discussed and studied in the education field since the 1960s and is defined as a persistent average difference in academic outcomes between students who are minoritized by race and their white counterparts (Ladson-Billings, 2006). The concept has helped to clarify that it is not individual student achievement that is the problem, but the

ways in which inequitable systems in education have continued to perpetuate lower rates of degree completion among minoritized students.

Student outcomes such as grade point average (GPA) in the first year and the receipt of D, F, or W (withdrawal) grades have been shown to relate to the amount of time it takes for students to complete their degree. For instance, at one university, the GPA after the first term was the most predictive variable in relation to attaining a degree in 6 years or less for first-time freshmen (McConville et al., 2021). More specifically, for students who were Pell grant recipients and identified as URM, if their first-term GPA was at or below 1.8, they had only a 21% graduation rate in 6 years or less (McConville et al., 2021). If their GPA for the first term was over 1.8, the same population had a 68%–69% 6-year graduation rate (McConville et al., 2021). The reasons that these students may have a low GPA their first term are many, and often relate to system-wide barriers and systemic harms.

Though our education systems are inequitable in a variety of ways, many students succeed in academic spaces that were not designed for them. People marginalized by race and ethnicity, who are not represented equitably in academia, nevertheless persist. The concept of persistence is often used to describe the many ways that students can accomplish the goal of degree attainment and has been used to describe the strategies and characteristics of both students and institutions that drive their success (Kinzie et al., 2008; Kuh et al., 2008; Laird et al., 2008; Museus & Quaye, 2009).

Institutions of higher education have utilized many strategies to support student persistence and to understand persistence in relation to racialized power, privilege, and oppression. University systems are encouraged by a breadth of research evidence to prioritize academic and social spaces for students that are not Eurocentric. Evidence suggests that when

students engage in culturally relevant pedagogical spaces, experience college environments as welcoming, and maintain connection with their culture of origin, they have more positive academic outcomes (Dee & Penner, 2017; Museus & Quaye, 2009). A more asset-based approach to the rich cultural diversity that students bring to the college environment from their cultures of origin suggests that universities can positively impact rates of degree attainment by providing culturally validating spaces and engaging students' cultural and racial backgrounds in their learning experiences (Kuh & Love, 2000; Museus & Quaye, 2009; Tierney, 1999).

One such validating space may be in ethnic studies classes. Recent research has demonstrated positive results from taking ethnic studies in both short-term outcomes and longer-term impacts in high school, including increased high school graduation rates (Bonilla et al., 2021; Dee & Penner, 2017). This research has been critical in examining the importance of anti-racist curriculum as an intervention for low-income students and racially minoritized students whose cultural experiences are not often reflected in their other academic spaces. However, what we do not know from the literature is how ethnic studies courses in a university setting may act as a similar intervention, validating students who are racially minoritized in the otherwise Eurocentric academy. This study aims to explore the relationship between ethnic studies course taking and degree attainment to encourage additional institutional changes that will support degree attainment for students who are racially minoritized.

History and Relevance of Ethnic Studies

Academic programs such as ethnic studies whose curricular mission is to uplift and validate marginalized voices in academia are well positioned to be validating spaces for students who are racially minoritized. Similarly to the ways that affinity groups or ethnic/cultural student organizations may provide validating social engagement, these courses can play a role in the

ability of students to experience validating spaces in their academic world. If we want students to obtain a degree through the completion of university coursework and we know that culturally validating spaces have positive impacts on students who are racially minoritized (Barnett, 2011; Rendón, 2002), then then the same effect is likely possible by creating culturally validating spaces through course curriculum.

What follows is a brief history of ethnic studies in higher education in California, including recent legislation, to provide context for the relevance of ethnic studies in higher education. In this study I argue that enrollment in ethnic studies courses ought to be encouraged and explored as a specific strategy for increasing degree attainment for students who are racially minoritized, as it directly confronts the overarching problem of Eurocentric academic spaces and instead validates students who are marginalized by the academy. It is important to note that I do not claim that ethnic studies courses are a panacea; they are not a cure-all for a Eurocentric, white-centered higher education system, but one of many potential opportunities for universities to meet the needs of students coming through their doors.

For the last 50 years, the primary curricular response to intentionally resist Eurocentric and male-centric models of learning and teaching has been the development and maintenance of academic fields of study in higher education such as ethnic studies, women's studies, and gender studies (Crouch, 2012; hooks, 1994; Sleeter, 2011). These areas of study have provided an essential alternative to dominant white, male narratives in higher education and have had positive impacts on marginalized students (Garcia & Okhidoi, 2015; hooks, 1994; Sleeter, 2011).

Ethnic studies as a field was created, in part, for students of color to have their lived experiences validated and legitimized in higher education institutions (Sleeter, 2011). Student organizing at San Francisco State in 1968 and 1969 spurred the development of ethnic studies

programs and created significant momentum in support of the movement to center ethnically marginalized voices and to decentralize whiteness in higher education curriculum (San Francisco State University, College of Ethnic Studies, n.d.). Born from student activism, ethnic studies demanded that higher education curriculum center the experiences of people of color, their histories and cultures, and their continued resistance to white supremacist culture (CSU Task Force on the Advancement of Ethnic Studies, 2016; Hu-Dehart, 1993; Sleeter, 2011).

Ethnic studies has been conceptualized both as a single discipline and as four distinct fields of study focusing on broad ethnically defined communities (CSU Task Force on the Advancement of Ethnic Studies, 2016). The four major fields of ethnic studies are commonly known as Black/African American studies, Asian American studies, Native American studies, and Chicana/Latina studies. The academic tradition of providing ethnic studies courses has continued and expanded in both university setting and K–12 education (Sleeter, 2011). Although not all students who take ethnic studies courses are part of a racially minoritized community, many are.

Recent Ethnic Studies Legislation

California Assembly Bill 1460 was signed into law in 2020 (Smith, 2020) and codifies the importance of ethnic studies in higher education. The law requires that all California State University (CSU) campuses provide ethnic studies courses and mandates that beginning with the graduating class of 2024–2025, all students must take a three-unit ethnic studies course to graduate (Smith, 2020). Despite persisting since the late 1960s, ethnic studies programs at the university level have continued to struggle with academic legitimacy (Cabrera, 2019) and are often found on the margins of higher education institutions, where their contributions are often

ignored and challenged (Aguirre, 2005). This is precisely why Assembly Bill 1460 was necessary, as it leveraged political power to influence the curriculum in the CSU system.

AB 1460 was followed by the passing of another law in 2021, AB 101, which required that all California high school students complete a semester-long ethnic studies course in order to get their high school diploma, with several California school districts already requiring this as part of their curriculum (Smith, 2020). With these two pieces of legislation, there seems to be an acknowledgement that curriculum matters and that the voices of marginalized communities ought to be included in that curriculum. This echoes the call of the student activists in the 1960s who demanded that the voices and experiences of students of color be represented in their university courses (Hu-Dehart, 1993). Ethnic studies courses should not continue to be siloed or exist on the margins in university settings and instead should be considered a vital component of scholarly inquiry.

The current context of the CSU system newly mandating students to take an ethnic studies course (The CSU, n.d.) provides an opportunity to explore ethnic studies' expanded presence in university settings. The combination of this new legislative mandate and an increased focus at many university campuses on supporting equity, diversity, and inclusion efforts make a strong case for critically examining ethnic studies course taking as a potential strategy to support equitable degree attainment.

Purpose and Research Questions

Higher education institutions have maintained Eurocentric systems, including curricula, that can negatively impact students. Although some institutional practices and policies have evolved to address the problem of inequitably graduating students, the problem needs additional strategies to ensure more equitable outcomes. In addition to inclusive and culturally responsive

pedagogies, welcoming campus environments, and a broad focus on equity, diversity, and inclusion, the specific strategy of encouraging ethnic studies course taking, both in the first year and throughout a student's college career, needs to be explored as a potential system-wide change.

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore the relationship between ethnic studies course taking and degree attainment utilizing a framework that posits ethnic studies courses as validating spaces (Rendón, 1994) for racially minoritized students. The suggestion that ethnic studies courses act as an institutional intervention to support equitable degree attainment is grounded in the acknowledgement that systemic racial oppression is a root cause of inequities in degree attainment for students of color and it is therefore the responsibility of the institution to change. The inquiry is centered on data from a midsized university in the CSU system with a small ethnic studies program. The following research questions will guide the inquiry:

1. Among students who are racially minoritized, what is the association between the number of ethnic studies courses students take throughout their college career and their time to degree?
 - a. Among students who identify as Hispanic/Latinx, what is the association between the number of ethnic studies courses students take throughout their college career and their time to degree?
 - b. Among students who are racially minoritized and enrolled in EOP, what is the association between the number of ethnic studies courses students take throughout their college career and their time to degree?

2. Among students who are racially minoritized, what is the association between the number of ethnic studies courses students take in their first year of college and their time to degree?
 - a. Among students who identify as Hispanic/Latinx, what is the association between the number of ethnic studies courses students take in the first year and their time to degree?
 - b. Among students who are racially minoritized and enrolled in EOP, what is the association between the number of ethnic studies courses students take in the first year of college and their time to degree?

The sub questions offer opportunity for inquiry with regards to the possibility of ethnic studies course taking as a beneficial option for students who identify specifically as Hispanic/Latinx as Hispanic/Latinx students are a growing community of college goers in California (The Campaign for College Opportunity, 2021). Similarly, exploring the benefits of ethnic studies course taking for students enrolled in the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) can offer insight for similar programs in higher education that target the critical first year and that provide more comprehensive support for students who have been historically marginalized in the university.

The complexity of our academic institutions and the embedded nature of systemic racial oppression require that institutions use many strategies that work to dismantle Eurocentrism and support the diverse assets and strengths of students. Museus and Quaye (2009) suggested that focused connection to a student's culture of origin positively impacts students' persistence to degree, and many scholars have demonstrated the positive impact of culturally relevant, responsive, and representative pedagogies (Gay, 2010; hooks, 1994; Hurtado, 2001; Ladson-

Billings, 1996). Throughout this study I argue that the important experience of being validated as a student is present in ethnic studies courses not only because of the inclusive teaching practices that may be used as Rendón (1994) describes, but also because of the curricular content itself.

Theoretical Framework: Validation Theory

This study utilizes Rendón's (1994) theory of validation to acknowledge the systemic harm that the Eurocentric curriculum has created and continues to perpetuate. The widely articulated purpose of the ethnic studies curriculum is to analyze the existence and impact of institutional racism, to identify and examine the many struggles for liberation historically and currently, and to study information from culturally diverse perspectives (Hu-Dehart, 1993; Sleeter, 2011). The ethnic studies curriculum is in direct opposition to the historically Euro-centered curriculum and thus provides needed validation in an academic space to people who are racially minoritized. Below I outline the connection between Rendón's (1994) original theory of validation, described as behavioral characteristics of faculty, and the ways in which ethnic studies' centering of racially marginalized voices in the curriculum is used as a validating strategy.

Validation theory (Rendón, 1994) suggests that if a student's lived experiences and their academic potential are validated within the university, they will be more involved in their academic pursuits and thus more academically successful. Validation is defined as "an enabling, confirming and supportive process initiated by in- and out-of-class agents that foster academic and interpersonal development" (Rendón, 1994, p. 44). I argue that ethnic studies curricular content and the faculty who teach these courses both act as "agents" who validate the identity and experience of students who face institutional and systemic racism.

Rendón (1994) accurately assessed the state of curriculum in higher education in the 1990s, when she developed this theory, to be “predominately Euro-centered, for the most part excluding the contributions of non-Whites and women” (p. 34). This Eurocentric and male-centered curricular environment continues to be the reality for much of higher education nearly 30 years after Rendón’s initial research and is an example of institutions ignoring best practices that promote culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1996) and a connection with students’ culture of origin (Museus & Quaye, 2009), both of which have been shown to positively influence degree attainment. Rendón makes the argument that when validation is present, students feel more capable of learning and that what they bring to the college environment is valid and valued. Instead, many educational systems leave students of color feeling silenced and subordinate (Rendón, 1994).

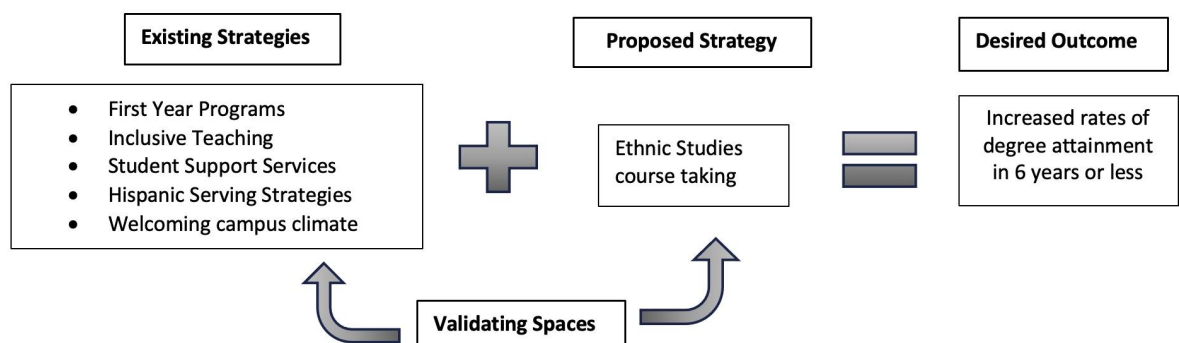
Further, validation both within and outside of the classroom should happen in the student’s critical first year of college in order to retain students and positively impact their involvement throughout their college career (Rendón, 1994). In this study, examination of first-year ethnic studies course taking is used to support this well-documented opportunity to intervene early in students’ college careers. Ethnic studies courses, provided early in students’ academic careers, can set the tone for students to feel validated in the classroom and to claim their education as their own. Early validating experiences may support students who are racially minoritized to continue to seek out academically validating spaces, thus increasing their academic confidence and engagement.

