

March 21, 2022

Dear Members of the UC Academic Council:

We are writing to express our concern about a proposal to add a new “H” requirement to the current A-G curriculum prerequisites for UC admission. The “H” proposal, as currently formulated by BOARS, would not only require applicants to have taken a one-semester ethnic studies course in high school, but to take a specific kind of course that is highly political and ideological in content. This would be a disturbing step on both substantive and procedural grounds.

First, some background. The “A-G” requirements are of long standing; they were established in the 1930s to ensure that every UC student learned a common core of academic skills in high school, intellectually preparing them to handle freshman-level college work across the humanities, social sciences, and STEM fields. It is worth emphasizing that the A-G requirements are all about the acquisition of key skills in high school, not about learning specific ideas or doctrines. They have been amended only once in the past fifty years,<sup>1</sup> and they represent a broad and deep consensus on key elements of a college preparatory education.

In November 2020, BOARS voted to add an “H” provision to the A-G requirements: “At least one of the courses used to satisfy the [A to G requirements] must be an approved course of study (one-half unit) in Ethnic Studies.” It commissioned a special committee to develop recommendations on the content of this course, and in November 2021 endorsed the committee’s detailed recommendations on what sort of course would satisfy the new ethnic studies requirement.<sup>2</sup> These are the matters now before the Academic Council.

The “H” proposal concerns us deeply on several independent grounds:

1) In mandating an “ethnic studies” course, the university is going well beyond the current province and purpose of the A-G requirements. “Ethnic studies” is not a particular type of intellectual skill or type of inquiry; it is a specific subject. The “A-G” standards require students to study a foreign language because that helps students understand written and verbal expression, and usually to gain insight into another culture; the university does not mandate that students learn Latin and study ancient Rome. The standards require that students complete two years of science; they do not mandate that students study genetic engineering.

2) While there are many distinct ways to teach high-school students about race, ethnicity, and diversity, the current proposal adopts a particular, highly political and ideological

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<sup>1</sup> The visual and performing arts requirement was added in 1999.

<sup>2</sup> See the letter from Robert Horwitz to Chairs of Senate Divisions and Committees, Dec. 2, 2021. The proposal detailing the content of the “ethnic studies” course is Enclosure 2.

formulation. To give some brief excerpts, courses that satisfy the requirement should “create<sup>3</sup> and honor anti-colonial and liberatory movements that struggle for social justice on global and local levels... Engage in the critical study of struggles, locally and globally, against systems and ideas that attempt to divide and conquer people...Critique histories of imperialism, dehumanization, and genocide to expose how they are connected to present-day ideologies, systems and dominant cultures that perpetuate racial violence, white supremacy, and other forms of oppression.” These go far beyond mandating training in certain types of intellectual skills – or even mandating the study of a specific subject. This smacks instead of an attempt to teach students a particular take on a range of highly controversial issues. It would entangle the university in the sorts of political and ideological disputes over ethnic course content that are currently roiling many school districts across the state and the nation.

3) The process that generated the current proposal is troubling on several grounds. The special committee BOARS created to develop course criteria for the ethnic-studies requirement was not diverse, either politically, ideologically, or in area of substantive expertise; instead, it was stacked with advisors, lecturers, and faculty friendly toward a particular and narrow approach to ethnic studies. Indeed, some of those involved in developing the proposal appear to have had a conflict of interest, since school districts around the state and nation are currently retaining many “experts” in the field, at exorbitant consulting rates, to develop their ethnic studies curricula. Persuading the university to mandate a particular vision of these curricula could plausibly generate large financial windfalls for these participants.

At the October 2021 meeting that first considered the course criteria, BOARS members raised some serious concerns, according to the released minutes. “Several found some of the language to be inaccessible, even though it is standard in the discipline. Others found the tone of the proposal to be problematic. The absence of external standards used as benchmarks and backstops in other fields, such as Common Core for English and math or Next Generation Science Standards for science and engineering, means UC is creating course criteria and guidelines independent of an established roadmap for high school curriculum design. External political and social pressures increase the risk for misunderstandings. Other concerns included the impact to non-resident applicants who may be unable to fulfill the new requirement.” In other words, several members raised concerns that echo some of our own. However, at the November 2021 meeting, BOARS approved the recommendations – but has still not released any minutes from that meeting. We therefore know nothing about how BOARS resolved these serious issues, and the lack of transparency on such important issues is very troubling.

In general, this entire process has operated “under the radar” so far as general faculty awareness is concerned. We believe that such a fundamental and controversial step needs to solicit broad faculty input and should only move forward with substantial consensus about a particular approach.

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<sup>3</sup> The implication of this wording is that acceptable courses should themselves lead to the formation of new ‘social justice’ movements.

4) Much of the recent momentum for ethnic studies curricula has been driven by two widely touted studies, by Thomas Dee, Emily Penner, and Sade Bonilla.<sup>4</sup> The studies claimed that a piloted ethnic studies course in San Francisco high schools had very large positive effects upon the outcomes of students “assigned” to it. However, a recent report on the studies<sup>5</sup> shows that the claimed effects do not actually exist and that there was, for example, no statistically significant difference in the outcomes of students who were assigned to the course but didn’t take it, and those assigned to the course who did.<sup>6</sup> This revelation should further call into question the process by which these recommendations have been developed.

5) BOARS voted to add the “H” requirement, in some form, in November 2020, shortly after Governor Newsom had vetoed AB 331. AB 331 created an ethnic studies mandate, but in the view of many critics (and ultimately, of the Governor), it overly prescribed a particular vision of the ethnic studies course. In 2021, the legislature approved, and the Governor signed, AB 101, which also established an ethnic studies course requirement for public high school students, but crucially took no position on the content of the course, which was left to local school boards. AB 101 bears on the current BOARS proposal in two ways. First, it has largely made moot the initial impetus behind the November 2020 BOARS vote – there is now an ethnic studies requirement in California. But second, the highly specified content of the ethnic studies course embodied in the November 2021 BOARS vote goes against the spirit of AB 101, and indeed appears to be an end run around its relatively ecumenical intent.

We therefore urge the Academic Council and the UC Academic Senate to not advance this proposal. It will undoubtedly generate profound opposition once its substantive implications, and the process that led to it, are more widely understood. The university should never be in the position of forcing a particular political agenda upon its own students – let alone all upon UC applicants across the state and the nation.

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas S. Dee and Emily K. Penner, “The Causal Effects of Cultural Relevance: Evidence from an Ethnic Studies Curriculum,” 54 *American Educational Research Journal* 127 (2017); Sade Bonilla, Thomas S. Dee, and Emily K. Penner, “Ethnic Studies Increases Longer-Run Academic Engagement and Attainment,” 118 *PNAS*, no. 37 (2021). The BOARS proposal, relying mostly on these studies, observes that “[b]y requiring all future UC applicants to take an ethnic studies course, UC can uplift the outcomes of students of color and change the institutional structures that perpetuate inequity.” We believe there is, in actuality, no evidence for this statement.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Sander and Abraham Wyner, “The Academic Effects of Ethnic-Studies Courses are Unknown: A Critique of Two Studies by Dee, Bonilla, and Penner,” March 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Even lead author, Thomas Dee, cautioned that the studies should not be generalized beyond outcomes of poor-performing students. Strikingly, the 2017 study did report data persuasively showing that the higher a student’s academic performance, the more likely the student was to avoid the course.