



Tumbling the Ivory Tower: Reflections on the Student Movement to Build the AC Requirement

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Thank you Chancellor Christ, Professor Duster, and Dr. Robinson for the kind invitation to speak on this anniversary, and all of you for coming this evening. I'm honored to be here to celebrate 30 years of American Cultures and to represent a bit of the student point of view.

Tonight is about celebrating great beginnings, great ideas, the great people who made these ideas real, and great teachers.

If I may, I wanted to start with a personal story.

The year was 1978. I was a child on a family trip, the first time most of us had ever been outside of Hawai'i, where I was born and raised in what used to be called, in a strange construction, a "majority-minority" society.

We had come to California, 25 of us, a small portion of the Chang clan, 16 of us young kids now off the rock and running around at our California cousin's house here in the South Bay. And my aunt and uncle said, "Chee, these kids are noisy. Let's take 'um to go see Cal and Stanford." And I remember all 25 of us

piling into two cars, a van and a station wagon and heading out to see these schools.

Well, I don't remember the visit to Stanford at all.

But I do remember the cars climbing the hill to the Lawrence Hall of Science, and all of us pouring out of the cars and running over to climb on the whale. I remember going over to the lookout, seeing the view above the stadium, seeing the Campanile, the entire Bay Area. And I declared to no one in particular, because there's 24 other Changs, everyone's talking at the same time anyway, that I was going here. When I get big enough, this is where I am going.

I knew little then about the storied UC Berkeley. Maybe I'd heard of Joe Roth. Certainly I knew nothing about its long history of student activism. I didn't know that in a few months, students would be protesting the Bakke decision and fighting to preserve ethnic studies programs they had fought for a decade before. All I knew then was that this where I was going to go.

Less than a decade later, I was admitted to the first majority-minority freshman class at UC Berkeley. I was excited to be here. I did know now more about Berkeley, about the 1960s, about peace and love and People's Park, I knew about the hip-hop and punk and graffiti scenes here, I was eager to dive into it all. But in the first few weeks of living here in the Southside of Berkeley, I also quickly learned what it meant to be, in the language of the 1980s, a "racial minority."

I was called racist slurs in the street, harassed by white fraternity members, spit at by long-haired hippies. That's what got me thinking about who I was. Being 18 is an intense period for many young people—it's the age at which we're trying

to discover who we are. To all the things now I was trying to figure out, I had to add racism.

I tell this story because I love talking about my family but also because it's probably the median of what many other young students here were experiencing at the time. We were the children of the civil rights movement. We were born into a hope that the U.S. might right the wrongs of its racially unjust past, and we were coming of age in a moment when the fruits of that hope were being tossed away, when the structures meant to move the U.S. towards a more equitable society were being dismantled. Those holding the hope and those contemptuous of that hope were doing battle in a set of culture wars that would only intensify.

It was a confusing time.

For many of us, the anti-apartheid movement helped to make sense of it. At Berkeley, the movement had changed dramatically in the year before I had arrived. Students of color had organized a coalition they called United People of Color, and a student political party they called Cal-SERVE, and they asserted their presence in what had previously been a predominantly white student movement.

What they brought was a moral, even prophetic gravitas. They connected the struggles of Black and Coloured people living under apartheid in South Africa to the struggles of "racial minorities" living under racial segregation in the U.S. That deeply resonated with me, someone still reeling from the shock of being so suddenly "minoritized."

In the summer of 1986 the anti-apartheid movement succeeded in pushing the Regents to divest billions from South Africa. By then I had taken my first ethnic studies class, and I felt like I had the beginnings of a language to root myself,

process my encounters with racism, and move forward. I knew now that I was not alone.

We were also beginning to understand how the preservation of whiteness in these historically white institutions gaslit our experiences, delegitimized our ways of being and knowing. Those structures and processes—the engines of knowledge production—debased not just those of us who had been “minoritized”, but also those who had been “majoritized” their entire lives.

So we became the latest generation to ask the question: What might it mean if all of us started from a place where we could engage each other equitably, where whiteness was not the only model of being and so-called European knowledges the sum of all that should be known?

In that moment, we were talking about what it might mean if everyone at the University would learn about the struggles of those who had been “minoritized.” Why were our histories and knowledges marginalized, suppressed, and erased? Weren’t universities supposed to produce and teach the knowledge that secured and advanced all of us? Wouldn’t we forge better communities if we better understood each other?

Most of us had no idea how important these questions would still be thirty years later.

The anti-racist student movements of that era—the 1980s, the 1990s, and 2000s—have never been discussed with the same weight afforded the student movements of the 1960s to advance civil rights and Black Power and 1970s to end the war. But the role that students played in the push for American Cultures is one example of how students of that era were an indispensable bridge from then

to now, from Black Power to Black Lives Matter, from the Third World Liberation Front to the intersecting social movements of today.

The seed of what would become the American Cultures requirement is directly linked back to the rise of the Third World Liberation Front at campuses like Berkeley, San Francisco State, and others, which issued a challenge to historically white institutions. Opening the doors to Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian American and Pacific Islander people was the first step, but the goal was establishing structures that were responsive to those communities and that unmade institutional racism.