This study expands on Rendón’s (1994) theory of validation not only to include the characteristics and behaviors of ethnic studies faculty as validating agents, but also to discuss the ways in which the curricular content of ethnic studies courses can serve to validate students’

identities and experiences. It is not difficult to make this theoretical connection from professor characteristics to curricular content. Inclusive teaching strategies mirror the concept of validation, ensuring the use of course materials from diverse perspectives (Columbia Center for Teaching and Learning, 2018) and thereby providing representation of the lived experiences of students with diverse perspectives themselves. Students may feel validated by engaging with course materials that focus on the examination and analyses of their own cultures of origin and the contributions of their communities to the richness and diversity of society. If ethnic studies courses are in fact academically validating spaces in the university setting, as this study contends, then taking these courses may have a positive relationship to degree attainment for racially minoritized students.

Figure 1 depicts a conceptual framework that focuses on ethnic studies course taking as a proposed institutional strategy to support degree attainment, recognizing that there are existing strategies that may also utilize some form of validation theory as a guiding practice. Ethnic studies is proposed as an underexplored strategy that this study investigates.

Figure 1. *Institutional Efforts to Close Inequity Gap in Student Degree Attainment*



The framework in Figure 1 recognizes that there are existing strategies to support degree attainment, such as the development of first-year programs whose main audience may be first-

generation students or the strategic deployment of student cultural centers as affinity spaces. Other strategies include the use of inclusive teaching practices by some faculty, which can include curriculum that ensures that materials are authored by people of color. These existing strategies have characteristics that support validation theory and have been shown to contribute to the desired outcome of increasing rates of degree attainment. This study proposes that taking ethnic studies can also be an institutional strategy to support increased degree attainment.

Rendón (1994) posits a clear theoretical stance that puts the responsibility on the higher education institution to create educational practices and systems that work for racially diverse student communities, as opposed to the responsibility landing on students to conform to racist systems.

Conclusion

For decades, ethnic studies has been an important part of the resistance and response to Eurocentric curriculum in our education systems, with most ethnic studies programs and courses found in institutions of higher education. The new California law requiring ethnic studies as part of the graduation requirement for students in the CSU system provides an opportunity to study the relationship between ethnic studies and student success, including degree attainment. This study contends that ethnic studies courses are validating spaces that support students' abilities to successfully attain a degree, suggesting that if students have positive validating academic experiences, they will be more likely to persist toward degree attainment. The hypothesis then is that students will have shorter average times to degree if they take ethnic studies in their college career, as validating spaces such as ethnic studies courses positively impact student success.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Best practices to promote equitable degree attainment and student success for racially minoritized students have gained traction in the past many years. These include legislation to create more equitable education systems (Legal Defense Fund, n.d.; Smith, 2020), utilizing inclusive teaching strategies (Carter, 2006; Columbia Center for Teaching and Learning, 2018; Hurtado, 2001), the role of faculty (Booker, 2016; Carter, 2006), student support programs (Garcia & Okhidoi, 2015; Kinzie et al., 2008), and the creation of supportive and welcoming campus environments (Laird et al., 2008; Museus & Quayle, 2009). As such, relevant literature related to the institutional strategies and approaches that educational systems utilize will be reviewed with particular focus on inclusive teaching practices such as the use of diverse course materials and infusing a sense of belonging, which are inherent in the design of ethnic studies curriculum (Hu-Dehart, 1993; State of California, Department of Education, 2021).

The role of faculty and discussion of student–faculty relationships will be reviewed. Attention will be given to the characteristics of faculty that students identify as supportive and part of the validating process (Rendón, 1994). Benefits of student support programs, such as EOP, will be shared, as research demonstrates positive benefits of student participation in these programs. Focus on campuses that are Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs) will be discussed as it relates to degree attainment and ethnic studies, as the university in this study is an HSI. A brief mention of the significance of campus climate more generally will be included as a component of necessary campus systems change to support the validation of students’ lived experiences.

Finally, a discussion of research that explores student outcomes related to degree attainment and ethnic studies course taking provides evidence of the potential benefit of this strategy for eliminating the inequities of degree attainment in higher education. This literature

will include important quantitative and qualitative studies from high school ethnic studies programs that have been the focus of current K–12 ethnic studies research and the ways in which outcomes from these studies have connection to higher education contexts. Discussion of some of the academic and psychosocial benefits of taking ethnic studies courses will be presented here as well.

Institutional Strategies and Approaches

Institutions of higher education have used many strategies to address the need to equitably graduate students who are racially minoritized. Strategies have historically included federal legislation such as *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 (Legal Defense Fund, n.d.), which desegregated school systems, and the development of EOPs in 1969 (The CSU System, n.d.), which helped to create more equitable access to higher education and support systems when students arrived. Though these pieces of legislation are some of the early examples of institutions creating policies and practices that acknowledged the need for change, the remainder of the discussion below will focus on more recent interventions.

The focus on equity, diversity, and inclusion in educational systems in the past several decades provides perspectives that offer clarity on how to support degree attainment for students who are racially minoritized (Kuh & Love, 2000; Rendón, 1994). First, students should not be required to integrate into the dominant culture in order to persist to degree attainment, as Tinto (1987) suggested in his early work. Instead, scholars have rightly critiqued Tinto's (1987) theory and suggested that a problematic underlying assumption here is that it is students' responsibility to change as opposed to the *system* that needs to change (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Kuh & Love, 2000). Equally problematic is the white supremacist notion that students must disassociate from their cultures of origin in order to succeed in college (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Kuh & Love,

2000). Research now demonstrates the opposite: students should be encouraged to stay connected to their culture of origin in whatever way they choose (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Museus & Quaye, 2009) and universities can and should create structural opportunities for this maintained connection.

Like ethnic studies, women's and gender studies programs demanded a decentering of dominant narratives with a focus on the ways in which sex and gender impacted women's experiences in academia and society in general. Foundational feminist scholars such as bell hooks (1965), Gloria Anzaldua (1987) and Patricia Hill Collins (1990) ensured that the intersections of gender, race, and class were examined and critically analyzed. Women's studies, gender studies, and ethnic studies courses offered critical analyses of politics, education, health, resistance, and the production of knowledge and added to conversations in higher education that critiqued the status quo with regards to white, male narratives. The analysis and dismantling of interconnected systems of oppression are key components to these academic fields, including ethnic studies (hooks, 1965; Hu-Dehart, 1993; Sleeter, 2011), and are foundational to the changes in higher education curriculum that are needed to center marginalized voices.

Inclusive Teaching

Higher education has long been steeped in white, male narratives about the world, including what curriculum is taught, which stories should be told, and how teaching should be done (Gay, 2010; hooks, 1994; Laird et al., 2008; Sleeter, 2011). In addition to broadly perpetuating dangerous views of white privilege and white supremacy, these dominant and supremacist narratives in education pose barriers to obtaining an undergraduate degree for racially minoritized students. Instead of relying on teaching practices that continue to reinforce

Eurocentric perspectives and exclude perspectives from many communities, teaching practices must utilize strategies that are effective for the education of a diverse student population.

Inclusive teaching practices have gained traction over many years and are seen as important strategies for increasing student engagement and thus persistence to degree, specifically for racially minoritized students but also for students in general (Columbia Center for Teaching and Learning, 2018). Inclusive teaching strategies as described by the Columbia Center for Teaching and Learning (2018) include five principles to follow with practical applications specified for the classroom space. Two of these principles as they relate to ethnic studies courses and culturally validating spaces include (a) the importance of providing diverse perspectives in materials and classroom activities, as opposed to perpetuating dominant Eurocentric narratives, and (b) cultivating a sense of belonging for students in learning environments (Columbia Center for Teaching and Learning, 2018).

Inclusive Teaching: Course Materials. Curriculum that resists Eurocentric, patriarchal narratives and instead centers the experiences and knowledge of Black/African American, Latinx, Asian American, and Native American communities and analyzes the experiences and knowledge production of women can positively impact experiences in higher education for students on the margins (Carter, 2006; Hurtado, 2001). Selecting materials that represent a diversity of perspectives with regards to ethnicity, race, and gender, as opposed to centering white- and male-centric materials, contributes to the positive representation of racially minoritized students (Columbia University Center for Teaching and Learning, 2018) and can validate their cultures of origin (Rendón, 1994).

Inclusive teaching practices encourage the use of course materials that recognize diversity and acknowledge barriers to inclusion (Columbia Center for Teaching and Learning,

2018). This includes presenting materials from authors of a variety of races and ethnicities and avoiding the tokenizing of minoritized or marginalized groups in materials, examples, and anecdotes (Columbia Center for Teaching and Learning, 2018; Hurtado, 2001). Ethnic studies courses do this as an inherent part of the curriculum, ensuring that marginalized voices and perspectives are centered as opposed to supplemental (Sleeter, 2011).

Inclusive Teaching: Infusing Belonging. Infusing belonging into the classroom is another inclusive teaching strategy that has been associated with increasing students' persistence to degree (Columbia Center for Teaching and Learning, 2017). Students describe a variety of classroom experiences that both help and hinder their ability to succeed academically, including their sense of belonging in academic spaces (Kinzie et al., 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Maestas et al., 2006). This includes teaching approaches and learning activities in the classroom, as well as the curriculum and materials used.

The classroom may be the most consistent and regular venue for some students to engage with faculty and peers (Kuh et al., 2008), and so it is a critical space to implement these practices. Research has shown that students desire classroom experiences that increase their sense of belonging, as this helps them persist in college (Booker, 2016; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). Experiences that increased belonging included interacting with faculty who were engaging, relatable and were connected to the students within and outside of the classroom (Booker, 2016) and, quite simply, faculty calling students by name (Columbia Center for Teaching and Learning, 2018). The positive correlation between students' feelings of being known and valued by faculty and their intent to persist in college has been demonstrated as well (Barnett, 2011).

Faculty willingness to approach certain subject matter is also important in terms of teaching approaches that can increase sense of belonging and persistence (Booker, 2016; Mamary, 2003). In one study, students appreciated their white professors who were willing to take on difficult conversations in class related to race, class, gender, and sexuality (Booker, 2016). One all-women seminar utilized a multicultural feminist pedagogy to engage the intellectual and personal needs of students (Mamary, 2003), which acknowledges the need for students' life experiences to be present in the classroom. One of the central foci of ethnic studies is to analyze topics related to racialized power, privilege, and oppression thus providing students with a model of how teachers can integrate this into the classroom in safe, supportive ways.

Inclusive teaching strategies as an overall approach can be effective in helping racially minoritized students feel validated academically and interpersonally (Rendón, 1994) as students can see themselves and their communities represented positively in their academic experience and thus have greater connection to their academic work. Inclusive teaching strategies are connected directly to the purpose of ethnic studies courses, which center the lived experience and knowledge making of communities that have been historically marginalized (Hu-Dehart, 1993; Sleeter, 2011). Using diverse perspectives in course materials assigned, employing culturally relevant pedagogical approaches that increase students' sense of belonging, and a willingness to approach subjects directly related to race, class, gender, and sexual identity are strategies that can create strong levels of engagement in the classroom for students (hooks, 1994; Kinzie et al., 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1995), thus supporting their degree attainment.

Role of Faculty

The importance of understanding the role of faculty in student persistence and degree attainment cannot be overstated. Faculty classroom practices, as well as out-of-classroom

experiences such as research projects or advising, have been shown to have a positive impact on student success (Barnett, 2011; Means & Pyne, 2017). Faculty have an important role to play in students' ability to persist (Barnett, 2011; Means & Pyne, 2017) and it is imperative that institutions of higher education understand the impact of faculty and design interventions that support student persistence with this in mind.

Early research around the role and impact of faculty included Astin's work in the 1980's, which found that "students who interact frequently with faculty members are more likely than other students to express satisfaction with all aspects of their institutional experience, including student friendships, variety of courses, intellectual environment, and even the administration of the institution" (1999, p. 525). An increased understanding in students' perceptions of faculty as institutional agents (Stanton-Salazar, 2011) who can help them navigate the complex systems at the university can help support faculty's ability to behave in ways that are congruent with students' needs. Institutional agents are defined by Bensimon et al. (2019) as "individuals who, having experienced or developed an understanding of institutional oppressiveness, use their knowledge to support minoritized student success" (p. 1691–1692). In this way ethnic studies faculty are well positioned to be important institutional agents, as not only are ethnic studies faculty themselves often part of racially minoritized communities, but the curriculum they teach in their ethnic studies courses calls out racism and other oppressions overtly so that students see faculty actively resisting systems of oppression in the classroom.

Helpful for the analysis in this study is the focus on research that explores the impact faculty have with students specifically who are racially minoritized. Recommendations from Kinzie et al. (2008) are congruent with suggestions that faculty behaviors have significant impact on the potential success and persistence of underrepresented students (Means & Pyne, 2017;

Rendón, 1994). In one study with Black women in college, students felt a stronger positive impact on their persistence to degree from faculty who were engaging, relatable, and connected to the students in and out of the classroom (Booker, 2016). Faculty who were warm and welcoming in and out of the classroom were identified as significant to student persistence for Native American students (Guillory & Wolverton, 2008).

Student Support Programs

Research has found many student programs that support student persistence in addition to classroom practices (CSU EOP, n.d.; Carter, 2006; Museus et al., 2008). These support programs include out-of-class student support programs that target specific student needs and/or identities, such as building community cohorts, first-year experience programs, and programs such as the EOP. Carter (2006) suggested that in order to support URM students, campuses must address systemic racism and discrimination as well as build and sustain specific retention and support programs. Research points to the significance of reflecting the diverse lived experiences of students in all aspects of higher education, from the ways that students experience the campus environment generally to the specific ways in which students get involved in their academic practices (Kinzie et al., 2008).

