

Ethnic studies curriculum tied to increased graduation, retention rates, study finds

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Students taking a College of Ethnic Studies course. Credit: San Francisco State University

In 1968, San Francisco State University activists made history by organizing the longest student-led strike in the U.S. What did they want? Curricula that represent people of color.

This demand was met a year later when the University formed its College of Ethnic Studies (CoES)—the first of its kind in the nation. Since then, various research studies have shown that ethnic studies courses could give a big boost to [student](#) success. A recent report with San Francisco State data supports that idea.

Written by College of Ethnic Studies Dean Amy Sueyoshi and Associate Provost of Institutional Analytics Sutee Sujitparapitaya and published this semester in the journal *Ethnic Studies Review*, the paper takes a quantitative look at ethnic studies. Using data from the University's Division of Institutional Analytics, Sueyoshi and Sujitparapitaya show a strong correlation between ethnic studies curricula and high retention and graduation rates.

"We should look at education as a way to bring opportunity to all people regardless of their background," Sueyoshi said. "It's a way to distribute wealth and create an educated citizenry. The report shows ethnic studies can support that."

The report's analysis is based on a sample of 22,250 first-time freshmen who first enrolled at SF State between the Fall 2008 and Fall 2013 semesters. The data shows that SF State students with a major in the CoES had high six-year graduation rates. (Six-year graduation rate is defined as the percentage of students who graduate within six years or less.)

For example, when looking at students who entered the University in Fall 2010, CoES majors had a six-year graduation rate of 77 percent. To put it into perspective, data from the National Center for Education Statistics indicates that the average six-year graduation rate for public institutions is 61 percent.

Even students who did not have a CoES major but had a CoES minor

showed a high graduation rate. For the Fall 2013 cohort, students with a CoES minor had a six-year graduation rate of 85 percent.

What might these findings suggest? Sujitparapitaya says that it validates some of the prior qualitative research on the value of ethnic studies. Those research reports suggest that ethnic studies could lead to higher student engagement and retention.

"There are studies that recognize that when students see themselves in curriculum or can relate to it, they perform better," Sujitparapitaya said. "That's the essence of ethnic studies."

Sujitparapitaya cautions, though, that correlation should not be confused with causation. But even with this caveat, Sueyoshi says discovering this data is a major development for higher education because it quantitatively validates past qualitative research on how ethnics studies curricula support [student success](#).

"Ethnic studies courses are meant to be relevant to and representative of different types of students," Sueyoshi said. "We know through qualitative research that courses designed this way can lead to better student engagement." In turn, it could lead to higher retention and [graduation](#) rates, she added.

Some higher education administrators and policy makers question whether ethnic studies curricula is worth investing in. The report shows why the answer is yes, Sueyoshi says.

"If we care about [graduation rates](#) and if we care about the success of underrepresented students, then we should invest in ethnic studies courses," she said. "This data shows that."

More information: Amy Sueyoshi et al. Why Ethnic Studies, *Ethnic*

Studies Review (2020). [DOI: 10.1525/esr.2020.43.3.86](https://doi.org/10.1525/esr.2020.43.3.86)

Provided by San Francisco State University

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