

**Crossroads to the 21st Century:  
The Evolution of Ethnic Studies at  
Bowling Green State University  
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**Introduction**

At Bowling Green State University's Fourth Annual Ethnic Studies Conference, scholar Dr. James A. Banks observed that Bowling Green State University is soon to become the *only* institution of higher education in the United States to institute a university-wide requirement in cultural diversity. The implementation of this landmark requirement demonstrates the depth and vigor of the commitment to excellence and equity in education held by the University's Department of Ethnic Studies.

The emphasis on a University-wide requirement illustrates the most fundamental principle of our department's over-all philosophy, which is that ethnic studies serves to educate *all* members of the University community—minority and majority group members alike. Our department exists to facilitate an educated understanding of American culture, a culture composed of a large number of various and diverse groups. In order to educate Americans about American culture, it is important not only to educate minority group members about their own rich cultures and cultural contributions, but also to educate members of all groups about the legitimacy and roles of other groups within American culture. As the year 2050 approaches, the year in which the so-called "white majority" may lose its numerical majority status, it is important that Anglo-Americans understand not only their relevant position in society, but also better understand other Americans who may be different from themselves. Because Bowling Green State University is composed largely of middle- and upper-middle class white students, we in Ethnic Studies have addressed this challenge in the development of our department. We hope to meet the challenge even more effectively through the institution of a university-wide cultural diversity requirement.

**History**

The Department of Ethnic Studies at Bowling Green State University began as a response to a call for social reform and civil rights. This call

came from a new body of socially committed students and faculty seeking the democratization of American higher education. This push for educational reform was part of a larger national movement toward political equality and heightened social consciousness. One of the major goals of this movement was to achieve the democratic ideals guaranteed by the constitution, but denied American racial minority groups. The movement aspired to achieve these ideals by challenging the policies and behavior of the American power elite, especially as they perpetuated domestic racism and sexism, and promoted international imperialism through the continued war in Viet Nam. Our department's origins are essentially representative of the trend in higher education curriculum development which attempted to respond to the social movements of the 1960s.

Historically, ethnicity has been a focus of a variety of disciplines which characteristically approach ethnicity from the perspective of the observer, frequently a Western, often an ethnocentric, perspective. Our department began as a part of the nationwide movement toward the establishment of black studies curriculum during the 1960s. Within this nationwide movement, programs abandoned Euro-centric biases and adopted in their place theoretical and methodological perspectives which reflected Afro-American culture. Further impetus was the killing of students at Jackson State University in Mississippi and at Ohio's Kent State University by the National Guard. A Committee on Ethnic Studies had been meeting for some time at Bowling Green State University, and the result was the appointment of Dr. Robert L. Perry as director of Bowling Green State University's Ethnic Studies Program on July 1, 1970.

The mandate from the Ethnic Studies Committee was for the program director to organize, develop, and teach courses; encourage University-wide development of ethnic studies courses; secure grants for the development of ethnic studies; support student development and recruit faculty; and inform the University community concerning minority group issues. Initially, three part-time faculty and five graduate assistants were assigned to the program. Twelve years after becoming a *bona fide* department, the department is composed of 4.20 tenured professors including a department chair, five part-time faculty members, two teaching fellows, four graduate assistants, one full-time secretary, and three undergraduate student employees. The most distinguished faculty appointment to the department was James Baldwin, who first came to the department as Writer-in-Residence in 1978 and returned in 1979 and 1981 as a Distinguished Visiting Professor at the University. During his 1979 residency he was inducted into Omicron Delta Kappa National Leadership honor society, and in August 1980 he was awarded an honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters from Bowling Green State University. James Baldwin helped to articulate the significance of the department's concerns to the wider University community and helped

the department to persuade the larger community to support cultural diversity in the University's curriculum.