Some universities are utilizing programs and services that target specific groups of minoritized students and creating early interventions and sustained attention during the first year (Kinzie et al., 2008; Rendón, 2002; Reyes, 2007). In one study, first-generation women of Mexican descent in their first year of college were found to benefit in a cohort model described as a unique community of support (Reyes, 2007). Research in the community college setting found that Latina/o college students gained confidence in their academic skills from a culturally validating English class in their first year, thus increasing their confidence in other classes

(Rendón, 2002). Students' first-year or early experiences are a critical time for universities to take action and set students on successful trajectories from their beginnings at the institution (Kuh et al. 2008; Rendón, 2002; Reyes, 2007). Kuh et al. (2008) found that when students are engaged in educationally purposeful activities in their first year of college, such as doing a presentation in a class, accessing tutoring services, or working with faculty outside of class projects, there is a statistically significant effect on persistence. In particular, Black students benefited more than their white peers in increasing their engagement in the first year (Kuh et al., 2008).

Another example of a student support program geared toward shifting institutional practices is the Educational Opportunity Program. EOP within the CSU system has a 50-year history of supporting students who are first generation and/or low income in their persistence to degree (CSU, EOP, n.d.). Students engage in cohort-based orientation, summer programs, specialized tutoring, and ongoing mentorship through participation in EOP (CSU, EOP, n.d.). Some programs offer counseling and course specific tutoring (University of California, Davis, n.d.) At other universities, including the one in this study, EOP participation requires that students enroll in ethnic studies courses as this aligns with the program's goals of creating community and a sense of belonging (D. Frank, personal communication, February, 12, 2023).

Garcia and Okhidoi (2015) suggested that although student support programs such as EOP have proven to be effective for serving underrepresented populations for several decades, they are often found at the fringes of the university. These programs could do more to serve students and move them towards a degree if there were a more comprehensive strategy, including appropriate resources, for serving and advising more students in this capacity (Garcia & Okhidoi, 2015).

In addition to student support services being individualized to meet the diversity of student needs, Kinzie et al. (2008) suggested that institutional programs and services should be intentionally and strategically connected to students, courses, and faculty to increase the likelihood that students will take advantage of the services offered. This alludes to the importance of strategically enrolling racially minoritized students in ethnic studies courses in their first year and introducing them to faculty as validating agents, as well as building a consistently welcoming and supportive campus environment overall.

HSIs

The movement of what we now know as HSIs began in the 1980s. HSIs are a part of a broader set of institutions that identify as minority-serving institutions, including historically Black colleges and universities and tribal colleges and universities, all of which recognize the distinct benefit of culturally relevant spaces in academia. A first legal definition of an HSI can be found in the Higher Education Act of 1992 (Santiago, 2008). This first definition included both public and private institutions that had an enrollment of at least 25% of Hispanic students, half of whom needed to have been first-generation college attendees and from low-income families (Santiago, 2008). The current definition in Title V of the Higher Education Act has removed the requirement of income or first-generation status and instead defines an HSI as a not-for-profit higher education institution that has an undergraduate enrollment of at least 25% Hispanic students (Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, n.d.). Although the majority (54%) of HSIs are community colleges, 46% are baccalaureate-granting institutions (Excelencia in Education, 2021). For the context of this study, 21 of the 23 CSU campuses are identified as HSIs, including the university in this study (The CSU, n.d.).

Practices that support degree attainment for Hispanic students at HSIs include commitment by the institution's highest leadership for systematic changes in practice and approach; academic support for students, including specific advising practices; engaging with Latino communities in the surrounding areas for ease of transition from high school to college; and the strategic use of data for decision-making (Santiago, 2008). This is in line with literature mentioned above that encourages the responsibility of the institution to make systematic changes in curriculum or teaching approaches, for instance (Barnett, 2011; Columbia Center for Teaching and Learning, 2018; Garcia & Okhidoi, 2015).

Campus Climate/Environment

Supportive and welcoming campus climates are often a result of many other campus systems changing to be more equitable, diverse, and inclusive, such as curriculum, teaching approaches, and advising practices. Welcoming and supportive campus environments can also include extracurricular activities that center shared experience and identity, which have been cited as having a positive impact on students' persistence after the first year of college (Carter, 2006; Laird et al., 2008). Student perceptions of a positive and welcoming campus climate are linked to students' psychological well-being and sense of belonging (Museus & Quaye, 2009). Earlier research has made clear that status as a racially minoritized student on a predominantly white campus creates additional emotional and psychological burdens (Smedley et al., 1993).

Booker (2016) suggested that African American women may face particular experiences with dissatisfaction at universities as they must cope with both gender and racial stereotypes. Other researchers have utilized theories of oppression and power related to minoritized and privileged students to guide their inquiry, hypothesizing that students who identified as minoritized would have fewer resources and less access to power to support their sense of

belonging in college environments (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). Additionally, some research has found that both the university's overall focus on diversity and having a diverse student population positively affect persistence (Museus et al., 2008).

Efforts to shift the campus climate to be more welcoming and supportive need to include “campus policies, atmosphere, demographics and structure of the university” (Smedley et al., 1993, p. 449). Hurtado et al. (1998) suggested that structural diversity and the psychological and behavioral components of campus climate need to be considered as well. Research has suggested, then, a multidimensional approach to building a welcoming campus climate. Providing increased access to culturally validating experiences at the university can improve the experiences of racially marginalized students in their persistence to degree (Museus & Quaye, 2009; Rendón, 1994). This big-picture approach can include building faculty understanding of and willingness to utilize inclusive teaching strategies in all fields (Columbia Center for Teaching and Learning, 2018), increasing the capacity of student support services such as EOP (Garcia & Okhidoi, 2015), and considering increased access to validating spaces (Rendón, 1994) in students' coursework, such as ethnic studies.

Ethnic Studies Outcomes

Although identifying and utilizing practices and approaches that support degree attainment generally, such as inclusive teaching, student support programs, and a welcoming campus climate, a specific examination of research that makes a direct connection between ethnic studies course taking and degree attainment for racially minoritized students is also needed to understand the relationship between these courses and degree attainment. Much of the research and discussion on the effectiveness and potential benefits of ethnic studies for students exists in relation to high school ethnic studies courses (Bonilla et al., 2021; Dee & Penner, 2017;

Sleeter & Zavala, 2020). This includes not only empirical research but also the work of groups of educators committed to the future of ethnic studies, such as the Liberated Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum Consortium (Liberated Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum Consortium, n.d.) and the newly formed University of California Ethnic Studies Faculty Council (The Council of UC Faculty Associations, 2022). The following is a review of recent research that utilized quantitative analyses in high school ethnic studies programs and courses. These research findings have implications to be considered for higher education as described below.

High School Ethnic Studies Outcomes

Studies demonstrating the benefits of taking an ethnic studies course in high school have included direct curricular outcomes such as high school students' increased GPA, increased credits earned, greater continuous enrollment, and a higher probability of high school graduation (Bonilla et al., 2021; Cabrera et al., 2014; Dee & Penner, 2017). Dee and Penner's (2017) important research in the San Francisco Unified School District provided causal evidence of the positive academic outcomes related to ethnic studies course taking in high school. This school district employed an ethnic studies policy to highly encourage students with a GPA of 2.0 or lower in their eighth-grade year to take the ethnic studies course in ninth grade (Dee & Penner, 2017). Their findings suggested that ninth-grade students who had a GPA of 2.0 or lower and were encouraged to take an ethnic studies course had increased their GPAs by the end of their ninth-grade year (Dee & Penner, 2017). These short-term results are important in that they demonstrate immediate impact on student engagement.

A follow-up study several years later demonstrated longer term effects of ethnic studies course taking (Bonilla et al., 2021). Results from this study, which included the same school district as the original study by Dee and Penner (2017), demonstrate that students who were

encouraged to take ethnic studies courses had greater long-term enrollment in the district, better rates of attendance, and more credits earned than their non-encouraged peers (Bonilla et al., 2021). Directly related to high school completion, Cabrera et al. (2014) found that voluntary student participation in Tucson's Mexican American studies program (an ethnic studies curriculum) was positively correlated with higher rates of high school graduation. These outcomes point to the positive impact that ethnic studies course taking has on student engagement and persistence, both of which have been demonstrated to have positive effects on degree completion in higher education.

Academic achievement is notably an important area of research inquiry, and research has found that ethnic studies curriculum can provide students the ability to link their own ethnic identity with an academic identity, an important aspect of being able to benefit from education (Sleeter & Zavala, 2020). However, in addition to academic effects, ethnic studies courses can be important social-psychological interventions, especially for students from historically marginalized groups (Bonilla et al., 2021). The use of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Sleeter & Zavala, 2020) and decolonizing curriculum is important in the overall content of these courses (Sleeter & Zavala, 2020). As such, students who are racially minoritized may feel more seen and affirmed in an ethnic studies course because the curriculum provides realities that center the experiences and histories of people of color and directly oppose supremacist ideologies and Eurocentric perspectives. Course content in ethnic studies provides stories of resistance and liberation, and strengths and assets, of ethnically marginalized communities (Hu-Dehart, 1993; Sleeter, 2011). This curricular focus may directly counter much of students' education thus far as their experiences are centered and historically dominant narratives are complicated and resisted (Hu-Dehart, 1993; Sleeter, 2011).

Parallels to Higher Education Settings

Although research in secondary education is critical information to help advance ethnic studies offerings in high schools, there is a need to better understand the impacts of taking ethnic studies in a university setting. The works of Dee and Penner (2017) and Bonilla et al. (2021) provide many useful parallels to consider how the implications of their research of ethnic studies course taking in high school may transfer to the university setting.

For example, participants in their study are in the ninth grade, a transition year to high school from eighth grade (Dee & Penner, 2017). This is a comparable experience to the transition between high school graduation/12th grade to the first year of college and provides connection to the evidence that suggests that the first year in college is a critical time for intervention (Kuh et al., 2008; Rendón, 2002; Reyes, 2007). Also, the methodology of these studies included the utilization of a subset of students who were strongly encouraged to enroll in an ethnic studies course due to their lower GPA (Bonilla et al., 2021; Dee & Penner, 2017). This is not unlike the students who are part of a student support program, such as the EOP, for whom, in some universities, ethnic studies course taking in the first year is a required part of participation.

Summary of the Literature

Inclusive teaching approaches (Columbia Center for Teaching and Learning, 2018), the role of faculty (Hurtado, 2001), student support programs such as EOP (Garcia & Okhidoi, 2015), practices to support Hispanic/Latinx students in HSIs (Santiago, 2008), and supportive campus environments (Museus et al., 2008) have been linked to student persistence and, ultimately, degree attainment. Additional institutional characteristics that support degree completion by way of student engagement include promoting a sense of belonging in the

classroom (Hurtado, 2001). Notably, scholars have also articulated the importance of the critical first year of students' experiences on their ability to persist to degree through the utilization of curricular interventions such as first-year seminars and learning communities that provide social connection among students and build effective academic skills (Kuh et al., 2008; Pittman & Richmond, 2008). Research from high schools has demonstrated that ethnic studies programs create positive benefits for students including higher GPA, increased credits earned, and higher rates of graduation (Bonilla et al., 2021). These strategies have been employed to acknowledge and support the needs of diverse student populations and to recognize the responsibility of university systems to change to meet those needs.

Academia must continue to resist racial oppression, both past and present, across systems in higher education. Ethnic studies courses are one location to continue this work. Intentionally providing courses and curriculum that validate students' cultural and ethnic identities and experiences may be a strategy to increase student success (Dee & Penner, 2017) and can be critical as an early intervention in the first year (Kuh et al., 2008).

To be clear, ethnic studies course taking is not a singular, magic solution for the complex problem that is racial inequity in education broadly or inequity in degree attainment specifically. Ethnic studies is but one opportunity for the academic institution to create spaces and experiences in academia that serve to validate the experiences of racially minoritized students and thus support their academic success. However, ethnic studies programs are quite regularly underfunded and undervalued in institutions of higher education, making the development and maintenance of the programs challenging (Flaherty, 2016; Hu-Dehart, 1993). Ensuring that ethnic studies courses are accessible and widely supported in the university context may be an

important strategy for institutions of higher education to utilize in their comprehensive efforts to increase equity in degree attainment for racially minoritized students (Dee & Penner, 2017).

Research Questions and Hypotheses

This purpose of this dissertation was to add to the conversation about the use of an underdiscussed opportunity to increase degree attainment for racially minoritized students, namely ethnic studies course taking as a strategy to improve degree attainment for students who are Black/African American, Latinx, Native American, or Hmong. This study defines *degree attainment* as the completion of a bachelor's degree. The time frame of 6 years or less is utilized as a desirable time to degree, as the university described in this study uses 6 years as an appropriate time frame for undergraduate degree completion based on national data collection (CSU, n.d.).

A more detailed understanding of the relationship between ethnic studies course taking and degree attainment will help educators to better understand the potential benefits of ethnic studies for students who are racially minoritized in higher education. With this in mind, this study sought to explore the relationship between ethnic studies course taking and degree attainment in 6 years or less for students who are racially minoritized both in the critical first year and throughout a student's college career. The proposed two-tiered hypothesis suggests differing rationales for the time to degree based on the experience of validation (Rendón, 1994) in ethnic studies courses. The first hypothesis is that students who take ethnic studies courses, either in the first year or throughout college, will have a shorter time to degree. This is in part due to the use of Rendón's (1994) theory of validation, which suggests that students will do better if they are validated by faculty in the classroom. This could mean they would pass more classes and get a higher GPA, both of which are shown to positively influence degree attainment

(McConville et al., 2021). The second hypothesis is that students who take ethnic studies will take longer to attain a degree because ethnic studies courses have created more connection to the institution, which then keeps students longer. This could be for many reasons: involvement in activism and student leadership, adding or changing a major or minor, choosing to participate in research or mentorship opportunities with faculty, or various other avenues.

This study proposes that the theory of validation can be broadened from its original intent (faculty characteristics that create validation) to include the specific curriculum utilized in ethnic studies courses, as the curricular focus on racially minoritized communities (Hu-Dehart, 1993; Sleeter, 2011) can also act as a validating factor. Positive experiences from experiencing validation in the classroom can then contribute to successful degree completion in a variety of time frames for students who are racially minoritized.