It was a transformative vision that pushed us to imagine a society in which we could all be free to shape our destinies. And it joined the critique of University president Clark Kerr's vision of the "multiversity" as "an instrument of national purpose." Kerr argued for new roles for the Ivory Tower: to produce knowledge for the information society, to grow an industrial-research complex that advanced the state, the military, and big business, to service the the affluent society.

But what if, the TWLF asked, education saw its role as ceasing the reproduction of an unjust, unequal society? How could it open itself to the histories, knowledges, and the very presence of these so-called "racial minority" communities? What purpose could be higher than for education to unleash the knowledges and creativity to transform American society from the bottom up? This was the vision that fueled the ethnic studies movement and that was passed down from generation to student generation.

By the 1980s, the U.S. was deep in the unmaking of the Second Reconstruction. Conservatives attacked and dismantled efforts to desegregate education, pushing liberal leaders into a defensive crouch. Students didn't have

the time to play games. Our very arrival as a multiracial multitude made things urgent.

When I arrived at Cal, students like Pedro Noguera, the late Patricia Vattuone, and so many more in UPC were already organizing students to demand an ethnic studies requirement. In 1987, the faculty and administration responded to these demands by establishing what would become known as the Simmons committee.

Students then elected into ASUC government leaders like Beth Bernstein and Juliana Chang to guarantee that students would have a say in a process that would consume the Academic Senate for much of the next two years. Mark Min and the late Emeka Ezeru became the student reps to the Simmons committee, making it directly accountable to the overwhelming majority of students who supported a graduation requirement. Jesse Jackson and Angela Davis rallied tens of thousands to pressure the Academic Senate for action on the proposal. But at the end of the 1987-1988 school year, the Senate failed to pass a graduation requirement. There was a palpable sense of disappointment on campus.

Nevertheless, we persisted. Students continued to express through the ASUC government their desire to see a graduation requirement passed, although it had moved away from an Ethnic Studies requirement to something now called an American Cultures requirement. And the Simmons Committee completed their report in March 1989, two months before a scheduled Academic senate vote.

The Simmons report outlined four changes affecting American higher education that the requirement meant to address. Within that section, perhaps the most important part of the report, is a part called a "Student Critique of the Curriculum."

The first change the committee said it was addressing was diversity. Diversity was now beyond ideology. It was simply a fact. The campus had already become “majority-minority.” And this fact was, then as now, the trigger for hatred and violence on campus and in the community. But it was also a source of a new hope, the promise of a new America that had, as Langston Hughes put it in 1935, “never been yet, and yet must be.”

The second change was campus racism, another fact. Here the Simmons committee decided to largely forgo a narrative for a long list of articles of incidents from across the country. We should remember that the 1980s and 1990s was the period when the term “campus climate” entered our lexicon. In an influential article advancing the term, Sylvia Hurtado wrote that, during the 1980s, one in four students perceived considerable racial conflict at their universities, and more than 100 campuses a year reported major incidents of racial harassment and violence.

The third was the debate in higher education over “the Great Books,” a debate over the canon that seemed to pit pluralism against Eurocentrism. Cultural conservatives—who were often politically liberal—accused proponents of multicultural education of wanting to shatter American society altogether. From the distance of time the debate may be understood now as being about how best to preserve and reproduce whiteness through higher education.

I don’t think I need to elaborate here on how of-the-moment these three “changes” that the Simmons Committee named sound in the continuing culture wars of the moment.

But then, in the report, the committee stepped aside to discuss the “student critique”, offering verbatim a collection of statements gathered through a number

of interviews. The committee cautioned its faculty audience not to dismiss student comments or believe that they reflected “short-term interests.” And here is where the promise of American Cultures cuts through the rancor and sophistry of the time and comes into sharp relief. Here are three of the student comments:

“I don’t see myself when I read my history books. We must introduce the contributions of people of color, and I don’t think there will be peace on this campus until this happens.”

“Berkeley students should hear what we (people of color) have to say about ourselves.”

“Increasingly the challenge to all Californians will be to develop a common awareness that recognizes and effectively responds to the cultures, histories, and concerns of our different racial minority groups.”

Faculty members debated, all the way up to and in the final vote, over the technical terms of the requirement, especially its implementation and its logistics, which were deemed insurmountable. After that it was down the slippery slope. One opponent of American Cultures even said, “It is a naïve point of view to say that the way to learn something is to take a course in it.” I remember when he said that, students watching the discussion from the balcony of the Zellerbach Hall let out a collective, “What”?

But the students had a clear understanding of the importance and potential impact of the requirement.

First, we knew it would recognize and lift up excluded and marginalized knowledges. Ron Takaki had taught us all what epistemology was. He said epistemology is about the question of “How do you know what you know?” Now that’s a powerful weapon to give an angry 19-year old of color. And we used it on the faculty all the time. “How do you know you know what you know?” was paired with “What do you not know that you don’t know?” So, for us, the American Cultures requirement was about more than the politics of representation. It was a critique of and a solution to the problem of knowledge production.

