

**BIO:** Ben Chappell is a graduate of Bethel College in North Newton, where he completed teacher certification training for K-12 music. After working as a substitute, he decided to pursue graduate study and earned the MA and the PhD in cultural anthropology from the University of Texas, with an emphasis in Mexican American studies. He has taught at Bethel, Eastern Mennonite University and Bridgewater College in Virginia, and the University of Kansas, where he is now an Associate Professor of American Studies. He has written a peer-reviewed book and multiple scholarly articles on contemporary Mexican American culture and cultural studies in general.

**TESTIMONY:** I come before you as a person of European ancestry whose understanding of the world and of our nation has been enriched by ethnic studies. The personal benefit that ethnic studies brought to my own education developed into a professional interest and a career as I became a scholar. As a student at Bethel College, I was part of a small group who drove to Mexico for a semester-long study and internship program. In doing so, we reversed the path that brought many American families to Kansas for over 100 years. In my early 20s, I was astonished to learn of the diverse culture and history that was based so close to me geographically, yet had been outside my awareness. No less, this was the background of people I knew and interacted with daily. The experience awakened my curiosity and my attention to the multitude of stories that make up the rich tapestry of American society.

Ethnic studies describes a body of scholarship and a tradition of study with roots in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, that arose out of demands by non-white or non-Anglo people to have a chance to learn more of their own history. Innovators in this long movement, such as Carter G. Woodson, often believed that one day such “special” historical projects would be unnecessary, but until the achievements and contributions of those who had been subjected to colonization, enslavement, and segregation were thoroughly recognized as integral to American history, special effort would be required to bring this history to light.

Ethnic studies as a field has developed further in at least two ways. One is that scholars and creative artists have demonstrated that understanding America is not just a matter of knowing **about** the diverse history and experiences that make up our common backdrop. It is also, and equally important, to understand this rich cultural and social landscape from diverse perspectives. As an interdisciplinary project, ethnic studies brings topics like social history together with literature, memoir, and the arts in order to provide a view on the different ways that historical events matter to people. Understanding a diverse society is not only a matter of mastering a comprehensive list of facts, but also requires learning how people who are situated differently in society narrate, interpret, and respond to those facts.

The second development I want to highlight is that scholars and teachers in ethnic studies have come to understand the value of our work to **all students**, regardless of background. It is easy to imagine how a certain bias may be produced when a white student is taught by white teachers to read works by white authors about the acts and achievements of

white people. It is understandable if that student concludes that his or her experience is universal, that America is made up of 320 million cookie-cutter citizens who are all capable of understanding each other simply by knowing themselves. This is actually a fair estimation of my own formal education in American history up until I took that travel course to Mexico and later began graduate school at the age of 25. The conclusion that all American experiences are alike would not only be a fallacy, but a failure of education and ill preparation for reality. Our society is objectively diverse. It is crucial to understand it as such because in a democracy we all may be called on to make decisions that affect others—to do so with no understanding of their experience short-circuits democracy. It is crucial to understand our objectively diverse workforce and markets of exchange because we will inevitably need to interact with others who do not share our identical cultural background. By the same token, not everyone we work, trade, and govern with will share the same historical frameworks for understanding events.

Professional educators in a range of organizations have endorsed the effectiveness of ethnic studies as a means to enrich the education of all students and better prepare them for a world that is far more diverse than it has traditionally been depicted in textbooks.