The following two primary research questions and corresponding secondary questions guided the inquiry. The sub questions were chosen to examine distinct populations at CSU X. As CSU X is an HSI, and there is a significant proportion of racially minoritized students who identify as Hispanic/Latinx, it was important to look into this subgroup specifically. The decision to examine the experience of students who had participated in the EOP was due to the program design of EOP, which requires students to take an ethnic studies course within their first year.

1. Among students who are racially minoritized, what is the association between the number of ethnic studies courses students take throughout their college career and their time to degree?
 - a. Among students who identify as Hispanic/Latinx, what is the association between the number of ethnic studies courses students take throughout their college career and their time to degree?

- b. Among students who are racially minoritized and enrolled in EOP, what is the association between the number of ethnic studies courses students take throughout their college career and their time to degree?
2. Among students who are racially minoritized, what is the association between the number of ethnic studies courses students take in their first year of college and their time to degree?
- c. Among students who identify as Hispanic/Latinx, what is the association between the number of ethnic studies courses students take in the first year and their time to degree?
 - d. Among students who are racially minoritized and enrolled in EOP, what is the association between the number of ethnic studies courses students take in the first year of college and their time to degree?

CHAPTER 3: METHOD

There are a variety of approaches that can be utilized as part of a comprehensive strategy to change university systems, including strategically supporting academic spaces such as ethnic studies programs. The following research questions guided the inquiry.

1. Among students who are racially minoritized, what is the association between the number of ethnic studies courses students take throughout their college career and their time to degree?
 - a. Among students who identify as Hispanic/Latinx, what is the association between the number of ethnic studies courses students take throughout their college career and their time to degree?
 - b. Among students who are racially minoritized and enrolled in EOP, what is the association between the number of ethnic studies courses students take throughout their college career and their time to degree?
2. Among students who are racially minoritized, what is the association between the number of ethnic studies courses students take in their first year of college and their time to degree?
 - a. Among students who identify as Hispanic/Latinx, what is the association between the number of ethnic studies courses students take in the first year and their time to degree?
 - b. Among students who are racially minoritized and enrolled in EOP, what is the association between the number of ethnic studies courses students take in the first year of college and their time to degree?

This study examined the relationship between ethnic studies course taking and degree attainment in 6 years or less for racially minoritized students at a particular campus in the CSU system. This university will be referred to as CSU X. A description of the study site and context of CSU X below will provide context and clarify the purpose of this study followed by the research design.

Study Site and Context: CSU X

At CSU X, there is a significant and longtime inequity in the rates of degree attainment in 6 years or less among students who are identified as underrepresented minorities (CSU Student Success Dashboard, 2022). CSU X has had some of the highest graduation rate inequities in the CSU system for URM students (CSU Student Success Dashboard, 2022), though a variety of efforts have been undertaken to eliminate this inequity. Between 2012 and 2016, CSU X had a significant equity gap, ranging between 8-15.3%, in graduating students in 4 years who are underrepresented minorities (URM) compared to non-URM students (California State University Student Success Dashboard, 2022). Six-year graduation rates at the same institution are slightly better, with URM students behind by 7.4-11.9% percentage points compared to non-URM students (California State University Student Success Dashboard, 2022). Tables 1 and 2 below provide data for 4-year and 6-year graduation rates at CSU X for first-time freshmen by URM identification.

Table 1. Equity Gap Data at CSUX: 4-Year Graduation Rate

Cohort year	URM graduation rate (%)	Non-URM graduation rate (%)	Inequity gap Percentage points
2012	22.2	30.1	8
2013	19.9	35.2	15.3
2014	20.3	35.6	15.3
2015	25.3	39.1	13.7
2016	25.4	39.4	14

Note. URM refers to underrepresented minority identities, including only Black/African American, Native American, and Latino/a. The California State University (CSU) uses this categorization to be consistent with the CSU Graduation Initiative and Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System data reporting practices.

Table 2. Equity Gap Data at CSU X: 6-Year Graduation Rate

Cohort Year	URM* graduation rate (%)	Non-URM graduation rate (%)	Inequity gap Percentage points
2011	58.8	68.1	9.3
2012	61.1	68.5	7.4
2013	59.7	71.7	11.9
2014	60.4	68.4	7.9
2015	60.2	69.4	9.2

Note. URM refers to underrepresented minority identities, including only Black/African American, Native American, or Latino/a. The California State University (CSU) used this categorization to be consistent with the CSU Graduation Initiative and Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System data reporting practices.

Although several other campuses in the CSU system have degree attainment differences between non-URM students and URM students ranging from 11%–15% percentage points—including campuses in rural and urban areas and various geographic locations—the campus under study has had some of the most significant inequity gaps in graduation rates among the CSU campuses since at least 2010 (CSU Student Success Dashboard, 2022). These numbers

speak directly to the urgent need for research at this institution that can point to additional strategies to increase the graduation rates for racially minoritized students.

CSU X is a midsize public university with approximately 16,000 students. Situated in a rural part of California, the university provides access to higher education for a service area covering 14 counties. Status as an HSI was received in 2015 with 25% of students identified as Hispanic/Latinx at that time. As of fall 2021, demographically the student body was 36.34% Hispanic/Latinx, with only 12.89% of students who were racially minoritized who were non-Hispanic. Although the university is an HSI, it is also a primarily white institution (white students = 43.33%). See Table 3 for the entering student demographics for fall 2013, the cohort this study utilizes.

Table 3. *Student Ethnicity—Fall Term 2013*

Ethnicity	% of students	<i>n</i>
American Indian/Alaska Native (American Indian) (non-Hispanic)	0.62	102
Asian (non-Hispanic)	5.55	906
Black/African American (non-Hispanic)	1.81	296
Hispanic/Latino (any race)	22.11	3,611
Native Hawaiian/other Pacific Islander (non-Hispanic)	0.14	23
Nonresident alien	4.01	655
Two or more races (non-Hispanic)	4.77	779
Unknown	8.61	1407
White (non-Hispanic)	52.38	8555

Note. Racial categories including nonresident alien (a xenophobic and problematic term) and unknown are not used in analyses in this dissertation and thus are not included in all descriptive data. Data source: California State University, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System

In terms of employee demographics, the university has low numbers of both instructional faculty and staff who are members of racially minoritized groups. As demonstrated in Table 4 (in contrast to Table 3), there is a significant discrepancy in the number of students who are members of minoritized groups in relation to the number of instructional faculty and staff who are representative of these same identities. For example, although 36.5% of students identify as Hispanic/Latinx, only 3.93% of instructional faculty and 9.62% of staff identify as Hispanic/Latinx.

Table 4. Instructional Faculty and Staff Ethnicity—Fall Term 2013

Ethnicity	% of instructional faculty ^a	% of staff ^b
American Indian/Alaskan Native only (American Indian) (non-Hispanic)	0.66	1.44
Asian (non-Hispanic)	6.60	3.66
Black/African American (non-Hispanic)	1.21	2.22
Hispanic/Latino (any race)	3.93	9.62
Native Hawaiian/other Pacific Islander (non-Hispanic)	No data	0.26
Two or more races (non-Hispanic)	0.66	2.22
White (non-Hispanic)	80.20	75.33

Data source: California State University HR Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System data extract year.

^a*n* = 909. ^b*n* = 766.

Ethnic Studies Department Context

At CSU X, the academic home of ethnic studies courses is the Department of Multicultural & Gender Studies (MCGS). MCGS was developed in 1975 as the Ethnic Studies and Women’s Studies Program on campus and did not receive departmental status until 2018. In the past two decades, MCGS has suffered from constantly rotating directors, impermanent office space, a lack of hiring tenure-line faculty, and general financial neglect. In 2017, renewed energy

and advocacy for the program brought increased investment from the university and allowed for the newly hired director to have a half-time appointment to provide the necessary attention and support MCGS needed to gain department status. Since that time, MCGS has hired six tenure-line faculty, developed a new major in intersectional Latinx/Chicanx studies, and redesigned the minor in queer and trans* studies. Additionally, the MCGS department faculty has recently created a variety of new courses, including specific ethnic studies courses, and responded to the delegated tasks from the chancellor's office in preparation for the new ethnic studies mandate (The CSU, n.d.).

Research Design

This section will discuss the data source used and describe the statistical models used for analyses in this quantitative study including preliminary descriptive statistics, and primary analyses to answer the research questions. Models included correlation models, t-tests, and logistic regression. A logistic regression model was selected as the goal of analysis was to explain the relationship between the outcome variable and a variety of explanatory variables (Hosmer & Lemeshow, 2000). This study sought to explore the relationship between taking ethnic studies courses and whether students attained a degree in 6 years or less versus more than 6 years. As the outcome variable was binary, a logistic regression was the best fit (Hosmer & Lemeshow, 2000).

A quantitative design was selected in order to help tell a story about student degree attainment in relation to their course taking. Existing de-identified student data from CSU X was analyzed to study this relationship. A request to the Office of Institutional Research was submitted for a data set for a six-year graduating cohort of First Time Freshmen who entered CSU X in Fall 2013. This cohort was selected as the most recent 6-year dataset available to

examine graduation and course-taking before the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. A conversation with a university data analyst was held to discuss needed data points before submitting the final request for data.

No student identification numbers were used and thus all data are deidentified and anonymous. As CSU X has a relatively small population of some racial/ethnic categories, and data were stored on a computer that is private and password protected to further protect data security.

Demographics

Demographic information included students' racial/ethnic identity, gender identity, status as a first-generation college student, and participation in EOP. A full list of variables can be found in Table 5. There are four variables that relate to race/ethnicity (see Table 5). *IPEDSrace* is a categorical variable based on IPEDS racial/ethnic definitions that the university collects. The variable *URM* defines whether a student is identified as an URM student based on the definitions of the university system. This includes only Black/African American, Latino/a, and Native American racial identities. As mentioned previously, the term URM is problematic as it both dehumanizes the students it refers to and suggests that the term "minority" is an identity that simply exists for the person as opposed to something that white supremacist culture has imposed upon them (Harper, 2013).

Additionally, though Asian students broadly are not identified as underrepresented minorities in the CSU system, it is widely understood that Hmong students are an underserved subgroup of Asian students in the geographic area. Therefore, I suggest that ethnic studies course enrollment might have similar validating benefits as for identified URM students. For this

reason, the variable *Hmong* is used as a fourth racial/ethnic variable and is collected by CSU X by a write-in option that students have on their registration paperwork.

Course Taking

The timing and number of ethnic studies courses that students took was collected, with one variable capturing the number of ethnic studies courses taken throughout college and a second variable counting the number of ethnic studies courses taken only in the first year of college at CSU X (see Table 5). The “first year” is defined as the first two semesters that a first-time freshman from the 2013 cohort completed, though those semesters do not have to be consecutive. The summer term was not included in this definition of the first two semesters as ethnic studies courses are rarely offered for summer terms at CSU X.

In terms of variables related to course taking, a formal approval process for ethnic studies courses at CSU X was developed in 2021 in response to the new ethnic studies legislation in California. Each campus was required to establish a committee to determine which courses would be eligible to meet the ethnic studies requirement. Currently, CSU X offers nine distinct courses that are approved ethnic studies courses that meet the general education ethnic studies requirement. Therefore, the courses in Table 6 below, which have been identified and approved as Ethnic Studies courses through the Ethnic Studies Ad Hoc committee, were used to make a distinction between courses that would meet the criteria for AB 1460. As this study used a cohort (2013-2019) that graduated before the ethnic studies requirement was put in place (2020), the choice to distinguish between approved and non-approved courses was intentional in the research design, with the potential for this work to be useful for research on the new policy moving forward.

Table 5. *Student Data Requested From Office of Institutional Research—FTF Entering Fall 2013*

Variable	Definitions
Gender	Student gender. Only male and female collected in fall 2013. <i>Categorical/binary.</i> 0 = male, 1 = female
IPEDS race	Student racial identity based on IPEDS categories. <i>Categorical.</i> American Indian/Alaska Native; Asian; Black/African American; Hispanic/Latino; Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander; two or more races; unknown; nonresident alien
Hmong	Student racial identity collected by university. Hmong identity in dataset (as not included in IPEDS). <i>Categorical/binary.</i> 0 = not Hmong, 1 = Hmong
URM	Student identity as URM. <i>Categorical/binary.</i> 0 = not URM, 1 = URM
First generation	Student identity as a first-generation college student during their first semester as defined by university: neither parent obtained a 4-year degree. <i>Categorical/binary.</i> 0 = not first generation, 1 = first generation
EOP participant	Student participated in EOP during their first year at the university. <i>Categorical/binary.</i> 0 = not EOP participant, 1 = EOP participant
Ethnic studies—all	Number of approved ethnic studies courses taken throughout 2013–2019. <i>Ordinal.</i> 0–7 courses
Ethnic studies—first year	Number of approved ethnic studies courses taken in first two semesters enrolled. <i>Ordinal.</i> 0–3 courses
Graduation	Student attained degree from CSU X. <i>Categorical/binary.</i> 0 = did not graduate, 1 = graduated
Graduated 6 years or less (degree attainment)	Student graduated in 6 years or less versus more than 6 years from CSU X. <i>Categorical/binary.</i> 0 = no, did not graduate in 6 years or less, 1 = yes, graduated in 6 years or less
DFW—total	Total number of D, F, and/or W grades throughout college career. <i>Ordinal.</i> 0–25
DFW—first year	Total number of D, F, and/or W grades in first two semesters of college. <i>Ordinal.</i> 0–10
GPA—first year	GPA after the first year of college. <i>Continuous.</i> 0.0–4.2
GPA—graduation	GPA at graduation. <i>Continuous.</i> 0.0–4.2

Note. FTF = first-time freshmen; IPEDS = Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System; URM = underrepresented minority; EOP = Educational Opportunity Program; CSU = California State University; DFW = D, F, or withdrawal grade; GPA = grade point average.

