

Critical Ethnic Studies, Anti-Zionism, and the Harassment of Jewish Students: Concerns about the AB 1460-Mandated Ethnic Studies Requirement at California State University

Here are the reasons why we are concerned that Ethnic Studies courses taught without adequate safeguards are likely to lead to the incitement of hatred and harm against Jewish and pro-Israel students:

1) Anti-Zionist Advocacy and the Promotion of BDS are an Intrinsic Part of Critical Ethnic Studies

Although the field of ethnic studies has been understood and defined in different ways over the last several decades, the text of AB 1460¹ and the CSU Academic Senate's Ethnic Studies Requirement Student Learning Outcomes² embrace a "narrow conceptualization"³ of the field known as "critical" ethnic studies that promotes activism to challenge "systems of oppression" as defined by the discipline's practitioners. Since its inception, Critical Ethnic Studies has falsely and negatively portrayed Zionism as one of these "racist," "colonialist" "systems of oppression" that must be vigorously challenged, and anti-Israel Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) campaigns have been the weapons of choice.

For example, the 2011 conference that launched the Critical Ethnic Studies Association (CESA) and each of the three subsequent CESA conferences⁴ included numerous panels, talks and workshops devoted to the demonization and delegitimization of Israel and Zionism and the promotion of BDS. In 2014, the full CESA membership passed a "Resolution on Academic Boycott of Israeli Academic Institutions," and similar resolutions were passed by the academic associations of three of the four core groups covered in Critical Ethnic Studies classes — Association for Asian American Studies (December, 2013), National Association of Chicano and Chicana Studies (April, 2015) and Native American and Indigenous Studies Association (December 2013). In addition, the membership of the American Studies Association, which includes many Critical Ethnic Studies faculty, also voted to join the academic boycott of Israel (December 2013).⁵

¹ https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201920200AB1460

² <https://www.csudh.edu/Assets/csudh-sites/academic-senate/docs/AS-3403-19.pdf>

³ In his book *Teaching Strategies for Ethnic Studies*, 8th Edition (2009), James A. Bank, a pioneer and founder of the discipline of multicultural education, writes: "One pervasive assumption many educators embrace is that ethnic studies deals exclusively with groups of color...This narrow conceptualization of ethnic studies emerged out of the social forces that gave rise to the ethnic studies movement in the 1960s. To conceptualize ethnic studies exclusively as the study of people of color is inconsistent with how sociologists define ethnicity."

⁴ See: <https://criticaletnicstudies.org/past-conference-materials> and <https://criticaletnicstudies.org/conference-information>

⁵ <https://amchainitiative.org/academic-associations-endorsing-academic-boycott-of-israel/>

In addition, a book entitled *Critical Ethnic Studies: A Reader*, which is used as a required textbook in introductory courses on Ethnic Studies around the country, including at San Francisco State University's College of Ethnic Studies, includes essays that demonize Israel with false accusations of "genocide," "apartheid" and "ethnic cleansing," and promote BDS. One essay by the volume's chief editor "calls on academics and others to mobilize support within the academy for the BDS Campaign and demonstrates that such action can refresh and enliven radical inquiry and scholarship in the United States."⁶

2) Critical Ethnic Studies Faculty Have Demonstrated a Willingness to Promote BDS and Anti-Zionist Advocacy in Their Academic Programming

Faculty affiliated with Critical Ethnic Studies are more likely to support BDS than faculty associated with any other discipline. More than one-third of all U.S. faculty who support an academic boycott of Israel are affiliated with a university Ethnic Studies program, and more university Ethnic Studies programs are headed by academic BDS supporters than any other discipline.⁷ In addition, 11 of the 14 founders of the US Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel are associated with Critical Ethnic Studies, including five who are faculty on CSU campuses.⁸

While faculty have every right to engage in political advocacy and activism outside the university, recent studies suggest that many Critical Ethnic Studies faculty are bringing their extramural support for BDS and their anti-Zionist politics into their conference halls and classrooms: departments with faculty who support BDS are five to twelve times more likely to sponsor events with one-sided, anti-Zionist content and BDS promotion,⁹ and BDS-supporting faculty are four times more likely to include readings by anti-Zionist, BDS-supporting authors in the syllabi of Israel-related courses they teach.¹⁰

3) Faculty Support and Promotion of BDS is Strongly Linked to the Harassment of Jewish Students

Several studies on antisemitic activity on U.S. campuses have shown strong correlations between faculty who support and advocate for BDS and acts of harassment targeting Jewish students, including physical and verbal assault, vandalism, bullying, and suppression of speech:¹¹ Schools with faculty who support BDS are about five times more likely to have

⁶ Nada Elia, David M. Hernandez, Jodi Kim, Shana L. Redmond, Dylan Rodriguez, and Sarita Echavez See (Eds.), *Critical Ethnic Studies: A Reader* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 9.