Initially, the Ethnic Studies Program was not tied to any college, but operated through the College of Arts and Sciences on an informal basis and reported to the Director of Minority Affairs. Now the department reports directly to the College of Arts and Sciences. Before departmentalization, none of the original program's courses were listed in the published schedule of classes; students were informed of classes by word-of-mouth, special flyers, and notices in the student newspaper. All courses within the program were given generic numbers and identified under traditional disciplines; curriculum development was therefore dependent on the good will of others outside the program. None of those early Ethnic Studies courses fulfilled any group requirement, and none of the participating departments provided faculty support for teaching. Yet these other departments were allowed jurisdiction over the program's course offerings and evaluated our faculty. The teaching equivalencies became the property of the departments identified with the generic course numbers. The Ethnic Studies Program was not given credit for the development of ethnic studies curriculum, and the director whose charge it was to develop a program in ethnic studies was given little real power or authority within the College. The program had essentially been instructed to develop a curriculum outside of the normal collegiate structure, and to do so in an environment that often challenged the academic legitimacy of ethnic studies. Ironically, much of the criticism incurred targeted the absence of academic faculty and the integrity of an interdisciplinary program.

The original courses offered by the Ethnic Studies Program focused primarily on Afro-American culture, as did the curriculum of many other black and ethnic studies programs developing across the nation. Our curriculum quickly expanded to include courses addressing general ethnicity and Hispanic culture. While the students who enrolled in courses offered by the Ethnic Studies Program were predominantly black and Hispanic, students currently enrolled in courses offered by the Department of Ethnic Studies are predominantly Anglo-American. The changing demographics of student enrollment in Ethnic Studies was facilitated by our departmentalization. Subsequent to departmentalization, and the development of major and minor concentrations in Ethnic Studies, a number of our courses have been designated by the College and by other departments as fulfilling general and specific requirements. The recent inclusion of Ethnic Studies 101 on the list of courses fulfilling general education requirements in social and behavioral sciences has greatly increased our enrollment, especially in terms of white students and others who might not have taken a course in Ethnic Studies unless it met the general education requirement.

Departmentalization was essential to Ethnic Studies at Bowling Green State University for a number of reasons. First of all, it allowed us

to be less dependent on the good will of other departments in allowing us course numbers. Secondly, and very significantly, it provided the means to offer our faculty tenured positions. Departmentalization further affirmed the legitimacy of the subject matter by providing both a major and minor in Ethnic Studies and by allowing us to establish a stable curriculum.

As the educational mission of the department continues to expand, we have expanded the community we serve. The Annual Ethnic Studies Conference at Bowling Green State University attracts an audience composed of faculty, students, and staff, as well as scholars and other interested parties from neighboring communities and educational institutions. Keynote speakers for the conference have included Alex Haley, Mary Frances Berry, and Kenneth Clark. Prominent scholars such as Ronald Takaki, Carlos Cortes, and Charles V. Willie have presented papers and participated in conference panels. The conference has raised the department's profile on- and off-campus and has heightened the sensitivity of the University community to the importance of cultural diversity in higher education and to the particular role played by the Department of Ethnic Studies in the creation of a diverse curriculum.

### **Philosophy**

Prior to the development of ethnic studies as an academic discipline, the study of racial and ethnic groups was achieved primarily through the areas of ethnology, a branch of anthropology, and sociology, within the speciality of race relations. Ethnology traditionally approaches various cultures, particularly non-literate societies, comparatively. Ethnographic observation frequently reflected ethnocentric standards, and so evaluated groups by those same standards. Ethnology has traditionally viewed non-Western groups and American minority groups as objects of curiosity, interesting because of their deviation from Anglo-Western norms. Because of this perspective, value judgments are sometimes incorporated into supposedly objective, scientific observation. Some of the same criticisms might be made concerning the specialty of race relations within sociology.

Since the 1970s, the United States has witnessed a number of events which reinforced and intensified ethnic identification and allegiance. During the fifties vigorous protest movements emerged within black communities ranging from nonviolent protests to the Black Power movement of the late 1960s. Afro-Americans during this period fought an unprecedented battle to achieve social, economic, and political equality. As the Civil Rights Movement progressed, black people tried to shape a new identity, shatter old and pervasive stereotypes about their culture, and emphasize the contributions which Afro-Americans have made to American society. Stimulated by the relatively progressive atmosphere of the sixties, other revitalization movements flourished. Hispanics, North American Indians, and other minority groups also demanded

changes in social, economic, and political institutions. In the process of becoming mobilized politically, American minority groups created more positive profiles of their varied cultures. A greater sense of cultural integrity also developed within these groups, some groups experiencing what has been conceptualized as nationalism. As these ethnic groups intensified their search for identity, unity and solidarity were generated, sometimes resulting in alternative forms of ethnocentrism and the rejection of out-groups within higher education. Rejection of scholarship exclusively dominated by Anglo-Western thought resulted in the emergence of Afro-American studies, and later Chicano and Native American studies. Each discipline emphasized a specific cultural perspective.