Participants

Students from the 2013 cohort of incoming first-time freshmen who were identified as racially minoritized were used to examine student course taking during a 6-year period. Again, this 6-year window was selected instead of a more recent window due to the COVID-19 pandemic's potential impact on course-taking patterns and time to degree, which was central to this study. Students who were identified as white ($n = 1,063$) were not included in the dataset as this is not a study comparing students who are racially minoritized to students who are not racially minoritized. The focus of this study was course taking and degree attainment in 6 years or less versus taking more than 6 years among students who have the experience of being racially minoritized in a white-centric educational institution.

The dataset included 1,277 students (55% of the full cohort), all of whom were identified as racially minoritized. Out of these 1277 students, 841 (36% of the full cohort) graduated from CSU X. 93.8% of those 841 students ($n=789$) who graduated did so in six years or less. This subset of the data was used to look at trends in the data relative to students who successfully graduated in 6 years or less. For the logistic regression, 841 students who graduated from CSU X were analyzed to look at predictive probabilities among those who graduated in 6 years or less in comparison to those who graduated in more than 6 years from CSU X.

Table 6. *Approved Ethnic Studies Courses Offered Fall 2013 Through Spring 2019*

Asian American Studies

Hmong Cultural Roots & Contemporary Issues
Southeast Asians: Culture in Transition

American Indian Studies

Introduction to American Indian Studies
American Indian Storytelling/Oral Narrative

African American Studies

Introduction to African American Studies
Hip Hop Culture

Chicanx/Latinx Studies

Introduction to Chicano Studies
Chicanos in Contemporary Society
Introduction to Latinx Studies
Latinx and Immigration

Multicultural and Gender Studies

Introduction to Multicultural & Gender Studies
Introduction to Multicultural & Gender Studies (Writing Intensive)
Introduction to Intersectional Ethnic Studies
Introduction to Intersectional Ethnic Studies (Writing Intensive)

Additional courses in the MCGS department that are ethnic studies-like but not in the category of approved ethnic studies courses were included for analysis. This was to recognize the ways in which these courses likely act as validating spaces but may not exactly align with ethnic studies curricular requirements per AB 1460 but are primarily taught with the focus on a minoritized Ethnic group. They are core courses, either required or elective, for ethnic studies majors and minors but did not automatically fit the legislated definition of ethnic studies. For example, African American Music is a course focused on uplifting and validating music created and produced by and for African American/Black people, including intersections with social systems such as oppression in the music industry and access to power, but this course is not on the approved ethnic studies list yet. These courses may also not have been available for review

by the Ethnic Studies Ad Hoc Committee during their one-time review period in 2021–2022 (see Table 7). In statistical models used, the two ethnic studies course categories (approved and ethnic studies-like) were combined. This was to add variability in the models as what mattered in the analysis was whether students took ethnic studies, no necessarily if the course had been formally approved yet or not. Information in the dataset also included whether students had declared one of the two ethnic studies majors, Multicultural & Gender Studies or intersectional Chicano/Latino studies, or one of the five ethnic studies minors. These minors include African American studies, American Indian studies, Asian American studies, Chicano/Latino studies, and multicultural & gender studies. There were not enough students who were declared majors (1 student) or minors (6 students) to effectively include these variables in analyses.

Table 7.

Ethnic Studies-like Courses Offered Fall 2013 Through Spring 2019

Asian American Studies

Asian American Literature

Special Topics in Asian American Studies

American Indian Studies

American Indian Literature

North American Indians

California Indians

Special Topics

African American Studies

Sociology of African Americans

African American History

African American Music

Chicanx/Latinx Studies

Mexican Heritage

Mexican Heritage before 1848

Chicano Arts and Ideas

Special Problems

Chicanos in Contemporary Society

Latinx Gender and Sexualities

Latina and Chicana Power

Chicano Literature

Special Topics

Multicultural and Gender Studies

Ethnic and Race Relations

American Multicultural Literature

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted with Stata software. Descriptive statistics were utilized to understand the identities and characteristics of the population, followed by correlations and *t-tests* to identify relationships and differences across variables. Logistic regression analyses were used to analyze the relationship between the binary dependent variable (graduated in 6 years or less versus graduated in more than 6 years) and predictor variables including ethnic studies

course taking, Hispanic/Latinx identity, EOP status, first-generation status, number of D, F, or W (DFW) grades in the first year, and GPA after the first year.

Before analyses were conducted, the data were cleaned to correct inconsistencies and errors. This included omitting variables that were no longer going to be used in the analyses. Each variable was reviewed in the Stata software and variables were labeled. Additionally, some variables were recoded to provide more desirable fields to answer the research questions.

Preliminary/Exploratory Data Analyses

Initial data analyses provided a baseline for understanding the data in relation to the research questions and the literature. This included preliminary descriptive data to understand the number of students who were racially minoritized and patterns of ethnic studies course taking. Preliminary data also included descriptive statistics regarding the number of students who graduated in 4, 5, or 6 years and the GPAs of students after the first year and at graduation. Demographic breakdown included racial/ethnic identity, gender identity, status as a first-generation college student, and enrollment in the EOP program.

Spearman's correlation was run to analyze associations between students' time to degree (3 to 8+ years) and number of ethnic studies courses taken in the first year (zero to three courses) and throughout college (zero to seven courses).

Primary Data Analyses

This dissertation focused specifically on the relationship between ethnic studies course taking and degree attainment in 6 years or less. To examine trends in the data among students who were successful in graduating within the 6-year window, *t*-tests and analysis of variance (ANOVA) were conducted with a subset of the data that included the students who graduated in 6 years or less ($n = 789$). Separate *t*-tests were run for (a) all students in the dataset, (b) students

who identified as Hispanic/Latinx, and (c) students in EOP in their first year, as described in the research questions.

For the logistic regression analysis, the dependent variable was binary: whether students graduated in six years or less (Yes = 1) or graduated in more than 6 years (No = 0). Predictor variables included number of ethnic studies courses taken (0–7), identity as Hispanic/Latinx (yes = 1, no = 0), status as a student who participated in EOP (yes = 1, no = 0), status as identified a first-generation college student (yes = 1, no = 0), GPA above the cut point after the first year (yes = 1, no = 0), and number of DFW grades in the first year (0–10). The cut point for GPA in the first year was set at 2.89, as this was identified in recent research at CSU X as a threshold that had significant increase in probability of graduation in 6 years for students who are URM (McConville et al., 2021).

To assess for normal distribution of continuous variables, histograms were reviewed and demonstrated normal distribution of the data. A check for multicollinearity was completed by calculating variance inflation factors. There were no variables with variance inflation factors above 2.0, suggesting low multicollinearity in the data.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

This study sought to explore the relationship between ethnic studies course taking and degree attainment in 6 years or less for students who are racially minoritized. To examine ethnic studies course taking and degree attainment in 6 years or less, the dataset included first-time freshmen entering the university in 2013.

Descriptive Results

This section provides descriptive statistics related to students' identities, program involvement, ethnic studies course taking, and time to degree. Student identity includes the racialized identities of American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian, Black/African American, Hmong, and Hispanic/Latinx, as well as students who identified as two or more races. Additionally, the numbers of students who are identified as URM, first-generation college goers, and participants in the EOP in their first year are provided to understand the population.

There were 1,277 students in the full dataset (see Table 8), all of whom were identified as first-time freshmen and racially minoritized. Students identified as white were not included in the dataset as this study was interested in the experiences of students who are racially minoritized specifically and not in comparison to the norms and narratives of white students. Descriptive data that provided baseline understanding of ethnic studies course taking and student identities included the full 1,277 students in the dataset and compared students who graduated in 6 years or less ($n = 789$), students who graduated in more than 6 years ($n = 52$), and students who did not graduate from CSU X ($n = 436$). Correlation and *t-test* analyses used only the students who graduated in 6 years or less ($n = 789$) in order to analyze course taking among those students who were identified as successful at degree completion in 6 years or less. The logistic regression model utilized 841 students who had graduated, some in 6 years or less ($n = 789$) and some in

more than 6 years ($n = 52$), in order to test predictive probability of degree attainment in 6 years or less versus more than 6 years. There is not enough available information about the outcomes for the 436 students in the dataset who did not graduate from CSU X to include them reliably in the model. See Table 8 for descriptive characteristics of students in the dataset.

Table 8. Descriptive Characteristics of Participants by Degree Attainment at CSU X (n = 1,277)

Variable	6 years or less (n = 789)		More than 6 years (n = 52)		No degree (n = 436)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Gender						
Female	477	60	22	42	239	55
Male	311	40	30	58	197	45
Unknown	1	0	0	0	0	0
IPEDS race						
American Indian/Alaska Native	7	1	1	2	6	1.4
Asian	80	10	7	13	43	9.9
Black/African American	26	3	5	10	25	5.7
Hispanic/Latino	468	59	30	58	275	63
Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	3	0.5	4	8	1	0.2
Two or more races	91	12	5	10	36	8.3
Hmong identity ^a	26	100	5	10	20	4.6
URM status						
URM	495	63	36	69	304	70
Non-URM	294	37	16	31	132	30
First-generation status						
First generation	274	35	20	38	168	39
Non-first generation	515	65	32	62	268	61
EOP participation						
EOP participant	123	16	15	29	66	15
Non-EOP participant	666	84	37	71	370	85

Note. CSU = California State University; IPEDS = Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System; URM = underrepresented minority; EOP = Educational Opportunity Program.

^aHmong identity is an additional write-in option for students and may result in a small overlap of Hmong students and Asian students.

As this study was interested in students who were identified as racially minoritized, data that provided a more detailed look at course taking and time to degree were analyzed. Students who graduated in 6 years or less included 88% of American Indian/Alaska Native students in the 2013 cohort ($n = 7$), 92% of Asian students ($n = 80$), 84% of Black/African American students ($n = 26$), 94% of Hispanic/Latinx students ($n = 468$), 100% of Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students ($n = 3$), and 96% of students identified as two or more races ($n = 91$) (see Table 8).

Additional descriptive statistics includes ethnic studies course taking. Of participants who graduated in 6 years or less, 66.16% ($n = 522$) had not taken any ethnic studies courses throughout their college career, whereas 33.84% ($n = 267$) had taken at least one course during college. When looking at course taking in the first year of college, 82.89% of students ($n = 654$) who graduated in 6 years or less did not take an ethnic studies course in their first year, and 17.11% of students ($n = 135$) did take at least one ethnic studies course in their first year. Of the students who took an ethnic studies course in their first year, 31 graduated in 4 years, 68 students graduated in 5 years, and 36 graduated in 6 years (see Table 9).

Table 9. *Frequencies: Time to Degree by Ethnic Studies Course Taken in the First Year ($n = 789$)*

Years to degree	No ethnic studies		Ethnic studies ^a	
	Obs.	%	Obs.	%
3	4	0.58	0	0.00
4	247	35.75	31	20.67
5	312	45.15	68	45.33
6	91	13.7	36	24
6 or less	654	82.9	135	17.11

Note. Obs. = number of observations

^aAt least one ethnic studies course taken in the first year.

Of the 789 students who graduated in 6 years or less, there were 110 students who took one ethnic studies course throughout their college career, 111 who took two courses, 24 who took three courses, 13 who took four courses, seven who took five courses, only one student who took six courses, and one who took seven courses throughout college. ANOVA results demonstrated that the average time to degree for students who took only one ethnic studies course was shorter ($M = 4.75$, $SD = 0.71$) compared to those who took two courses ($M = 4.95$, $SD = 0.69$) and those who took three courses ($M = 5.21$, $SD = 0.78$), $F = 4.12$, $p = .0002$.

GPA in relation to ethnic studies course taking was analyzed with an independent t -test. Results show that if students who graduated in 6 years or less took ethnic studies in their first year, the average GPA after the first year was 2.94 ($SD = 0.49$), compared to students who did not take ethnic studies their first year, who had an average GPA at the end of their first year of 2.90 ($SD = 0.53$), $t(787) = 2.07$, $p = .03$ (see Table 10).

Looking at average GPAs at graduation, independent t -test results show that students who graduated in 6 years or less and took ethnic studies in their first year have an average cumulative GPA at graduation of 2.91 ($M = 2.91$, $SD = 0.51$) compared to an average cumulative GPA at graduation of 3.02 ($M = 3.02$, $SD = 0.54$) for students who did not take ethnic studies their first year, $t(787) = 2.07$, $p = 0.4$ (see Table 10).

Independent t -test results demonstrate that students who graduated in 6 years or less and took ethnic studies anytime in their college career had an average GPA at graduation of 2.97 ($M = 2.97$, $SD = 0.48$) compared to students who did not take any ethnic studies during their time in college who had an average GPA of 3.02 at graduation ($M = 3.02$, $SD = 0.56$), $t(787) = 1.26$, $p = .2$ (see Table 10).

Table 10. *Ethnic Studies Course Taking and GPA (n = 789)*

Variable	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>p</i>
GPA after Year 1				
Ethnic studies Year 1	135	2.94	0.49	0.47
No ethnic studies Year 1	654	2.90	0.53	0.47
GPA at graduation				
Ethnic studies Year 1	135	2.91	0.51	0.04*
No ethnic studies Year 1	654	3.02	0.54	0.04*
GPA at graduation				
Ethnic studies in college	267	2.97	0.48	0.2
No ethnic studies in college	522	3.02	0.56	0.2

Note. GPA = grade point average.

* $p < 0.05$.

Of all 789 students who attained a degree in 6 years or less, 267 (33.84%) took an ethnic studies course at some point in their college career. Of the students who identified as Hispanic/Latinx ($n = 468$), 181 (37%) took an ethnic studies course, and of the students who participated in EOP ($n = 123$), 99 (80%) took an ethnic studies course (see Table 11).

