

# Course Syllabus

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### Instructor

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### Course Description

This course will explore the ways in which higher education has evolved from a primarily discipline-centric institution, to one that recognizes and awards undergraduate and graduate degrees in “interdisciplinary disciplines” based on different cultural identities, such as: Women’s Studies/Gender Studies, Black Studies/African American/Africana Studies, Raza Studies/Latino/Chican@ Studies, Indian/Native American Studies, Asian American Studies, LGBT/Queer Studies, Disability Studies, Urban Studies, and Ethnic Studies.

The course will begin with a short history of higher education, focusing on the ways that universities have traditionally been organized around disciplinary knowledge. This conversation will include critical questions about the ways in which academic aspirations are couched in terms of knowledge acquisition, equal opportunity, democracy and meritocracy, and economic viability. Against this background, we will consider the purpose and future of social justice, cultural studies, and area studies within academic life in the United States.

Students will explore the detailed history and evolution of emerging departments and areas of study that defy disciplinary boundaries, such as *Women’s Studies*, *African American Studies*, *Queer Studies*, and others. Students will learn about the foundations of these programs (many of which were/are tied to social justice and civil rights movements); the reception of these programs by a range of stakeholders; the

growth and challenges these programs have faced since their inception in higher education; and their future trajectories and viability.

Specifically, students will grapple with critical questions about the theories, pedagogies, and politics that both unite and divide these programs as they seek to become an enduring part of higher education. In what ways are these programs changing the construction, organization, and consumption of knowledge in higher education, and to what effect? Likewise, how successfully are these programs reframing fundamental theories of cultural identity, moving away from visibility studies towards intersectionality, trans-studies, and critical race studies? Students will consider what it means to be at both the “center” and “margins” of the university, straddling a difficult line of seeking academic legitimacy while also actively criticizing the Institution itself.

Students will also examine the ways that these programs have sought to differentiate themselves from each other and validate the need for their individual existence, while also working together across critical intersections of race, class, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality. What kinds of alliances, mergers, cross-listings, or resource sharing arrangements have these different area studies programs made, and what have been the pros and cons of these efforts? Students will read critiques of these programs from both within and without, with a special focus on how they represent and serve the needs of diverse populations.

Finally, students will examine the social justice orientations of these programs, and map the tensions inherent in combining academia with concrete and contemporary activism. To what extent have these academic programs remained true to their activist roots? What are the risks and rewards for activist organizations that wish to partner with academic institutions? Do they still – or did academics and activists ever -- share the same theories of change? How do these alliances disrupt traditional pedagogies and theories of (academic) space? Individually and as a class, we will imagine different trajectories and possible futures of higher education, as new disciplinary structures are both critiqued and legitimized.

### **Weekly Syllabus:**

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#### August 27, 2015: Introductions and Overview

- *Introductions:* Please come prepared to briefly share: 1) Why you wanted to take this course and what you most hope to learn/accomplish over the course of the

semester; and 2) What experiences you've had (if any) with cultural studies in higher education. Note: These experiences can include courses that *didn't* pay attention to culture, as well as those that raised critical questions or changed the way you think about cultural identity.

- *Overview of course:* The instructor will discuss the syllabus and design of the course and answer any questions.
- *Discussion of Upcoming and Semester-long Assignments:* Each student will choose an area of cultural studies that they will investigate in depth through a series of guided assignments over the course of the semester. The instructor will explain these assignments, and handout guidelines and worksheets.

### September 3, 2015 & September 10, 2105: Cultural Difference and Higher Education History

In these two classes we will examine the ways that cultural difference has been understood theorized, and addressed (or marginalized) in higher education. We will begin by looking at the "Petal Chart" and "Knapsacking" assignments (given to you on August 27, 2015) as frameworks for understanding the ways that *your own* cultural identity is constructed/reconstructed, including how different identities are interdependent/ overlapping, visible/invisible, chosen/assigned, etc. We will compare different frameworks for understanding identity more generally, including cultural pluralism and multiculturalism, bell curve and deficit theories, critical race theory, indigenous knowledge, (invisible) privilege, social/cultural capital, standpoint theory, intersectionality, and positionality. We then use these frameworks to explore: 1) the ways that higher education have been traditionally "disciplined" and how culture identity has be positioned within these disciplines; 2) the evolution of interdisciplinary studies around cultural and social justice; and 3) the different "goals" of education, including the subsequent conflicts that have arisen around the idea of "politicizing knowledge."

