The 2020 Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum – May Draft raises significant concerns vis-à-vis both Jewish Studies and the Jewish community.

- It continues a fifty-year pattern of isolating Jewish Studies from other Ethnic Studies programs.
- It ignores rising anti-Semitism, and by omitting any discussion of it, increases the dangers for California’s students and faculty.
- Worse than simply ignoring Jews, the proposed model curriculum contains false, misleading, and inaccurate information, some of which is anti-Semitic.

1. The Exclusion of Jewish Studies Reflects Decades of Institutionalized Discrimination

The proposed Ethnic Studies model curriculum perpetuates a decades-long system of discrimination in California higher education against Jewish Studies, isolating it from other ethnic studies programs, and would now extend that discriminatory treatment into the K-12 system.

While many Americans assume that Jews are only a religious group, in fact, most Jews, including most American Jews, see their Jewish identity as primarily a matter of ancestry and culture (62%), while only a minority see it primarily as a matter of religion (15%). See, Pew Research Center, A Portrait of Jewish Americans (October 2013). Jews are not the only group where ethnicity and religion overlap (see, e.g. Druze and Armenians). Treating Jews as only a religious group imposes upon them a European Christian model that distinguishes between religion and ethnicity and makes it difficult to study any socio-cultural situation where they might overlap.

In fact, Jewish Studies can be defined as "the discipline which deals with the historical experiences, in the intellectual, religious, and social spheres, of the Jewish people in all centuries and countries." Arnold Band, “Jewish Studies in American Liberal-arts Colleges and Universities,” Studies in Modern Jewish Literature (1966). Jewish Studies not only includes religious thought but also economic and social relationships, as well as cultural products and practices. The study of the religion of Judaism is only a subset of the wider field of the study of Jews.

The field of modern Jewish Studies was born two centuries ago in the German states, where it was known as “Wissenschaft des Judenthums,” the Scholarship of Jewishness. For over a century, Jewish Studies scholars struggled for academic recognition in the face of anti-Semitic dismissal. In fact, it was only 90 years ago that a Jewish Studies scholar was first appointed at an American university (Salo Baron at Columbia University in 1929). Jewish Studies programs emerged slowly, but the pace quickened after WWII. By 1969, there were enough scholars to found a professional association, the Association for Jewish Studies.
The growth of Jewish Studies programs parallels the wider emergence of Ethnic Studies at California colleges and universities. From only a handful in the late 1960s and 1970s, there are now eight such programs offering majors and/or minors on California State University campuses and seven in the University of California system. At all of these institutions, however, Jewish Studies is isolated and treated apart from the other ethnic studies departments and programs.

In 1969, the same year that the Association for Jewish Studies was founded, faculty and students at San Francisco State University established what is now the College of Ethnic Studies. From that time until now, that campus has defined “Ethnic Studies” as limited to Africana Studies, Chicano/a-Latinx Studies, Asian and Asian American Studies, and American Indian Studies. This list, defined by the campus politics of the late 1960s, remains unchanged to this day, as reflected in CSU Chancellor Timothy White’s 2016 report on Ethnic Studies in the California State University system.

The fact is, however, that they should not be separated. Stanford University shows us the way with its Center for Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity, under whose aegis can be found the fields of: Asian American Studies, Chicana/o-Latina/o Studies, Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity, Jewish Studies, and Native American Studies.

The current definition of Ethnic Studies is trapped in a limited conception held by some activists in the late 1960s; it is time California moved into the 21st century and broadened its definition to include the other ethnic groups who make a home here in California.

2. **The Exclusion of Jews and Jewish Studies is Dangerous, Given the Rise in Anti-Semitism**

When I have approached the various Ethnic Studies Departments and Programs on my campus to ask that Jewish Studies be included, I have been told “no,” since Jews are not one of “the four historically defined racialized core groups,” which is simply another way of saying that since they were excluded in 1969, they should remain excluded today. This exclusion is based on stereotypes of Jews as a “successful, model minority” in America, that does not face significant prejudice or discrimination. Such stereotypes reflect a lack of understanding of the American Jewish experience, modern anti-Semitism, and of contemporary American racism.