Table 11. Time to Degree by Ethnic Studies (ES) Course Taken Anytime in College

Years to degree	All students (n = 789)		Hispanic/Latinx (n = 468)		EOP (n = 123)	
	n	%	N	%	N	%
3 years						
ES course	0	0	0	0	0	0
No ES course	4	100	1	100	1	100
4 years						
ES course	82	30	54	35	14	74
No ES course	196	70	101	65	5	26
5 years						
ES course	126	33	89	37	53	84
No ES course	254	67	151	63	10	16
6 years						
ES course	59	46	38	51	32	80
No ES course	68	54	34	49	8	20
6 years or less (total from above)						
ES course	267	34	181	37	99	80
No ES course	522	66	287	63	24	20

Note. “ES course” indicates at least one ethnic studies course taken throughout college.

Research Question 1

1. Among students who are racially minoritized, what is the association between the number of ethnic studies courses students take throughout their college career and their time to degree?

Spearman’s correlations were run to analyze associations between students’ time to degree and number of ethnic studies courses taken in the first year and throughout college. There was a weak positive relationship between time to degree and whether a student took an ethnic studies course anytime in their career ($r = 0.14$). There was also a weak positive relationship

between time to degree and whether an ethnic studies course was taken in the first year ($r = 0.16$). In other words, if students took ethnic studies either in their first year or anytime in college, the data showed a small correlation to taking longer to graduate. Statistical significance was demonstrated for both relationships, $p = .00$, which indicates that ethnic studies course taking at some point in college had a significant negative relationship to time to degree.

Independent t -test results demonstrated that those who had taken at least one ethnic studies course throughout college ($n = 293$) had an average time to degree of 4.91 years ($M = 4.91$, $SD = 0.72$) compared to an average time to degree of 4.74 years for students who did not take an ethnic studies course ($n = 548$) ($M = 4.74$, $SD = 0.69$), $t(787) = -3.32$, $p = .00$ (see Table 12).

- a. Among students who identify as Hispanic/Latinx, what is the association between the number of ethnic studies courses students take throughout their college career and their time to degree?

Of the students identified as Hispanic/Latinx, independent t -test results demonstrated that Hispanic/Latinx students who took at least one ethnic studies course in college took an average of 4.91 years to graduate ($M = 4.91$, $SD = 0.71$) compared to Hispanic/Latinx students who did not take an ethnic studies course in college who had an average time to graduate of 4.76 years ($M = 4.76$, $SD = 0.65$), $t(466) = -2.37$, $p = .02$ (see Table 12).

- b. Among students who are part of EOP, what is the relationship between ethnic studies course taking throughout college and their time to degree?

Among students who participated in EOP in their first year, independent t -test results demonstrated that students who took at least one ethnic studies course throughout college ($n = 99$) took an average of 5.18 years to graduate ($M = 5.18$, $SD = 0.66$). EOP students who did not

take an ethnic studies course in college ($n = 24$) took an average of 5.04 years to graduate ($M = 5.04$, $SD = 0.86$), $t(121) = -0.88$, $p = .38$ (see Table 12).

Table 12. *t-Test Analysis—Time to Degree by Ethnic Studies Courses Taken Throughout College*

No. of courses	All students ($n = 789$)			Hispanic/Latinx ($n = 468$)			EOP ($n = 123$)		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
0	4.74	0.69	522	4.76	0.65	287	5.04	0.86	24
1+	4.91*	0.72	267	4.91*	0.71	181	5.18	0.66	99

Note. Time to degree measured in years; 4.0 = 4 years; EOP = educational opportunity program
* $p < 0.00$.

A logistic regression model analyzed the relationship between student degree attainment, measured through graduating in 6 years or less versus graduating in more than 6 years, as the binary response variable, and predictor variables consisting of the following: (a) ethnic studies course taking in Year 1, which includes any ethnic studies or ethnic studies-like course as described in the Method section; (b) student identity as Hispanic/Latinx, as collected through students' self-identified demographic information upon enrollment to CSU X; (c) student participation in the Education Opportunity Program (EOP) during their first year; (d) status as first-generation student as collected at enrollment; (e) number of DFW grades in the first year; and (f) a GPA above the 2.89 threshold after the first year versus not, as collected by CSU X.

The logistic regression model yielded a significant χ^2 result of 0.0001, indicating a strong association between the predictor variables and the outcome of graduating in 6 years or less versus graduating in more than 6 years. This suggests that the model is able to distinguish between variables more significantly than by chance alone (Huber, 2022). The data revealed no significant prediction of probability in graduating in 6 years or less versus graduating in more than 6 years in relation to ethnic studies course taking throughout college (see Table 13).

Results from the logistic regression model suggest that students' GPA at the end of their first year and the number of DFW grades in the first year reliably predicted the odds of graduating in 6 years or less versus graduating in more than 6 years. The data revealed that students with a GPA of 2.89 or above were significantly more likely to graduate in 6 years or less, with an odds ratio of 2.26, $p = .03$. This means that relative to students who had a GPA below the 2.89 cut point after the first year of college, the odds of graduating in 6 years or less are increased by a factor of 2.26 for students with a GPA above the 2.89 threshold. As mentioned in the Method section, the 2.89 cut point was designated based on previous research at CSU X that determined this GPA threshold as a significant predictor of graduating in 6 years or less for students who are Pell receiving and identified as underserved minorities (McConville et al., 2021).

The data showed that students who had fewer DFW grades were significantly more likely to graduate in 6 years or less versus graduating in more than 6 years, with an odds ratio of 0.76, $p = .006$. This means that for every one-unit increase in DFW grades, the odds of graduating in 6 years or less decreased by a factor of 0.76 (see Table 13).

The data demonstrated that participation in EOP in the student's first year was marginally significant in terms of graduating in 6 years or less versus graduating in more than 6 years with an odds ratio of 0.51 meaning that the odds of graduating in 6 years or less decreased by a factor of 0.51, $p = .09$. Although participating in EOP was only marginally significant, it is noted here as EOP participation is a focal variable of a secondary research question (see Table 13).

No other variables in this regression model (status as first-generation or identity as a Hispanic/Latinx) significantly predicted the odds of graduating in 6 years or less versus graduating in more than 6 years.

Table 13. *Logistic Regression Analysis—Degree Attainment in 6 Years or Less Versus More Than 6 Years (n = 841)*

Variable	Odds Ratio	SE	95% CI		P
			LL	UL	
Ethnic studies—anytime	0.63	0.21	0.33	1.22	0.17
Hispanic/Latinx	1.28	0.39	0.71	2.31	0.42
EOP	0.51	0.2	0.24	1.10	0.09
First generation	0.97	0.31	0.52	1.82	0.93
DFW	0.77	0.07	0.63	0.93	0.006 ^b
GPA	2.26	0.83	1.10	4.65	0.03 ^a

Note. EOP = Educational Opportunity Program; DFW = D, F, or withdrawal grade; GPA = grade point average.

^a $p < 0.05$. ^b $p < 0.01$.

Research Question 2

2. Among students who are racially minoritized, what is the relationship between ethnic studies course taking in the first year of college and time to degree?

Independent *t*-test results demonstrate that students who took at least one ethnic studies course in their first year of college ($n = 135$) had an average of 5.04 years to degree ($M = 5.04$, $SD = 0.70$) versus students who did not take an ethnic studies course in their first year ($n = 654$), who had an average time to degree of 4.75 years ($M = 4.75$, $SD = 0.69$), $t(787) = -4.38$, $p = .00$ (see Table 14).

a. Among students who identify as Hispanic/Latinx, what is the relationship between the number of ethnic studies courses students take in the first year and their years to degree?

Independent *t*-test results demonstrate that Hispanic/Latinx students who took at least one ethnic studies course in their first year ($n = 92$) took an average of 5.04 years to degree ($M = 5.04$, $SD = 0.69$). Hispanic/Latinx students who did not take an ethnic studies course in their first

year ($n = 376$) took an average of 4.76 years to degree ($M = 4.76, SD = 0.67$), $t(466) = -3.59, p = .00$ (see Table 14).

- b. Among students who are part of EOP, what is the relationship between ethnic studies course taking in their first year and the time to degree?

Among students who were part of EOP in their first year of college, independent t -test results demonstrate that students who took at least one ethnic studies course ($n = 86$) took an average of 5.23 years to degree ($M = 5.23, SD = 0.63$), compared to students who did not take an ethnic studies course in their first year ($n = 37$), who took an average of 4.97 years to degree ($M = 4.97, SD = 0.83$), $t(121) = -1.90, p = .06$ (see Table 14).

Table 14. *t-Test Analysis: Time to Degree by Ethnic Studies Courses Taken in the First Year*

Ethnic studies courses taken	All students ($n = 789$)			Hispanic/Latinx students ($n = 648$)			EOP students ($n = 123$)		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
Zero	4.75*	0.69	654	4.76*	0.67	376	4.97	0.83	37
One or more	5.04*	0.71	135	5.04*	0.69	92	5.23	0.63	86

Note: Time to degree measured in years, 4.0 = 4 years; EOP = Educational Opportunity Program
* $p > .00$.

A logistic regression model analyzed the relationship between student academic timelines, measured through graduating in 6 years or less versus students who graduated in more than 6 years as the binary response variable, and predictor variables consisting of the following: (a) ethnic studies course taking in Year 1, which includes any ethnic studies or ethnic studies-like course as described in the Method section; (b) student’s identity as Hispanic/Latinx as collected through students self-identified demographic information upon enrollment to CSU X; (c) student participation in EOP during their first year; (d) status as first-generation student as collected at

enrollment; (e) number of DFW grades in the first year; and (f) GPA at the 2.89 threshold as collected by CSU X.

The logistic regression model yielded a significant χ^2 result of 0.0001, indicating a strong association between the predictor variables and the outcome of graduating in 6 years or less versus graduating in more than 6 years. This suggests that the model is able to distinguish between different groups more significantly than by chance alone. The data revealed no significant prediction of probability in graduating in 6 years or less versus graduating in more than 6 years in relation to ethnic studies course taking in the first year.

Results from the logistic regression model suggest that GPA at the end of their first year and the number of DFW grades in the first year reliably predicted a student's odds of graduating in 6 years or less. In the analysis examining the relationship between GPA and graduation in 6 years or less, the data revealed that students with a GPA above the 2.89 cut point were significantly more likely to graduate in 6 years or less, with an odds ratio of 2.26, $p = .03$. This suggests that the odds of graduating in 6 years or less increased by a factor of 2.26 for students above the 2.89 threshold.

The data also revealed that students with fewer DFW grades were significantly more likely to graduate in 6 years or less with an odds ratio of 0.76, $p = .005$. This suggests that for every one unit increase in DFW grades, the odds of graduating in 6 years or less decreased by a factor of 0.76 (see Table 15).

No other variables in this regression model (identity as Hispanic/Latinx and status as first generation) significantly predicted the odds of graduating in 6 years or less versus graduating in more than 6 years.

Table 15. *Logistic Regression Analysis—Degree Attainment in 6 Years or Less (n = 841)*

Variable	Odds ratio	SE	95% CI		P
			LL	UL	
Ethnic studies—first year	0.71	0.32	0.29	1.73	0.47
Hispanic/Latinx	1.24	0.37	0.68	2.24	0.4
EOP	0.5	0.23	0.2	1.25	0.14
First generation	1.0	0.32	0.53	1.87	1.0
DFW	0.76	0.07	0.63	0.92	0.005**
GPA	2.26	0.83	1.11	4.65	0.03*

Note: EOP = Educational Opportunity Program; DFW = D, F, or Withdrawal grades; GPA = Grade Point Average.

* $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$.

Summary of Findings

Of the 789 students who graduated in 6 years or less, 267 took an ethnic studies course at some point in their college career and 135 took an ethnic studies course in their first year. Of Hispanic/Latinx students ($n = 468$), 181 took ethnic studies at some point in their college career and 92 took ethnic studies in their first year. Of the 135 students who took ethnic studies in the first year, EOP students accounted for 86. Of the 267 students who took ethnic studies at some point in their college career, 99 were also EOP students.

Correlation analysis suggests a relatively weak positive and significant relationship between ethnic studies course taking and longer time to degree both in the first year and throughout college. The t -test analyses demonstrated that students who took at least one ethnic studies course throughout college had a longer average time to degree compared to peers who did not take an ethnic studies course. Additional t -test analyses demonstrated that students who took at least one ethnic studies course in their first year of college had a longer average time to degree compared to peers who did not take an ethnic studies course. Similarly, among Hispanic/Latinx students, those who took ethnic studies either throughout college or in their first year had higher average times to degree compared to Hispanic/Latinx peers who did not take

ethnic studies. Students who took ethnic studies in their first year had a slightly higher GPA at the end of their first year compared to students who did not take ethnic studies. These *t*-tests were statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level.

EOP is a supportive program for students who identify as first-generation college students and/or as low income. The program provides a variety of academic and extracurricular support. Though the EOP program at CSU X required ethnic studies to be taken in the first year, about 20% of EOP students did not take an ethnic studies course due to scheduling conflict and other exemptions. Results showed that students who participated in EOP who took at least one ethnic studies course either throughout college or in their first year of college had a slightly higher average time to degree compared to EOP peers who did not take an ethnic studies course.

Results showed no reliable prediction for probability of graduation in 6 years or less versus graduating in more than 6 years in relation to ethnic studies course taking. Logistic regression results did demonstrate that GPA and number of DFW grades were significant predictors for probability of graduating in 6 years or less versus graduating in more than 6 years.

Reflexivity

Although I do not claim that this study uses QuantCrit (Gillborn et al., 2018) as a framework in any significant way, it is a helpful theory that recognizes the power and privilege of telling a story through numbers and the great responsibility of researchers to acknowledge this power in the discussion of results. A basic overview is offered here to support the overall aim of this study, which focuses on systemic power and racialized identities as foundations for analysis. Gillborn et al. (2018) proposed the following principles for QuantCrit: (1) the centrality of racism; (2) numbers are not neutral; (3) categories are neither “natural” nor given; (4) voice and

insight are essential, because data cannot “speak for itself”; and (5) numbers can be used for social justice.