The movements and reforms initiated by non-white ethnic groups encouraged some white ethnic groups to proclaim ethnic pride and to push for social, political, and educational reforms that would directly benefit their own particular groups. This movement became known as the "new pluralism." Ethnicity is an integral part of American society. A sophisticated understanding of our society cannot be grasped until the separate ethnic communities which constitute American society are seriously analyzed. It is insufficient to conceptualize ethnicity only in terms of racial groups. While these groups, because of institutional racism, discrimination, and individual prejudice, are the most socially isolated and physically identifiable, ethnic divisions also exist among Americans of European origin.

In the spirit of both racial and ethnic pluralism, the Department of Ethnic Studies at Bowling Green State University incorporates a wide variety of cultural perspectives. Our mission is to instill in our students a real understanding of actual American culture. We hope that cultural literacy will result in the appreciation and tolerance of all groups, regardless of any differences which may exist.

In recent years, educators have begun to realize the importance of ethnicity in American society. They recognize the need to help students develop a more sophisticated understanding of the diverse ethnic groups who compose the population and to help them achieve acceptance of cultural differences. Responding largely to student demands and community pressure groups, institutions of higher education have made attempts to incorporate information about ethnic groups into social science and humanities curriculum. Too often, however, social science and humanities courses depict racial and ethnic groups only in terms of how they differ from dominant groups. Ethnic studies is important even where such educational amendments have been made, as ethnic studies presents racial and ethnic cultures without apology or comparison.

In developing our own ethnic studies curriculum, we believe American culture can best be represented by studying each cultural group's understanding of itself. Afro-American scholars, or those who can articulate the perspective, are best equipped to understand the special

position of blacks in American culture; scholars of Asian-American culture are best equipped to observe Asian-American society. By providing a range of scholarship produced primarily by members of specific racial and ethnic groups, we are able to avoid indoctrinating students to any *one* perspective or bias, be it Eurocentric, Afrocentric, or any homogeneous world view. Such a multiplicity of theory and methodology reflects well the multiplicity of groups creating our uniquely American landscape. By advocating the scholarship of minority scholars, however, we do not exclude Anglo-Western scholarship which transcends the limitations of traditional Eurocentric philosophies. Structural functionalism and conflict theorists, for example, are often incorporated into the curriculum regardless of their personal cultural experience.

Because of the careful attention given to cultural perspectives, the movement of ethnic studies away from traditional ethnology, and the rejection of Eurocentric scholarly bias, ethnic studies is in many ways a well-defined discipline. But in order to truly introduce students to groups other than their own, it is necessary to introduce students to the cultural artifacts of those groups. In our department we accomplish this by combining humanities and social sciences in the curriculum. This interdisciplinary approach provides more depth in the understanding of culture than a singular disciplinary approach. We utilize ethnic arts, music, and literature to illustrate various cultural aesthetics. It is vital that students from all backgrounds recognize that different world views exist and further understand those different world views. Only by appreciating numerous cultures can students understand the complexity of American culture.

## **Department Strengths**

The Department of Ethnic Studies at Bowling Green State University is privileged in areas that similar departments at other universities may not be. Our faculty and staff have gathered data and resources which illustrate the experience of ethnic and racial minority groups in Northwest Ohio. The Ohio Hispanic Institute of Opportunity, which once had offices in Bowling Green, donated to our department a wealth of documents pertaining to the migrant experience in Ohio. Once our department is able to obtain funding for a faculty member to develop and direct an applied policy and research center, the data will serve as the foundation for research projects. The existence of this data and the projected establishment of our Ethnic and Migrant Policy Research Center will allow faculty and students the opportunity to understand the dynamics of the geographical area and gain practical research experience. The Center will be designed as an educational, training and research organization. Research will focus on public policy, issues, and concerns related to ethnic minority populations in Northwest Ohio and surrounding regions.