The move of American Jews out of the working-class inner cities and into the formerly segregated middle-class suburbs is a post-WWII phenomenon. As late as 1944, most Americans (according to Gallup polls) identified American Jews as the greatest internal threat to the United States. See, Charles H. Stember, *Jews in the Mind of America* (1966). Jews were regularly excluded from residential neighborhoods by racially restrictive housing covenants, faced quotas designed to limit their admission to American colleges and universities, and were regularly denied employment and public accommodation.
While general rates of anti-Semitism declined significantly in the United States over the course of the 1950s, Jews continue to be disproportionately targeted for hate crimes here in California. Jews make up only 3% of the population of California but are the victims of 11.8% of hate crimes in California, according to the most recent Hate Crime Report for 2018, released in July by the Attorney General. In fact, Jews are the fourth largest group (in absolute numbers) targeted by hate crimes in California, after African Americans (25.9%), LGBT (24.1%), and Latinx (14%). These figures do not include the massacre at the Poway synagogue in April 2019, which will appear in next year’s report.

Jews occupy a particularly dangerous place in the imagination of contemporary racists: a kind of secularized demonic force bent on destroying the white race. American and European racists have embraced the delusion of a “Great Replacement” conspiracy by Jews to bring in Muslim and non-white immigrants in order to eradicate whites. This is why the neo-Nazis marching in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017 chanted “Jews will not replace us.” This was the ideology that motivated the shooter who carried out the massacre at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh in October 2018, as well as the shooter who attacked the synagogue in Poway in April.

Simply put, one cannot understand contemporary American or European racism and white nationalism and ignore the critical roles that anti-Semitism and Jews play in the construction and pervasiveness of racial supremacist ideology. By excluding Jews and Jewish Studies from the proposed model curriculum, California students will not only be denied the resources to confront the dangerous forces threatening our communities but, by also ignoring historical and contemporary prejudice against Jews, this new curriculum could result in greater, not lesser anti-Semitism, as students will have no tools for addressing anti-Semitic prejudices and stereotypes when they encounter them. In short, by not understanding who Jews are, or how anti-Semitism works historically and culturally, the curriculum disempowers our students and encourages anti-Semitism to fester.

3. The Proposed Curriculum Contains Anti-Semitic Materials

The proposed model curriculum for Ethnic Studies contains misinformation about Israel, BDS, and has anti-Semitic material. The most egregious is the definition of “BDS” in the “Glossary and Bibliography,” which is rife with other misstatements, historical inaccuracies, omissions, and mischaracterizations. The description of Israel as creating “apartheid” conditions does violence to the historical meaning of the term as well as the actual conditions in either Israel or the occupied territories. The definition describes BDS as targeted against the Israeli government and/or companies “associated with it.” In fact, BDS is targeted against all Israelis, regardless of where they live or what they do, whether or not they are in the government. In fact, it even extends to attempting to block American students from studying in Israel.

While the definition claims that it is only trying to bring pressure on Israel “until it complies with international law,” in reality, the stated goal is the dismantling of the country itself. It
seeks to reverse the UN’s partition vote of November 1947, which led to the creation of the State of Israel.

The BDS movement is strongly linked to anti-Semitism. The Anti-Defamation League of B’nai Brith, the leading American advocacy group fighting anti-Semitism, describes it this way:

the founding goals of the BDS movement and many of the strategies used by BDS campaigns are anti-Semitic. While there are people who support BDS but are not anti-Semitic, the campaign is founded on a rejection of Israel’s very existence as a Jewish state. It denies the Jewish people the right to self-determination – a right universally afforded to other groups. In ADL’s view, this differs from legitimate criticism of Israel and is anti-Semitic.

Part of what makes the BDS movement so disturbing is that by delegitimizing any conversation about Jewishness, anti-Semitism, and Israel, BDS prevents discussions about how anti-Semitism works or what it means to be Jewish. This is particularly dangerous in this time of growing violence, both verbal and physical directed against American Jews.

