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The Whitewashing of Higher Education

By Connie Hopinks

The state that sparked anti-Latino immigrant sentiment with Proposition 187, anti-Affirmative Action initiatives with Proposition 209, and anti-bilingual education laws with Proposition 227, strikes again. Ethnic studies programs may soon be on the chopping block at the University of California if UC regent Ward Connerly, the man who spearheaded Proposition 209 and eliminated Affirmative Action at UC, is successful. With projections of drastic changes in the ethnic composition of the population in the United States, the new millennium becomes a frightening question mark for conservatives who worry about changes to the American way of life. But proponents of ethnic studies argue that to remove these programs would impact the quality of life for future Americans living and working in a multicultural society.

In California, minorities make up 44 percent of the population - Latinos alone make up 25 percent. Under the guise of creating a color-blind society, Connerly's plan turns a blind eye to the harsh realities of contemporary American life in which racism, intolerance, and ignorance continue to thrive. "During a year in which President Clinton has initiated a national dialogue on race, Connerly seeks to undermine the academic discipline of ethnic studies, one of the most important tools that Americans have to engage in that crucial conversation," wrote Caroline A. Streeter, a Berkeley, California, resident in a July 23, 1998, letter to the San Francisco Chronicle. "Only through education can we combat the ignorance that is responsible for racial inequality and racism."

Just as French and Russian studies-standard staples at universities across the United States-promote a better understanding of other world cultures, ethnic studies help Americans better understand one another. Race relations would indeed be undermined if ethnic studies were eliminated, say many academicians. The activism of the Civil Rights Era sought to end generations of discrimination of ethnic minorities. Empowered Chicanos like Cesar Chavez in the sixties began to speak in a louder, stronger, unified voice about minority issues, experiences, concerns, literature, and history. As more voices joined Chavez's, cultural awareness began to trickle down into all sectors of society, including academia.

In the sixties, paralleled by the growth of African American studies at universities across the country, women's studies, Chicano (or Mexican American), Puerto Rican, Hispanic American, Cuban, and Latin American studies began to sprout up around the country. In 1966 Rodolfo Acuña taught the first Mexican American history class in Los Angeles, and from March 17 through April 11 of the same year, Cesar Chavez and the United Farmworkers Union marched from Delano to Sacramento, California, on behalf of farm workers. There was an explosion of publications for, by, and about Latinos, which continued into the seventies. Such works as Rudolfo Anaya's first novel, *Bless Me Ultima* (New York: Warner Books, 1999), winner of the 1972 Premio Quinto Sol award, and Rodolfo Acuña's *Occupied America: A*

History of Chicanos (Reading: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1987), marked the changing of the tide.

Afterward, hundreds of ethnic studies programs emerged in colleges and universities around the country. Connerly's disdain for them-despite his role as a university regent-was revealed in a June 1997 letter to President Clinton: "It is the academicians who have been using race in an obscene matter that's now coming to light . . . It is the academicians who gave birth to separate ethnic and race-based graduation ceremonies, race-based scholarships and outreach activities, resegregated dormitories, and the proliferation of ethnic studies programs which sometimes amount to segregated curricula." Connerly's efforts, however, would also make biology, history, and American literature segregated curricula. In higher education, it is necessary to limit study to a particular discipline to learn and understand it well. General survey courses have their value, but it is specific courses like early American history and ethnic studies that, like microscopes, enlarge subject areas to improve students' understanding of a particular subject.

Would Connerly limit study to only certain cultures? King Features writer Roger Hernandez asks this crucial question in his July 1998 article for LatinoLink, an on-line community forum for Latinos: "Is Connerly going to determine that French history is worth studying but not Puerto Rican history? That courses should be offered on German literature but not on the works written by black American authors? If so, why?" These questions underscore a greater problem, the tug-of-war taking place in California and the rest of the nation over which political group will control the country's evolving cultural panorama.

Connerly, a land-use consultant and staunch Republican appointed in 1993 to a twelve-year term as regent of the University of California by then Governor Pete Wilson, would seemingly have average Americans make that determination. In his letter to the President he states: "As you convene your 'Oblivious ribbon' commission of academicians and other high-priced brain power to develop their position papers on this subject, please don't forget 'Joe and Jane Six-Pack' (those average Americans whose views and attitudes about race matter far more than those of any academician)." Based on this sentiment, Joe and Jane would determine the curricula of our universities. What Juan and Juanita would want their children to learn in college is of no apparent consequence.