Other materials developed by our faculty and staff for our express use include two documentaries produced through WBGU-TV: *The Heights* explores contributing factors to dramatically low educational attainment for Mexican-Americans in one affluent local school district, and *Crossroads to the 21st Century* (the title comes from our annual Ethnic Studies Conference) which is a series of interviews with Bowling Green faculty staff, and students and with distinguished participants in the conferences including Charles V. Willie from Harvard's School of Education and Mary Jean Mosely, the Director of Intercultural Studies at Ft. Lewis College. The latter documentary makes a strong argument for the necessity of incorporating cultural diversity into the higher education curriculum.

The annual Ethnic Studies Conference creates an invigorated atmosphere within the department. Each fall our faculty and staff encounter new perspectives on ethnic studies through contact with a variety of scholars in education, literature, sociology, and social policy. Such stimulation serves to revitalize enthusiasm which may sometimes be depleted by everyday university politics as well as to create a quality profile for the department on campus. Important papers which have been presented throughout the years at the conference are currently being edited for publication.

Because of the range of courses we offer, including a basic introductory course, a specific introduction to black studies, a course addressing the role of the Chicano in American culture, an upper-level study of the depiction of racial minorities in television and film, and a course addressing Euro-American ethnic experiences, our courses are in many ways "mainstream" courses, meeting a variety of general educational requirements. As a result, our courses attract a variety of students from a variety of areas. This trend in enrollment supports our premise that race and ethnicity are integral components of American culture, and that no education is complete without an understanding of what roles race and ethnicity play in social, political, and economic life. We feel that our platform, which defines ethnic studies as complementary, rather than adversarial, to more traditional higher education curriculum has enabled us to establish ourselves as an important area of study and to continue to grow whereas departments elsewhere may have expired or been diminished.

Fundamental to our survival and success was our departmentalization in 1979. Departmentalization facilitated not only control over our own curriculum, but also the ability to exercise full autonomy over the selection of ethnic studies faculty and to offer faculty tenure. We feel that the evaluation of ethnic studies faculty by others educated in the area is essential to maintaining the quality of instruction and scholarship. Such autonomy promotes survival on campuses which may have indifferent or ambivalent attitudes toward ethnic studies.

Perhaps our largest accomplishment to date is the development of the

University-wide Cultural Diversity requirement. Still in its embryonic stage, the requirement will guarantee that all students graduating from Bowling Green State University will have at some point in their college career been exposed to non-European cultural perspectives. The University-wide requirement at Bowling Green, like less comprehensive requirements elsewhere, not only benefits students, but also elevates the intellectual sophistication of individual Colleges which expand their academic mission to reach beyond traditional historical limitations of curriculum. Faculty, as well as students, improve their scholarship by being encouraged to incorporate additional dimensions into their instruction. We hope that one day this standard will be the *status quo* in higher education.

### **Limitations**

As various ethnic studies courses are identified as meeting specific distribution and general requirements in a number of Colleges within the University, our student enrollment has increased significantly. Unfortunately, the number of full-time faculty has not grown proportionately, and we are having difficulty accommodating the growth. The result of the discrepancy between the demand for courses and the availability of faculty has been twofold: students are frequently denied access to courses they want and need, while our faculty are exhausted by overcrowded courses and frustrated by being forced to turn students away.

While the College of Arts and Sciences has been generous in providing funds for a number of part-time instructors, the department is not fully satisfied with that solution. Because of the tenuous nature of the funding, appointments are often made at the last minute. A larger permanent faculty would allow the department more continuity, which would assist us in better planning for the future. With the institution of the University's Cultural Diversity requirement, our need for faculty will become even greater as students seek to fulfill that requirement. In addition to an increase in the number of full-time tenured faculty, the department also requires an increase in the number of graduate assistants and teaching fellows assigned to the department. The department has always depended on graduate students from a number of academic areas to utilize their particular perspectives while teaching a variety of ethnic studies courses. In order to increase the number of courses and sections offered each semester, a further commitment to the Department of Ethnic Studies must be made by the College of Arts and Sciences and the Graduate College.

