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New Campus Debate -- What If American Studies and Ethnic Studies Were One in the Same?

By Joan Walsh



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Thirty years after helping to found the Ethnic Studies Department at the University of California-Berkeley, department chair Ling-chi Wang is proposing a bold initiative to transform itself into an American Studies department. The move, he argues, would help acknowledge race and ethnicity as central to American identity - - and it may also prevent the Ethnic Studies department from becoming victim of its own success. PNS associate editor Joan Walsh writes on issues of race and poverty.

BERKELEY, CA. -- Almost 30 years after a bitter student strike led the University of California-Berkeley to create one of the nation's first Ethnic Studies Departments, its chair is proposing what seems like heresy to some -- merging Ethnic Studies with the newer discipline of American Studies.

"I see it as a way to redefine not just American Studies, but what it means to be American," says Professor Ling-chi Wang, a co-founder of the department.

It's also a way to redefine Ethnic Studies, which is struggling with challenges from within the university and without. The number of Ethnic Studies majors at Berkeley has been declining steadily since the early 1990s, from a peak of about 400 to under 200 today. At the same time the discipline has drawn the fire of anti-affirmative action Regent Ward Connerly, who recently called for an examination of Ethnic Studies Departments as bastions of "self-imposed isolation" for students of color.

Wang's move has nothing to do with Connerly's, which he opposes. The department chair's proposal, made months before Connerly's critique, would create an American Studies department with five "concentrations" -- African American, Native American, Chicano, Asian American and Comparative Ethnic Studies -- along with the existing group major in American Studies.

Wang sees this as a way to transform the discipline - making race and ethnicity central to the question of American identity. He admits it's also a way to stabilize his department, which has been a victim of its own success. He thinks some of the trouble began in 1989, when Berkeley first required undergraduates to take an "American Cultures" course comparing at least two different ethnic groups and their American experience.

Similar requirements were instituted around the country, but Berkeley included "European Americans" as an ethnic group and allowed required courses to be taught in any department.

Since then, nearly 300 American Cultures courses have been offered in 40 departments. "Today you can study Asian American literature in the English department, not just in Asian American Studies," Wang notes, adding approvingly, "Ethnic Studies created the scholarship that allowed these courses to be taught elsewhere."

But the requirement has also allowed students

curious about issues of race and ethnicity to go elsewhere, and enrollment in the department's courses has dropped sharply, except for courses that meet the American Cultures requirement.

"We used to turn away 1,000 students a semester," Wang notes. The decline in majors and the bias toward mandatory courses mean the department is offering fewer upper-division courses -- which leads in turn to a further decline in majors.

Meanwhile, the small, interdisciplinary American Studies program -- which is not a department, has no full-time faculty, and offers a curriculum based mostly on courses cross-listed in other departments -- has grown to more than 300 majors in just four years. Much of its popularity derives from its flexibility, which lets students tailor individualized majors from a broad list of approved courses.

Merging the two would make Berkeley's American Studies program "instantly the largest, the most diverse and hopefully the best, in terms of faculty and curriculum, in the United States," says Wang.

The proposal is supported by Percy Hintzen, chair of African American Studies -- currently independent of Ethnic Studies -- but Hintzen notes that many of his colleagues have reservations.

"I think the proposal recognizes that the question of difference is central to the study of America," Hintzen says. "But telling African Americans, who

have been spokespersons for the study of difference, and who have been the premier department in Ethnic Studies, that they must 'integrate' -- well, you can imagine the concern."

Barbara Christian, an African American Studies founder, is skeptical. "I laud the idea of redeeming America and American Studies, but I think there needs to be a lot more discussion. The symbolism of not having an Ethnic Studies or an African American Studies department, could be really profound. Would we really have the autonomy to do the work we want?"

In American Studies, concerns about autonomy are just as pronounced. Some liken Wang's proposal to the United States proposing to "merge" with Puerto Rico -- with 18 full time faculty positions and a 29 year history, Ethnic Studies could overwhelm the small, new American Studies program, which has no full-time faculty, and offers a curriculum based mostly on courses in other departments.

But Pedro Noguera, a professor in the Graduate School of Education who also teaches courses in both Ethnic Studies and American Studies, backs the proposal. "To continue to position ethnic studies at the margins of the university would be a mistake," Noguera argues.

The new head of the American Studies program, Donald McQuade, declined to comment on the proposal, as did the Dean of Interdisciplinary

Studies, Carolyn Porter. There seems to be some hope the proposal will be defeated by opponents in Wang's own department.

That's a possibility. Returning students are discussing Connerly's attack as well as Wang's proposal.

"There's not necessarily opposition, but there are a lot of questions," says Caroline Streeter, who is pursuing a Ph.D in Ethnic Studies.

"We've suffered a lot of political losses, with the passage of Prop. 209 and the declining number of black and Latino students here," Streeter notes. "That makes it problematic to give up our profile and our autonomy."

Graduate students have asked to discuss Wang's proposal at the first Ethnic Studies faculty meeting in September. Wang welcomes this. "I think there needs to be a lot of participation and debate. I feel the burden of 30 years of Ethnic Studies on my shoulders, but I don't want to preside over its death. I truly believe without a serious change, Ethnic Studies will die within the decade."



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