With this basic understanding as a guide to be reflective about my own situatedness as a white woman and teacher within an ethnic studies department, I attempted to use the data to tell a story about the relationship between course taking and time to degree. I recognize the potential backlash on ethnic studies based on what the data reveal. If the data show that ethnic studies course taking may create a longer time to degree on average, this could be seen in a simplistic way as ethnic studies having a negative impact on students. I also have an understanding that the value of urgency, derived in some part by white supremacy culture (Okun, 1999), can drive the push for students to graduate more quickly (i.e., in 6 years or less). This supports the narrative that taking longer is somehow less acceptable than graduating more quickly. This may verify the racist narrative that suggests that students who take longer to graduate, many of whom are racially minoritized, must not be smart enough to graduate more quickly. Although the value of urgency is more conceptual here, there are also very practical ways that finishing more quickly can benefit students. For instance, less time in college may mean less financial aid burden after college. A quicker time to degree may mean students enter the workforce and begin earning a higher income for themselves and their families.

I want to resist the single narrative that quicker is better, even though my original hypothesis, that ethnic studies course taking would lessen time to degree, perhaps perpetuated it. Instead, the data, viewed through the lens of validation theory, have helped me to see that perhaps ethnic studies courses might act as validating spaces, spaces that help students feel they belong, and help to create a college environment in which students who are racially minoritized choose to stay to attain their degree and participate in the university in other positive ways. The

data may be telling us that students who are racially minoritized and who experience ethnic studies courses as validating may choose to stay at the university longer than they would without the experience of this validation in the classroom.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This study sought to add to the conversation about the relationship between ethnic studies course taking and graduation for students who are racially minoritized. With the implementation of AB 1460 ensuring ethnic studies course taking as part of the graduation requirement in the CSU system, more research is needed to understand how to leverage this significant opportunity to increase equity in graduation rates. There is little research thus far (the bill was passed in 2020) about the relationship between ethnic studies course taking and graduation rates in higher education. Although some important work regarding ethnic studies and student academic success has been done in high school settings (Bonilla et al., 2021; Cabrera, et al., 2014; Dee & Penner, 2017), very little research focuses on higher education.

The passage of AB 1460 signaled a new commitment to centering ethnic studies curriculum, which is designed to be by, for, and about people who have been historically marginalized by race and ethnicity. In doing so, the new law provides rationale for not only the content but the curricular and pedagogical approach. Ethnic studies as a course of study is not only about the content alone. It is also about the ways in which curriculum relates to students' lived experiences, validating the many lifeways and cultural contexts of people whose experiences have gone unacknowledged in traditional, white supremacist educational settings. Acknowledging the importance of students' abilities to see their own lived experience in the curriculum in ways that validate their identity as a student and their sense of belonging in higher education is surely a step in the right direction. This study adds to the conversation on the relationship between ethnic studies course taking and student success broadly. More specifically, this inquiry encourages the need for more examination of the relationship between ethnic studies

course taking and increased equity in graduation rates for racially minoritized students specifically.

This discussion will attempt to make meaning out of the findings in relation to validation theory (Rendón, 1994) and the goals of ethnic studies curriculum as an equity-based approach. The discussion will cover main results of the data, including the relevance of ethnic studies course taking on time to degree and the relevance of students' identity as Hispanic/Latinx or their participation in EOP. It will also discuss the concept of belongingness and explore how student decision-making throughout college, including students' connection to faculty, and the intersections of socioeconomic status and academic goals may impact time to degree. Lastly, the chapter will discuss some limitations of the study, identify implications for policy and practice, and share ideas for future research.

Discussion of Results

Ethnic Studies and Time to Degree

Though one hypothesis of this project was that taking an ethnic studies course might lessen the time to degree, the results demonstrate a different relationship: among students who are racially minoritized, taking at least one ethnic studies course either in the first year or throughout college (versus not taking any ethnic studies at all) is associated with a slightly longer time that students stay at the university to attain a degree. Results demonstrated that those who had taken at least one ethnic studies course in their college career took longer on average to attain a degree (4.91 years) versus students who did not take an ethnic studies course (4.74 years). If students took an ethnic studies course in their first year of college, the average was 5.04 years to degree versus an average of 4.75 years for students who did not take an ethnic studies course in their first year. As CSU X is on a semester system, these average differences amount to

less than a semester difference. Though the findings are statistically significant, less than a semester difference may not be a big problem for students who are still graduating in 6 years or less except of course for the financial burden of an extra term for some students.

Time to degree is, of course, not the only measurement of success for students and should not be valued from a singular perspective. That is, a shorter time to degree may not be the best measure of success for every student. A sense of urgency has often been described as a value imposed by white supremacy (Okun, 1999). Though timeliness is an important factor in capitalist systems to get students into the workforce faster, graduating quickly may not make sense for all students. Important to explore in the discussion of the findings are reasons students may stay longer that center desire-based frameworks (Tuck, 2009) and equity-centered understandings of the data. Using these frameworks provides a counter story to the dominant narrative that taking longer to get a degree is somehow negative and instead centers the possibility of students choosing to stay at the university because they are being validated in the academic space. These frames also affirm the reality that our educational systems were built for a very specific kind of student (i.e., mostly white and financially comfortable), which creates inequitable experiences for many students who have been historically marginalized.

Connection to Validation Theory

Validation theory (Rendón, 1994) suggests that students benefit from being validated in their life experiences both in and out of the university classroom. This includes ways in which the faculty whom students engage with validate students' lived experiences (Rendón, 1994). As ethnic studies courses center content by, for, and about communities of color, these courses can be validating experiences specifically for students who are historically marginalized. Findings in this study suggest that if students take an ethnic studies course, and thus experience a validating

space, they stay at the university longer on average to get their degree compared to peers who did not take an ethnic studies course. In this way, ethnic studies courses may act as a strategy to retain students, keeping them connected to their goal of pursuing a degree. As the literature on persistence suggests, universities need to infuse culturally relevant strategies across campus to help students feel as though they belong and are academically capable in order to stay and persist to degree (Dee & Penner, 2017; Museus & Quaye, 2009). Ethnic studies may be one of these culturally relevant retention strategies.

Results from this study demonstrated that the quantity of ethnic studies courses may matter, as the more ethnic studies courses a student took throughout college, the longer they stayed to get their degree. The average time to degree for students who took only one ethnic studies course was slightly lower (4.75 years) than for those who took two courses (4.95 years) or those who took three courses (5.21 years). A natural question arises here: Are students seeking out more validating spaces in the classroom intentionally as they move through college? And if so, is this impacting the length of time they stay at the university?

Students Identified as Hispanic/Latinx

CSU X developed a new major in Chicana/Latina studies in 2019 and the program has grown in scope and number of majors since then. With HSI status as of 2015, and growing numbers of Hispanic/Latinx-identifying students, it makes sense that more students might be seeking out courses that reflect their cultural identity and related interests. These ethnic studies courses may bolster students' sense of belonging due to the nature of ethnic studies' pedagogical approaches to be by, for and about communities that have been historically marginalized. Again, a question arises: Are students being validated in ethnic studies courses in ways that encourage them to stay and study longer at the university?

Results demonstrated that students identified as Hispanic/Latinx who took at least one ethnic studies course either throughout college or in their first year had a higher average time to degree (4.91 years) than their Hispanic/Latinx peers who did not take an ethnic studies course (4.76 years). Similar to findings with the entire cohort of students, ethnic studies course taking could be one reason that students choose to stay at the university and persist to degree. Ideas for future research here include inquiries about Hispanic/Latinx students' engagement in these courses and their experience of validation. Additionally, investigation into decisions about course-taking patterns in relation to the desire to make space for these ethnic studies courses, and/or a major or minor, would be helpful.

Students Who Are EOP Participants

As previously mentioned, the nature of EOP is to support students who are first-generation college goers and/or students who have high financial need. Though California has been legally unable to utilize race as a category for enrollment in programs such as EOP, there is broad understanding that due to the interconnected nature of racism and classism, both status as a first-generation college student and socioeconomic status can act as a proxy for race. With high numbers of students who are racially minoritized being served by the EOP program, the EOP program at CSU X made the decision to require an ethnic studies course to be taken in students' first year. This is based, in part, on the assumption that ethnic studies curriculum can act as a supportive and validating space for students otherwise marginalized in the curriculum, thus supporting students' sense of belonging and academic success.

Results showed that students who participated in EOP in their first year and took at least one ethnic studies course at some point in college or in their first year stay at the university longer than the group as a whole, averaging 5.04 years if they took ethnic studies anytime in

college and 5.23 years if they took ethnic studies in the first year. Using a desire-based (Tuck, 2009) frame here, students in EOP may be more likely to find staff and faculty mentors during their time at the university that impact their decision to stay at CSU X and persist to degree. The ways in which EOP creates intentional relationships with faculty of color at CSU X may contribute to this, including the EOP practice of encouraging specific professors to teach the sections of the ethnic studies introductory courses. Although there are no data in this study that point directly at the connection to faculty and staff as institutional agents (Stanton-Salazar, 2011), by nature of the pedagogical approach in ethnic studies, students are being connected to supportive and validating faculty in the classroom in these courses. These faculty, most of whom are part of communities of color, are significant players in students' classroom experiences.

There are also many other intentional strategies that programs such as EOP utilize to connect students to supportive faculty and staff, including strategies at CSU X that have included inviting faculty to orientations, faculty/student mentor programs, student learning opportunities facilitated by staff and faculty, and off-campus retreats that students, staff, and faculty attend. These strategies may contribute to students having more meaningful connections to institutional agents on campus who can support and encourage their academic journeys, thus encouraging students to stay.

It is difficult to distinguish the relationship of ethnic studies course taking on time to degree alone for this population of students, as EOP students are part of a comprehensive support program. There are many complex and compounding factors for students who are first-generation college goers and/or who experience the realities of having few socioeconomic resources that may affect the time to degree. These factors were not controlled for in this study but may include the need for students to work full or part time during college, thus requiring that

students take fewer units per term. Compounding factors may also include choices or need to work, choices to get involved in activist or advocacy work on campus, and engagement with affinity groups and other supportive extracurricular spaces.

Belongingness and Decision-Making

Although educational systems have encouraged us to listen to dominant narratives about the time it should take to earn a degree from a deficit frame (that is, it is seen as a negative thing if a student takes longer than 4 years to attain a degree), what is quite possible in this line of inquiry is that students who take an ethnic studies course are positively impacted by the experience of taking ethnic studies and thus make decisions that have them staying longer at the university. Although this study did not directly address the many complex factors that can impact a student's academic journey, it is important to address some of them here in order to resist dominant, unhelpful narratives.

Students may be choosing to stay because they become connected to faculty and/or staff who encourage and support them in their academic journey. They may choose certain courses due to the faculty who teach them. They may choose the number of courses per term for financial reasons. They may choose to add or change majors or minors due to exposure to new thoughts and ideas, thus lengthening the time to degree. Participation in research projects that support their trajectory to graduate school or engagement in activist or advocacy work can also impact the time to degree. In general, students may choose to stay for additional terms because they are actively validated and engaged in the learning process and thus make choices that lengthen their time. Further explanation for some of these factors is offered below.

Students have many decisions to make during their academic journey to degree attainment. This includes decisions about course taking generally, decisions about majors and

minors, whether or how much to work while in school, and many others. Many factors can complicate decision-making and the process is often iterative, needing adjustments based on student experiences. For example, students who take an ethnic studies course in their first year may be introduced to a faculty member whom they appreciate. Perhaps this faculty member is the first they have had who is Black or Hmong or Latinx in their college career and this is a positive classroom experience for them. The student may then select courses to take the next term based on which courses that faculty member teaches. These choices can potentially impact their ability to take other required courses in a timely way, as courses may be offered at the same time or only once an academic year. Students may take an ethnic studies course in their second or third year and decide that they want to change or add a major or minor, thus making irrelevant some courses already taken towards another area of study and adding to their time to degree. Both examples demonstrate the potential of ethnic studies course taking having the effect of students taking longer to attain their degree.

Students who have limited economic resources may need to make decisions about course taking based on what they can afford and what their work schedule can handle. Summer and intersession courses can be more costly to students, so they may not be able to gain credits earned in a timely way using this strategy. Students who must work full or part time during school have choices to make regarding the number of units they take and the times and days that their work schedule allows for. Students make choices to structure their course taking and work schedule to ensure they have appropriate time allotted for study, homework, and labs—along with other personal or family obligations. This can mean they take fewer courses each term, or, if they take too many courses and don't have time to study, can mean they fail courses not due to lack of ability to pass but due to lack of time to study.

Students who are activists and leaders in clubs and organizations may also choose to limit their total units per term based on their involvement in these activities. For example, some universities have long endorsed the need for affinity group spaces, including women's centers, Black student unions, and pride clubs, as spaces where students can find others with similar lived experiences, creating community and belongingness that is critical for student success (Museus & Quaye, 2009). Students who take ethnic studies are exposed to concepts such as power, privilege, advocacy, and organizing that can encourage students to get involved in change-making efforts. Participation in clubs and organizations can offer critical skill building and highlights the importance of connecting theory to practice. In these roles, students connect with staff and faculty as advisors and mentors and work alongside dynamic students, building networks that can support their careers after college. Some students may choose to spend the kind of time in these roles that then takes time away from time spent on academic endeavors. This can mean that students take fewer units per term in order to also hold leadership positions. It can also mean that students make less time to study, which can negatively impact their grades or ability to pass a course. Though these choices may mean they take a bit longer to graduate, who are we to say that these experiences are not a "success"? When we define success based on narrow parameters that reduce the complexity of choices in front of students, we ignore the core concept of diversity in that "success" has many definitions and that these definitions are based on the lived experiences of students.

Students who find ethnic studies in their college career may be choosing to stay at the university because they see themselves and their experiences validated in the curriculum and thus the institution. Finding connection and belonging at the university has been identified as an important factor for students to successfully complete a degree (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Museus

& Quaye, 2009), and ethnic studies has historically been an anchor of this sense of belonging that is needed to persist to degree. The diversity of students' realities and choices described above makes it critical to understand more specifically how ethnic studies course taking relates to student success.