While on the subject of the Glossary, it is striking that while it contains definitions of various kinds of oppression, such as “Anthropocentrism,” “Cisgender patriarchy,” “Heteropatriarchy,” “Homo- and bi-phobia,” “Imperialism,” “Islamophobia,” “Matriarchy,” “Patriarchy,” “Racism,” “Sexism,” “Transphobia,” “White supremacy,” and “Xenophobia,” the authors of the proposed model could not find any room to include “anti-Semitism.” One might conclude that they did not consider it a real problem. Certainly, they did not think it was necessary to define it for California teachers.

As noted already, Jews and Jewish Studies are almost completely absent from this model curriculum or sample courses. They are only mentioned twice. The first is a brief reference in one of the texts used by the Native American Studies Course Outline, which refers to Lionel Cohen, founder of the Lionel Train Company (see line 4723 on page 223). The second, and far more problematic instance, is in the Arab American Studies Course Outline.

On line 5561-5562 on page 259, in a portion of the text discussing Arab Stereotypes, the curriculum states:

Palestinians: terrorists, blow up airlines, try to “destroy Israel” and “drive the Jews into the sea.”

While the Palestinian Liberation Organization (the PLO) signed the Oslo Peace Accords in 1993 and agreed to peaceful negotiations with the State of Israel to resolve outstanding differences, some radical groups rejected Oslo and continue to carry out terrorist attacks. Furthermore, this agreement does not magically erase the prior 30 years of the PLO’s history, in which it blew up airplanes, tried to destroy Israel, and drive the Jews into the sea. In fact, far from being a stereotype, these are the stated goals of terrorist groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad (and
is the principle reason these groups have been sanctioned by the United States and the European Union).

It is important to remember that such views are held by only a minority of contemporary Palestinians, either in Israel or in the West Bank or in the wider Palestinian diaspora. The point is not to tar all Palestinians or Arabs with the brush of fanatic anti-Semitism, but rather to point out how much context and nuance is missing from model Arab American Studies course outline, which whitewashes out the more problematic parts of the history of the conflict in order to create a one-sided and inaccurate depiction.

Needless to say, the inclusion of false, misleading and inaccurate, and even anti-Semitic material in the proposed model curriculum makes the absence of any positive inclusion of Jews or Jewish Studies even more glaring.

The failure to include a model Jewish Studies course outline represents a missed opportunity. Rather than the current proposal, where virtually the only references to Jews are negative, the inclusion of a Jewish Studies model curriculum could strengthen and resonate with the ethnic studies curricula in a way that would benefit all of them. These include, but are not limited to: the struggle for workers’ rights (e.g., unionization of garment workers); the fight over immigration (e.g., the Chinese and Japanese Exclusion Acts, and the 1924 quotas designed to restrict Jewish immigration); the efforts to create progressive multi-cultural communities (see, e.g., George Sanchez’s work on the LA neighborhood of Boyle Heights); an examination of comparative discrimination in employment, housing, and public accommodation; a comparative analysis of concentration, detention, and internment camps that would highlight their similarities; and an exploration of historical and modern racism, in which anti-Semitism plays a critical, if complicated part.

**Conclusion**

While the project of creating a model ethnic studies curriculum for use in California schools is an admirable and desirable goal, the current proposed model curriculum contains serious flaws that demand correction before the proposal advances any further:

1) The proposal should be modified to end the ghettoization of Jewish Studies and include it among the other ethnic studies programs under discussion.
2) A model Jewish Studies Course Outline should be included to provide resources for California teachers.
3) The Glossary should be updated to include terms such as “Jews,” “Judaism,” and “Anti-Semitism,” and to remove or correct the misinformation under the term “BDS.”
4) While one should not expect that a proposed course outline for Arab American Studies would include pro-Israel material, the material it does include should be historically accurate. The current version does not and should be amended.
Making these changes is essential as this curriculum moves forward. The era in which we are now living is increasingly dangerous, with violent rhetoric and actions an almost daily occurrence. This proposed curriculum should provide California students with the tools to meet and overcome these challenges, not aid and abet them.

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