Second, we were articulating a call to belonging. We saw the graduation requirement as a solution to the rise in racial violence on the campuses and our communities. We understood it was a cultural intervention that could scale from the personal to the social—from the everyday culture of the classroom or dorm to the workplace or the community institution.

Third, we saw the requirement as an act of racial and cultural equity and justice. Here were the children of desegregation arguing to extend desegregation into higher education, even at campuses where minorities had become the majority. We wanted the university to move beyond a diversity framework of number-counting, move beyond even the inclusion framework that put some underrepresented faculty or staff or students at the table only to be ignored or gaslit, and to move ourselves toward the undoing of the historical Eurocentrism of our institutions.

And finally, we were very clear about the long-term impact that the requirement could have in helping people to think about how to make shared, equitable futures for all. American Cultures was meant to help shape a “common

awareness.” Even now, the new book from the 1619 Project titles itself “a new origin story.” What kind of society could be built if we recognized a multiplicity of origin stories? Bill Simmons himself articulated the larger stakes. He said that the requirement meant to answer the question, “How do you talk about the cultural construction of the society?” In content, form, and praxis, this question still sits at the heart of American Cultures.

So this is the work that the American Cultures requirement and the American Cultures Center has taken up over the past three decades—from its approval through its accelerated rocket—or should we say out of the cannon—launch, through its dynamic growth into a national model. Its community engagement connects to the revolutionary pedagogy proposed and practiced by generations of students. Its comparative approach—which I must admit many of us opposed at first as a “watering down” of the original Ethnic Studies requirement—has proven over time to be suited for the kind of 21st century questions that trouble our intersectional communities. And American Cultures has by now transformed the breadth of disciplines well beyond the social science focus that many students and some members of the Simmons Committee had in mind.

As Chancellor Christ noted, there is a long way to go and that sustainability is a central question, but we can move forward assured that the foundation is strong.

I want to turn to talking about American Cultures in today’s moment. As that well-known philosopher Q-Tip said, thirty years ago, “Daddy don’t you know that things go in cycles?”

The American Cultures requirement and Center was launched during a period when police brutality had triggered a reckoning over racial justice. In 1991 and 1992 we talked about 1965, when the assassination of Malcolm X was followed by the Watts rebellion. Today we talk about Rodney King and Latasha Harlins as we think about the George Floyd uprisings.

And we also recognize that times have changed. Ethnic studies is now a statewide graduation requirement for high schoolers. But the culture wars are at a substantially higher pitch than they were in the 1980s and 1990s. The stakes are even higher—we think about how the presidency of Donald Trump followed that of Barack Obama. How the 2010s became an era of movements—Occupy, the DREAMERS, Standing Rock, and above all, Black Lives Matter. How 25 million people took to the streets last year to call for racial justice.

We must also think about how the profound backlash going on now has given us, among many other things—a Presidential executive order banning discussions of systemic racism, white privilege, and intersectionality; a new upswell of book bans and attacks on the phantom menace of “critical race theory” under the guise of “parental rights”; a continuing war against migrants and immigrants; and attacks on the voting franchise and on the symbol of democracy itself, the capitol. As Dr. Ibram Kendi reminds us, when anti-racist movements secure change, movements to maintain racism evolve again.

In times like this when we are on rough seas, navigating through swells and surges from all directions, I keep returning to the lessons I learned at UC Berkeley in and out of the classroom. To Ron Takaki’s teaching that history and epistemology are worth fighting for because they give us a guide to finding shared ground. To Leon Litwack’s commitment to teaching as a way to “fight the power.”

To Lawrence Levine's optimism for the future of polycultural, multiracial societies, propelled by the hope of the common people, and the faith that freeing people to understand each other and develop solidarity with one another might produce a flowering of ideas and innovation we have never seen before. These were teachers, and there were so many more, who believed in education as personal and collective liberation.

When American Cultures passed, Ron Takaki said, "Today we articulated the Berkeley vision of an educated person." What was true then is true still now. American Cultures still maintains the Berkeley vision of an educated person. Every graduate from Berkeley has been given the gift of that light when they step into the world. What is learned here serves as a beacon to all who seek the light. And we are the majority. Together we are the majority.

Students were right about pushing for the American Cultures requirement because they were right about the transformative role institutions could play in society. That is why American Cultures, through all of these rough seas, what it has thrived, and must continue to thrive as we move deeper into this century.

So let's take a moment to say thank you.

Thank you to all the directors, whose vision through the fog has been clear, and who have made this Center into a powerful model of responsive, transformative education;

To all the faculty, whose work continues to deepen and expand in all the ways American Cultures evolve, and whose research and teaching lights the way for our shared future;

All the staff who have made it happen, whose invisible, too often unsung work makes the culture of American Cultures so welcoming and the success of it guaranteed; we see you and we honor you;

All the administrators who have supported and who continue to support and sustain the mission of American Cultures against all odds and attacks, you know the value of this work, we need you to continue to defend it and allow it to realize its promise;

And most of all to all the students, past and present, who are and will make our communities and our world. You built a solid foundation for us and you continue to push us higher.

Congratulations on the 30th anniversary of American Cultures. Long may you run.