Limitations of the Study

Limitations of the study include factors related to the dataset itself, whether ethnic studies course taking was required or voluntary, and students' identities and how the data label those identities. First, in relation to the dataset, the relatively small sample size and the fact that the data are from one university can limit the generalizability of the results. Though a larger sample was desired, the Office of Institutional Research was unable to fulfill the request to expand the dataset to include five additional cohort years due to the capacity of the office. Based on the timeline in which this research needed to be completed, the dataset that was provided in January 2023 includes only the cohort of first-time freshmen who entered the university in 2013.

Related to this is the fact that the ethnic studies general education requirement per California law was not implemented for the 2013 cohort. This study was interested in the context of the new ethnic studies mandate per AB 1460 (Smith, 2020) but chose to utilize the 2013–2019 cohort to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students' course-taking and degree-attainment patterns. Further research will be helpful to account for the ethnic studies course requirement at all stages of the new mandate's implementation.

With regards to the variables about ethnic studies course taking, it is important to note that the raw data include one variable that denotes whether a student took an ethnic studies course at any point in their college career. Another variable separates out whether a student took ethnic studies specifically in the first year but does not provide specific information about any

other year. This means that if, for instance a student took ethnic studies in their third semester or the summer after their first year, which the data do not capture, there may be a similar effect as these time frames are similar to the first two semesters.

It is important to note that students who identify as Hispanic/Latinx are the majority of students in this dataset, with 468 out of 789 (59%) of students identifying as Hispanic/Latinx. Although some analyses were conducted with only these particular students, when analyzing the full data this large student demographic can drive the results, meaning they are the vast majority and their experiences influence results. This is not uncommon in educational research focused on racially minoritized students, as Hispanic/Latinx students became the largest group of racially minoritized students on college campuses in 2011 (Fry, 2011).

Limitations of this study include the reality that about 39% ($n = 114$) of the first-time freshmen in this dataset who took ethnic studies at some point in their college career were required to take an introductory ethnic studies course in their first year based on their participation in EOP. The other portion of students self-selected into ethnic studies courses, possibly choosing their own courses likely without any advising on ethnic studies. Students who chose ethnic studies may have had a variety of reasons that they chose those courses, including having had prior exposure to ethnic studies in high school and/or having a different understanding of power, privilege, oppression, and identity compared to other students. Although neither group was a control group in any way, the comparison between students who were enrolled in EOP and those who were not provides some analysis of the decision to take ethnic studies.

Data related to racialized identities can pose complexities, as racial and ethnic identities are nuanced and the language used to describe identities in data collected does not necessarily

match the identity markers that students choose for themselves. There were many iterations of decision-making with regards to racial and ethnic demographic categories. First, because Asian students as a broad group are not seen as underrepresented by the university system but many subpopulations within the Asian/Asian American community are underserved and historically marginalized (such as Hmong), creativity was needed in the dataset to account for Hmong students. One of the racial/ethnic categories students can opt into when providing their demographic information is an optional, write-in category for race/ethnicity. It is unclear how effective this option is in collecting data and how reflective the data are of the actual number of Hmong students at CSU X. It is possible that not all students who identify as Hmong marked the optional write-in box and it is possible that some Hmong students included themselves in the IPEDS racial category of “Asian.”

Students who identified as white were not included in the dataset from the beginning. Though CSU X is a primarily white institution, and some comparative analyses might be helpful in terms of highlighting the potential benefit of ethnic studies for white students, the purpose of this study was not to compare the experiences of students of color to the experiences of students who are white. The purpose of the study was to examine the ethnic studies course-taking patterns for students who are racially minoritized with the hypothesis that ethnic studies courses could bolster degree attainment amid inequitable educational systems.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Efforts to reduce the inequities in graduation rates and degree attainment must include a variety of structural and institutional interventions to meet the needs of students and use best practices in multiple areas. Understanding the impact of taking an ethnic studies course for students who are racially minoritized is important for institutions of higher education to include

in their decision-making, as it is the only academic course of study that explicitly centers the lived experiences of people who are racially minoritized. Inquiry related to the impact of ethnic studies on equitable graduation rates will help institutions learn how to serve students more equitably as part of a holistic and systemic approach.

If one of the system changes needed to better support students who are racially minoritized to stay and attain a degree is taking an ethnic studies course during their college career, then these courses not only need to be made more widely available, but students could be actively encouraged to enroll in the courses. Many university systems need to respond systematically to make this happen, including coordinating recruitment, registration, advising, and first-year experience programs. This also includes campus orientation and advising practices that engage strategies to ensure students are getting information about the potential benefits of taking these courses. University registrar policies can include accommodations for the section offerings in terms of course times, conflicts with other courses, the course add/drop period, and waitlist management.

Ethnic Studies Departments and Campus-Wide Offerings

Departments and programs that teach ethnic studies must be funded and staffed to ensure they have adequate resources to offer these courses. Courses that are introductory and appropriate for first-year students may need to be prioritized. Ethnic studies departments must utilize data in their decision-making related to course offerings, faculty hiring, and teaching assignments to ensure they are offering ethnic studies courses with appropriate content at the levels that are best suited to the student population. If future research provides more information about ethnic studies courses that focus specifically on the benefits of first-year course taking, then introductory-level courses—offered and encouraged in the early part of students’ academic

career—should be prioritized. If future research demonstrates the importance of ethnic identity of the students who take the course (e.g., Black/African American students benefit more from a course on Black/African American studies than Latinx studies), then courses need to be staffed and offered to match the racial makeup of the student body, and to match institutional goals for growing and diversifying the student body.

Garcia and Okhidoi (2015) note that embedding culturally relevant curriculum throughout the university is important in effectively serving minority students. ethnic studies departments cannot do this work in a silo. This means that departments and programs *other than* ethnic studies need to also offer courses that meet the criteria to be ethnic studies courses. If institutions do not already have a decision-making body of faculty, staff, and students to review and approve such courses, then a committee or work group should be developed. This practical suggestion for universities is critical in terms of furthering the practical application of ethnic studies courses as a systemic approach to reduce the equity gap.

The Significance of Faculty

Ethnic studies faculty are pivotal players in the effort to provide increased access to ethnic studies courses. Not only can they develop and teach new courses, they can also be instrumental in using their voices in various university spaces to uplift the significance of taking these courses for students who are racially minoritized. This can include their service on committees that determine university policy and practice related to resource allocation, advising practices, and student support services. Service in terms of collaborations with campus orientation and advising is also a way for ethnic studies faculty to support the work of ensuring students are getting the information they need about the benefits of ethnic studies courses.

Relatedly, as the literature suggests that the role of faculty is significant in terms of fostering a sense of belonging for historically marginalized students (Booker, 2016; Means & Pyne, 2017; Rendón, 1994), attention to the hiring and retention of faculty who can teach with these strategies is critical. Also important here is the provision of resources to provide robust professional development opportunities for faculty who are already a part of the university but need education and training to learn both the approaches to teaching with cultural relevance and inclusivity and the curricular content that validates historically racialized students. A critical component to ensure that faculty are able to provide effective teaching and other service to the university related to ethnic studies is to ensure the appropriate recognition of and compensation for the additional labor that goes into this kind of diversity, equity, and inclusion-centered work. Often faculty of color are a significant minority on college campuses (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020) and are asked to serve on committee after committee having to do with social justice and equity. This work is labor-intensive and often highly emotionally intense and misunderstood, leaving faculty to consistently cope with the primary and secondary traumas of being involved in advocacy related to racial equity work. Again, faculty are critical players in the validation and sense of belonging that supports student success (Booker, 2016; Hurtado, 2001; Rendón, 1994). Acknowledging the significant role of ethnic studies faculty by encouraging their strategic efforts across campus and compensating them for their work to uplift the value of ethnic studies are important system-wide efforts that can support student success.

Engaging Students

Students need to be empowered with information about ethnic studies as potentially validating spaces (Rendón, 1994) at the university. Ethnic studies course taking could be a validating experience for them that might influence later decisions on their path to degree

attainment. If, for example, students understand that taking an ethnic studies course in their first two semesters of college might positively impact their GPA and thus their academic trajectory, they can utilize this information upon enrollment. Incoming students and student advisors will need this information as they make course selections in their first two terms, as further research in this area may help clarify. Importantly, students and higher education professionals alike need to understand that these courses are academically rigorous. It is not the ease of the class that could garner a higher grade but the ways in which students are seen and validated that help make the class engaging for students and therefore may increase their interest in doing the learning it takes to earn a higher grade.

Engaging students in department-level decision-making is also important here. Decisions related to which ethnic studies courses are offered and when, which faculty are selected to teach these courses, and which courses can count towards major or minor requirements could all be more student centered if students were engaged as stakeholders. Student advisory positions on curriculum committees or other department-level decision-making bodies would be a helpful strategy.

Future Research

There are many opportunities to continue to explore the value of ethnic studies course taking for students with the goal of finding system-level changes to support more equitable degree attainment. Below are some ideas for future research.

- Conducting more population-specific analyses (e.g., Hmong or Native American) across multiple cohorts with regards to degree attainment could help in understanding time to degree in a culturally specific context. Both quantitative and qualitative methods could be helpful here. Larger datasets across multiple years and institutions would provide a more

effective number of students for analysis in any particular ethnic/racial community.

Qualitative methods to hear from students directly about their degree attainment trajectory would increase understanding.

- Studies that examine and attempt to sort out the many complicating factors that exist for students in relation to the time it takes to attain a degree are critical. Research that can connect ethnic studies course taking, identity as racially minoritized, and factors such as high school preparedness, socioeconomic status, need to work during college, access to college advising, and involvement in leadership activities would be helpful to more fully understand student experience.
- Examination of the relationship between ethnic studies course taking and time to degree for white students is needed, as research in high schools suggests benefits for students of all racial backgrounds including higher GPA, increased credits earned, and increased school attendance. Specific inquiry with regards to connections between ethnic studies course taking and dismantling white supremacist culture and white normativity would be critical.
- Quantitative course-level analyses are needed to determine if some ethnic studies courses have more benefit in relation to GPA or degree attainment, or have more benefit for certain students (i.e., if Black/African American students benefit more from Black/African American studies courses than Latinx students).
- Qualitative studies to explore students' decision-making related to course taking and their experiences in ethnic studies courses are needed. Lines of inquiry can include the experience of being validated in and out of the classroom (Rendón, 1994), feelings of belongingness, and the connection to institutional agents.

- Qualitative studies to explore the perspectives of ethnic studies faculty and staff who are part of particular student success programs such as EOP would be critical to understand specifics related to ethnic studies pedagogical approaches and the perceived benefits of ethnic studies curriculum for students based on faculty and staff experiences.
- Research that investigates the ways in which the concept of “success” in white supremacist culture impacts students who are not white is encouraged, including the intersection here of the choices students make to be involved in student activist and advocacy spaces as acts of resistance to Eurocentric university spaces.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study found that the data tell a complex story about the relationship between ethnic studies course taking and the time to degree for students who are racially minoritized. Although the data suggest that taking an ethnic studies course in college may slightly increase a student’s average time to degree, it isn’t clear whether this is a positive or negative experience for students. As the research questions investigated only time to degree as an outcome, there are questions left unanswered that would help clarify the experiences for students who take ethnic studies during their college career. Students’ participation in a support program such as EOP that requires and/or highly encourages ethnic studies course taking may be an important system-level decision that recognizes the benefits of ethnic studies curriculum and approach. The intentional ways in which ethnic studies curriculum centers the experiences of racially minoritized communities in otherwise Eurocentric higher education systems must be both acknowledged and acted on as a baseline strategy for the CSU.

Rendón (1994) and others have suggested that it is the role of higher education institutions to change institutional behavior, recognizing that our student demographic has

shifted (Astin, 1999; Carter, 2006; Excelencia in Education, 2021). As demonstrated through many efforts to center the experiences of a diverse student body in university settings, such as initiatives to serve growing Hispanic/Latinx student bodies (Garcia & Okhidoi, 2015) and the new California law requiring ethnic studies as a graduation requirement in the CSU system (The CSU, n.d.), higher education is acknowledging their responsibility to systematically change.

Though the California law may be new, ethnic studies programs have long advocated for the inclusion of marginalized voices in higher education, specifically recognizing the importance of representation in the curriculum by centering content by, for, and about identities decentered due to racism and other oppressions. Feminist scholars such as bell hooks (1965) have made the connection between pedagogy, classroom practices, and student success for decades and have made clear statements supporting the education of the whole person, and the recognition that identity matters. The importance of seeing and validating students' lived experiences is essential in education. This includes the ability of students to see themselves and their experiences reflected in the curriculum that they pay for. It includes the opportunity for students to engage in the analyses of systems of oppression and the ways in which male, Eurocentric academia perpetuates these systems. Centering curriculum on these topics, as ethnic studies does by intentional design, is a critical opportunity for students to engage in validating academic spaces.

This study explored the relationship between ethnic studies course taking and time to degree for racially minoritized students with aspirations that institutions of higher education can more readily see the benefits of ethnic studies course taking. It is important that higher education systems make changes that ensure these courses become more widely accepted as necessary components of higher education curriculum, a curriculum that continues to be steeped in Eurocentric and white supremacist perspectives. hooks (1994) writes that students are “adamant

that education should be liberatory” (p. 19) and that students expect that they will not be offered “information without addressing the connection between what they are learning and their overall life experiences” (p. 19). This is the core of ethnic studies education—to connect the real-life experiences of people who have been minoritized by their racial identity to systems of learning in our country.

In closing, it is my particular hope that many more of us in higher education who have the privilege to do this kind of research will work to uplift and center the experiences of students who have been silenced by the very institutions that we work for. The students continue to do the hard work of resisting oppression and uplifting themselves and each other every time they arrive on campus. They are my role models and the inspiration for this project.

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