**Assignments Due September 3:** "Petal Chart" and "Knapsacking" assignment.

### September 17, 2015: Cultural Affinity

Building on our previous discussions about cultural difference, in this class we will watch a documentary film called "Precious Knowledge" about the Tucson Unified School District's legally mandated closing of their ethnic studies program. Although this film is about ethnic studies at the secondary school level, it raises highly relevant questions about ethnic studies in higher education. Key questions to consider as you watch the film include: What is the power of a shared identity? What makes this power "threatening" to some while "life-affirming" to others? What is the line (if any)

between critical thinking and educational indoctrination? What does it mean to be an “American”? Should individual and/or community agency be an integral goal of education?

September 24, 2015 and October 1, 2015: Individual Programs, History and Overview

In these two classes we discuss readings about the history and founding of different cultural studies programs. We will consider the ways that different area studies evolved, and the central premises under which they operate. For example histories of immigration, slavery, colonialism have critically impacted diverse cultural groups in different ways. We will

examine the mission and goals of different programs at different kinds of higher education institutions, and consider the findings from your individual research/analysis of different program websites. Please come prepared to succinctly present your findings and to lead (or co-lead) a discussion about the critical questions that these assignments have raised for you.

**Assignment Due September 24:** “Mission, Goals and Conflicts” assignment

**Assignment Due October 1:** “Website Review” assignment

October 8: Critical Race Theory and Counter-Narratives, I

See list of assigned readings under "CRT Readings." There is no paper due, but please come with critical clearly articulated questions based on the readings to raise for the entire class discussion.

Today, we will have small group discussions that will be expanded into a large group discussion next week.

October 15, 2015: Critical Race Theory and Counter-Narratives, II

Larger group discussion based on small group discussion last week.

Please make a list of the key components/issues inherent in CRT and its variations (for example, interest convergence, counter narratives, cultural capital, knowledge construction, black-white binary, activist agendas). Be prepared to raise some critical questions for discussion about what you have identified.

October 22, 2015: Interviews with Scholar and Students

In this class we will discuss your findings from interviews with long-time scholars and newer scholars in your chosen area. We will begin to piece together what controversies are common across area studies programs, as well as how these controversies are couched in different languages, ideologies, and strategic interventions in individual programs. We will look at how these controversies have been addressed, and where these programs remain vulnerable. Again, please come prepared to succinctly present your findings and lead (or co-lead) a discussion about the critical questions this assignment has raised for you.

**Assignment Due October 22:** Be prepared to give a concise presentation and raise critical questions based on your Interviews with scholars and students in your chosen area.

October 29, 2015: Institutional Diversity

The class will be led by Andrés Castro Samayoa, a Ph.D. student at Penn in Higher Education, and a Research Assistant at the Penn Center for Minority Serving Institutions. Andrés will talk about the historic significance and contemporary role of Minority Serving Institutions and Women's Colleges in light of current efforts to diversify all higher educational institutions across the United States. Readings: TBA

**Assignment due October 29:** Choose one short (less than 10 pages) but controversial or seminal reading in your area of study to assign for the whole class to read and discuss in class on November 5, 2015. Please post your reading on the dedicated thread in Canvas. In addition to full information on how to access the reading, please include at least three critical questions that this reading raises for you about your area of study in particular, and diversity in the higher education curriculum more generally.

November 5, 2015: Theories of Change

Today, we will discuss the readings that you have each chosen, and the critical questions you raised.

November 12, 2015 & November 19, 2015: Academia and Activism

These classes will explore the ways in which the activist roots of many cultural studies programs have been preserved, honored, and/or reimaged over time. In particular, we look at the different *theories of change* without and outside the academy. We will talk about the history, obstacles and possibilities of coalitions

between activists and academics, and read narratives of activist academics and community engagement in higher education. Readings: Listed under assignments/readings on Canvas.

November 24, 2015: Journals Discussion

This class will be an opportunity for us to share and discuss our journals and meta-analyses, which are due today. Your journals (as described on page 10) will consider the plethora of terms, theories, and ideologies of culture, identity, and “difference”. What terms did you find most relevant to your chosen area of identity studies? Why? How has your understanding of these terms changed/evolved over the course of the semester? Specifically, what readings, assignments, conversations or class discussions influenced your new perspectives? What critical questions do you want to pose to your classmates?

**Assignment Due November 24: “Journal Meta-Analysis”**

December 3, 2015: Final Presentations of Findings/Critical Questions

In this class (and next week if necessary) we will share our findings from the semester long research we have done on different cultural studies areas. A list of questions to be addressed in your (co)presentation is included on page 11

December 10, 2015: Last Class

- Final Presentations (con't)
- Closing discussions/reflections/critical questions
- Course evaluation

December 18, 2015: Final Papers Due

[Download the Syllabus.](#) 

## Course Summary:

**Date**

**Details**