⁷ <https://amchainitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Faculty-Report.pdf>

⁸ <http://web.archive.org/web/20090202085703/https://usacbi.wordpress.com/about-us/>

⁹ <https://amchainitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Faculty-Report.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://amchainitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Syllabus-Study-Report.pdf>

¹¹ See: <https://amchainitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Antisemitic-Activity-at-U.S.-Colleges-and-Universities-with-Jewish-Populations-2015-Full-Report.pdf>; https://www.amchainitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Antisemitism_At-the-Epicenter-of-Campus-Intolerance_Report-2016.pdf;

incidents targeting Jewish students for harm; schools with student and faculty anti-Zionist expression and BDS promotion are about four times more likely to have acts of anti-Jewish hostility; and schools that host departmentally sponsored events that include BDS-supporting speakers are twice as likely to have such incidents.

4) SFSU's College of Ethnic Studies Offers a Clear Example of How Unbridled Anti-Zionist Advocacy and Activism Can Lead to Harm of Jewish Students

San Francisco State University's College of Ethnic Studies, which is highlighted in AB 1460, is a founding institution for the Critical Ethnic Studies movement. Many of the College's faculty have expressed support for BDS, including the chairs of two of the College's departments, and College faculty have used their academic positions to promote anti-Zionism and BDS advocacy in their teaching, research and scholarship, arguing that doing so is consistent with the College of Ethnic Studies' stated mission of providing "safe academic spaces and resources...to practice the theories of resistance and liberation... [and] to actively implement a vision of social justice."¹²

One SFSU professor and program director in the College of Ethnic Studies' Race and Resistance Department is a founder of the U.S. Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel and leader in the BDS movement. This professor/program director has consistently used the classroom, program-sponsored events and the program's official SFSU Facebook page to demonize and delegitimize Israel and Zionism,¹³ to denigrate Israel's supporters -- including Jewish students at SFSU¹⁴ -- and to promote BDS,¹⁵ and has done so with impunity. On one occasion, after the president of the university had published a statement affirming that Zionists were welcome at SFSU, the professor/program director posted a message to the program's official SFSU Facebook page strongly objecting to "welcoming Zionists to campus". Soon after that message was posted, the words "Zionists are Not Welcome" were chalked in huge letters on a campus walkway, with similar discriminatory messages chalked and posted in numerous other places across campus.¹⁶

This SFSU professor/program director has argued that anti-Zionist advocacy and BDS promotion are "part of my job duties...reasons why SFSU hired me in the first place," and

<https://amchainitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Campus-Antisemitism-2017.pdf>;
<https://amchainitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Antisemitism-Report-2019.pdf>; and
<https://amchainitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Faculty-Report.pdf>

¹² <http://web.archive.org/web/20130812155354/http://www.sfsu.edu/~ethnicst/home3.html>

¹³ See here for a partial list of program-sponsored events and classes that included the demonization and delegitimization of Israel and the promotion of BDS: <https://tinyurl.com/AMED-events>

¹⁴ For example, see this posting by the Professor/Program Director to the Program's Official SFSU Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/AMEDStudies/posts/573870589632199>

¹⁵ For example, see this posting by the Professor/Program Director to the Program's Official SFSU Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/AMEDStudies/posts/907963842889537>

¹⁶ <https://amchainitiative.org/fliers-posters-response-to-Wong-2.23.18>

that such advocacy and activism are wholly consistent with “the mission and raison d’etre of ethnic studies in general and the College of Ethnic Studies in particular — and by extension SFSU.” And indeed, neither the previous nor current Dean of the College of Ethnic Studies has restricted or voiced objections to the professor’s use of the College’s or University’s name and resources for the express purposes of anti-Zionist advocacy and activism — even when these behaviors resulted in numerous complaints of antisemitic harassment¹⁷ and were cited in a federal lawsuit filed on behalf of Jewish students who felt that these behaviors contributed to a hostile campus climate for them.¹⁸

The example of SFSU’s College of Ethnic Studies highlights the lack of adequate safeguards against political indoctrination in the ethnic studies program that is held up as a model in AB 1460, as well as underscores the toxic environment that can result from unbridled political advocacy and activism in academic spaces, particularly in the discipline of Critical Ethnic Studies.

¹⁷ See, for example: <https://amchainitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/California-State-University-Letter-7.11.19.pdf>; <https://amchainitiative.org/letter-to-White-and-CSU-Trustees-Mar-2018>; and <https://amchainitiative.org/amcha-write-sfsu-president-leslie-wong-regarding-sfsu-professor-of-ethnic-studies-rabab-abdulahdi-egregious-misuse-of-university-and-taxpayer-funds/>

¹⁸ <https://tinyurl.com/SFSU-FederalComplaint>