In a 2010 review of published research, the National Education Association asserted the enduring need for ethnic studies curricula, noting that despite growing attention to “contributions” of racial and ethnic minorities in K-12 education, “scholarship by and about African Americans, Latino/as, Native Americans, and Asian Americans continues **not to be used** to frame academic content.” This results in a systemic imbalance in the presentation of white and non-white perspectives, a gap that students of color notice to the detriment of their relationship to school. The NEA also reports that inclusion of ethnic studies programs, beyond just “ethnic content,” has been found to have a positive effect on racial attitudes valuing fairness. This impact tends to be greater on White students than on students of color. Moreover, studies find “diversity experiences” like those that ethnic studies provides academically to be linked to cognitive development related to analytical thinking, discernment of the point of view of narratives, and awareness of framing ideas and context.<sup>1</sup>

Scholars in disciplinary associations have also lined up to support ethnic studies. The executive council of the Modern Language Association issued a statement in 2013 that ethnic studies are “integral to an understanding of American national identity and the American national project.” The council continued, “We therefore believe that **all students in the United States** should become acquainted with a wide variety of American ethnic histories and heritages.”<sup>2</sup>

The American Sociological Association in a 2010 statement called the content of ethnic studies a “rich body of important knowledge that has contributed to the well-being of the

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<sup>1</sup> National Education Association, “The Academic and Social Value of Ethnic Studies: A Research Review.” <http://www.nea.org/home/44876.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Modern Language Association, “Statement on the Value of Ethnic Studies.” [http://www.mla.org/statement\\_val\\_ethnic\\_studies](http://www.mla.org/statement_val_ethnic_studies)

United States, a nation that is envied across the democratic world for its successful diversity,” suggesting that there is a “disservice” done to students who are not exposed to this scholarship.<sup>3</sup>

A resolution that I wrote in 2012, which was adopted by participant vote at the annual conference of the Mid-American regional American Studies Association in Tulsa asserts that “Scholarship focused on a particular identity group ... [corrects] for exclusions and active misrepresentations of people and experiences that can rightly be called “underrepresented” in formal archives of knowledge... This scholarship enriches historical, cultural, and social understanding and therefore is a benefit to **all students**, regardless of their own identities.” As practitioners of American Studies, we further asserted that the critical scholarship that ethnic studies cultivates is “essential to a functioning democracy.”<sup>4</sup>

Local school districts have begun to pass ethnic studies requirements, not because it is mandated on a national level, but because it is a way to practically address the challenges they face providing education both to and about diverse populations. The San Francisco Unified School District recently adopted ethnic studies as a graduation requirement, following the lead of Los Angeles. That resolution argues that ethnic studies “encourages students to explore specific aspects of identity on personal, interpersonal and institutional levels; and... provides students with interdisciplinary reading, writing and analytical skills.” Beyond these specific curricular outcomes it further presents affective outcomes, stating that the curriculum “fosters strong ties between students and their families, neighborhoods, and schools, thus encouraging a sense of civic engagement and social responsibility.”<sup>5</sup>

Ethnic studies has proven to be an effective approach to diversifying the study of America without re-marginalizing minority experience as a mere footnote or add-on. There is a famous folktale of a group of blind men who are trying to understand what an elephant is. The one who feels the elephant’s leg says that the animal is like a pillar. The one who feels its side says an elephant is like a wall. The one who feels its tail says it is like a rope. The elephant in the room is our complex and conflicted, but common history and the many different experiences it has generated. We are all in the room together, and while we may try to deny the elephant’s existence, we cannot avoid it. As a society we cannot afford to pay attention only to one perspective on the facts. We need to talk with and learn from each other. This conversation is what ethnic studies delivers.

It is my professional opinion that ethnic studies in our public schools can provide the same benefits to Kansas.

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<sup>3</sup> American Sociological Association, “Statement on Arizona Anti-ethnic Studies Law.” [http://www.asanet.org/press/statement\\_on\\_arizona\\_anti\\_ethnic\\_studies\\_law.cfm](http://www.asanet.org/press/statement_on_arizona_anti_ethnic_studies_law.cfm)

<sup>4</sup> Mid-America American Studies Association, “Resolution in support of ethnic studies.” <http://maasa.net/ethnicstudiesresolution.html>

<sup>5</sup> “Institutionalizing Ethnic Studies into SFUSD.” <http://colemanadvocates.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/RESOLUTION-Institutionalizing-Ethnic-Studies-in-SFUSD.pdf>