One factor contributing to the difficulty in obtaining additional graduate assistants and teaching fellows is the absence of a graduate program in ethnic studies. Although the Graduate College includes an American Studies Program offering a degree at the master's level, and an



American Culture Program at the doctoral level, neither features a concentration in ethnic studies. If our department were to offer a graduate degree, the interdisciplinary programs in American Studies and American Culture could include ethnic studies as important parts of their curricula. All we can offer at this time is an occasional course taught by one of our faculty and assigned a "topics" graduate course number through another department or program. A graduate program in ethnic studies would further generate research in the discipline, benefiting not only the Department of Ethnic Studies at Bowling Green State University, but also departments elsewhere, as research and data would be collected and made available through our developing Ethnic and Migrant Policy Research Center.

An increase in the size of the faculty would facilitate the much needed expansion of undergraduate curriculum. Although we currently offer a wide variety of courses, we need to develop additional courses in theory and methodology to support our major and minor programs, and to increase in the number of courses we offer which could be used to meet the Cultural Diversity requirement.

Because of the small faculty, the department is limited in additional ways. There is not a woman in a full-time or tenured faculty position. We are attempting to improve the current situation by developing a joint faculty appointment with the Women's Studies Program, a program with which we have historically had a mutually supportive relationship. The small size of the department has also limited the variety of ethnic groups represented by faculty; as we increase the number of faculty members, we will be able to expand the racial and ethnic composition of the faculty.

To accommodate a larger faculty, staff, and the Ethnic and Migrant Policy Research Center, the department will require improved and enlarged physical facilities. Despite repeated requests for additional space in which to house the Research Center, we have been granted only a small area for document storage. Commitment to ethnic studies by University administration, at Bowling Green and elsewhere, must transcend verbal support and be made concrete by providing necessary personnel and facilities. Significant commitment to ethnic studies departments and programs will indicate to students higher education's determination to integrate pluralism into the curriculum, a commitment which will better represent and serve higher education's constituency.

## **Conclusions**

As we approach the twenty-first century, it becomes increasingly important that cultural diversity be incorporated into higher education curriculum. This incorporation is best achieved through the establishment of ethnic studies departments and programs which offer curriculum defined by a variety of cultural perspectives.

Two thirds of the world is composed of non-white, non-Western

cultures, yet higher education curriculum continues to emphasize scholarship within the Western, Judeo-Christian tradition. As the economic and political dominance of the West wanes, it will become increasingly imperative that our students be able to function in a world society that may differ dramatically from their own experience. Only through understanding and respect will international conflict be resolved.

Because the racial and ethnic composition of the United States is rapidly changing, it is equally important that students be aware of the nuances of American culture. Black and Hispanic populations in the United States are relatively young, and their birthrate is higher than the older Anglo population. Cultural emphasis on the family also contributes to a large average family size for blacks, Hispanics, North American Indians, and Asian-Americans. In addition, immigration profiles have shifted. The majority of immigrants to the United States no longer come from Europe; they come from Mexico, Central America, South America, and Southeast Asia. These immigrants bring with them languages, religions, and cultural artifacts much different from their European predecessors. Their entrance into the United States alters not only the demographic make-up of society but also the cultural landscape.

These changing patterns in immigration, combined with already existing young minority populations, create new meaning for the concepts of "majority" and "minority." If current trends continue, Asians, Hispanics, and blacks could represent one third of the population by the year 2000. By 2050 these "minority" groups could compose the numerical majority of United States citizens. It is essential that all people possess skills which will allow them to understand, appreciate, and respect groups other than their own. Political, economic, and educational institutions will need to respond to multicultural constituencies. The practical application of ethnic studies can help facilitate the efficient and equitable treatment of all groups by public and private institutions.

The faculty in the Department of Ethnic Studies at Bowling Green State University believe our philosophy and instruction contribute to creating a society which recognizes and respects all of its members. We believe that when different groups understand each other's important roles and contributions to American culture, bigotry and racism will become mere remnants of an earlier, less informed society. We look forward to seeing cultural diversity incorporated into higher education curriculum nation-wide, so that the profile of American culture may become truly representative of all its components and contribute to the unity of the American people. We hope to see this happen as we stand at the crossroads to the twenty-first century.