Yet, it is not certain that the average American, if given the opportunity to determine the limits of higher education, would eliminate ethnic studies. In Massachusetts, a statewide poll for the Ford Foundation Campus Diversity Initiative found that two-thirds of those polled said it is important for colleges to prepare graduates to adapt to a diverse society. Fifty percent of the respondents think that the nation is growing apart, and 74 percent think diversity programs on college campuses help bring society closer. These figures lend support and validity to the ethnic studies programs in Massachusetts. California, however, seems to have a much more polarized public.

"As we see it, Proposition 187, Proposition 227, and Proposition 209 are anti-Mexican, and the next proposition will be to eliminate Chicano studies. If we do not address the issue now, when the ballots are counted in a few years, the marches to save the field will be too late," cries the

Los Angeles chapter of the Brown Berets, an activist group, in a December 1998 e-mail announcing a rally to save Chicano studies. Its perspective, along with that of many other Latinos in California, equates the elimination of Chicano studies with racial discrimination.

This clash between minority activists and conservatives like Connerly make it that much more necessary for ethnic studies programs in California to delineate clearly the problems that exist and to shed some light on the solutions, say academicians. According to Gerardo Marín, executive director of the Center for Latino Studies in the Americas at the University of San Francisco (USF), "Ethnic studies programs or, more specifically, courses with significant ethnic content, are for everybody. Ethnic as well as non-Hispanic white students benefit from learning about the cultural and ethnic diversity that makes our country rich and strong. Our experience at USF is that all students are interested in learning about ethnic diversity, and all types of students take those courses.

"We have a strong ethnic diversity component in the core curriculum so that our ethnic diversity courses are not segregated, but in order to graduate from USF, all undergraduate students must take two diversity courses, says Marín. "In addition, all core curriculum courses are required to include an ethnic diversity component as well as a gender diversity component. These requirements are a reflection of our university's mission to educate leaders for change and individuals who will make a difference in a multicultural society."

Courses offered at USF cover the spectrum of the minority experience. There are courses in world and minority theater, Latin American literature, the Hispanic American experience, feminine discourse in Latin American literature, the psychology of ethnic groups in the United States, and others dealing with the African American and Asian experience. Similar courses on other college campuses bring greater insight to America's diversity and provide a better understanding of the social, economic, cultural, and political issues affecting these communities and society as a whole.

But conservative thought tends to want immigrants and ethnic minorities to forget their past, their rich cultural traditions, and adopt, instead, the values and ideas of the mainstream of the United States. John Miller, a political writer for the conservative publication the National Review and author of *The Unmaking of Americans: How Multiculturalism Has Undermined America's Assimilation Ethic* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), describes the evils of multiculturalism in a May 17, 1998, Dallas Morning News interview. He says that the process that immigrants should undergo when becoming Americans is undermined by multiculturalism. "Bad policies are tampering with the fundamental principles of Americanization. Those principles are: first, you learn the laws and traditions, and you follow them; second, you lead a productive life by working or contributing in some way to your new homeland; third, you learn English, which is the common language of this country. The fourth is very critical. You become an American by becoming a citizen and that means adhering to a set of political ideals that this country is founded on. America is dedicated to a proposition of equality; it is not a country based on race or ethnic identity."

Ironically, Hispanics do adhere to these principles. The inability to

understand another culture is usually attributed to ignorance, and as Arnaldo Carlos Vento, professor of Spanish and Portuguese at the University of Texas at Austin and author of *Mestizo: The History, Culture, and Politics of the Mexican and the Chicano* (Landham: University Press of America, 1997) explains, ethnic studies can provide the information to eliminate ethnic intolerance. "How can knowledge of the fastest-growing culture in the U.S. be harmful?" asks Vento. "To suggest that this curricular offering is segregated implies it is only for Chicanos/as and/or the ethnic group. To the contrary, the main target is mainstream society—they are the ones who need to know and understand this group, the Spanish-speaking mestizo, who will constitute, along with other minorities, more than 60 to 70 percent of the population by the middle of the twenty-first century. Doesn't Regent Connerly know that the next industrial giant will be Spanish-speaking America south of the border? All professions interacting with this new economic boom will have to learn not only Spanish, but understand the culture fully."

The individual freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution, and which Americans hold dear, protect against the tyranny of majority rule. As long as new ingredients are added to the U.S. melting pot there will be a need to understand them to strengthen the union. It has only been in the last 30 years that many obstacles to equality were removed; the Civil Rights Era gave birth to Affirmative Action and ethnic studies, which are important steps in ridding the country of inequality in practice.

Growing conservative fears of the growth of ethnic minorities can lead to dangerous schisms. *E Pluribus Unum* ("one out of many"), the motto of the United States, is a reminder that the country's strength lies in its union. Ethnic studies may not go the way of other anti-minority-based initiatives, but as the Brown Berets warn, to assume so in the wake of California's propositions 187, 209, and 226, would be foolish.

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