Ethnic Studies and the Program in American Studies:

A Working Paper

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In its report, The American University and the Pluralist Ideal, the Visiting Committee on Minority Life and Education at Brown University has stated that "pluralism begins with the curriculum" and has asked that "the faculty give formal consideration to establishing an Ethnic Studies Research Institute". Before such a discussion can fruitfully take place at Brown a definition of Ethnic Studies is crucial. At the heart of the problem lies the critical distinction that must be made between the two related but fundamentally different categories, ethnicity and race. While there has been considerable overlap in the use of these two historically determined categories, it is important that the two categories not be confused.

In its broadest sociological sense, ethnicity has generally described the cultural, social and linguistic differences among groups in society. In American sociological and historical writing it has been most often used in reference to "white ethnic groups", that is those peoples who trace their ancestry to "non Anglo-Saxon" European immigrants, this variously includes Scandinavians, French, Germans, Central and Southern Europeans, Italians, Irish and Jews. While these ethnic groups each faced social and
through segregated public and private institutions and legal prohibitions on marriage between whites and nonwhites.

The racial history of America is, of course one of the central patterns of American civilization, integral to the social, intellectual and political history in America and interwoven with the histories of European immigrants, women, labor and indeed the national identity. The erosion of the the racist consensus from the 1950's and the dismantling of its formal structures in the 1960's should not obscure the distinction between race and ethnicity. If we allow the concept of race to be subsumed to ethnicity, then we endanger the agenda of seeking greater racial equity by stripping race of its historical meaning.

The new consensus on achieving racial equity in America coupled with the changing demography of America suggest a need for the evaluation of what constitutes a liberal education in American institutions of higher learning. Racial minorities will be represented in the pool of eligible college students in larger proportion than their share in the national population. Of course there are regional variations of this trend, but for those institutions that lie claim to being national universities there must be curricular perspectives which will welcome an increase in the proportion of racial minorities at these institutions. Essentially, it is difficult to view as adequate and comprehensive the teaching of American society without the inclusion of the conditions and experiences of racial minorities. The exclusion of racial minorities is detrimental not only to the educational experience of minority students but to an understanding of
American culture and society on the part of all students.

The study of racial minorities in American will expand the base of our knowledge about the varieties of the American experience so that our interpretation of American civilization is more complete, more sophisticated and more finely textured. At the same time, if a new synthesis of the American experience is to emerge, then it behooves us to embrace and make full use of the insights we can gain in these rich areas in creating new frameworks for interpreting a reintegrated American experience.

The report of the visiting committee and the work of the EPC Subcommittee on Minority Perspectives in the Curriculum have generated considerable discussion of how ethnic studies, variously defined, might be developed and institutionalized at Brown. A number of proposals for new or revised structures to house ethnic studies are likely to be put forward. Some models already exist, the Pembroke Center for Teaching and Research on Women and the Institute for International Studies are two that are often cited. Both of these models however seem to have serious limitations when applied to the problem of ethnic studies as would the creation of three separate new units for Asian American Studies, Hispanic American Studies and Native American Studies. The Program in American Civilisation is positioned to assume leadership in this discussion. Indeed, some of the proposals already under discussion assume some role to be played by the Program in American Civilization. As first steps the Program in American Civilization might make a major proposal for substantial growth in these areas within the context of its traditional
economic discrimination of varying severity, all of these groups have been fully assimilated into American society. While certain aspects of the distinctive ethnic cultures of these groups were sacrificed to the dominant Anglo-Saxon republican ideal in the process of Americanization, the fact remains that these ethnic groups became "free white persons" in contradistinction to black, yellow, red and brown people. (The term "free white person" is taken from the Naturalization Law of 1790 and remained the standard against which all others were to be judged assimilable and acceptable for citizenship until Walter McCarren Act of 1952.)

Race however is a different category and the study of racial domination in America leads to an altogether different understanding of American history and society. Unlike "free whites" for whom assimilation and full participation in American society was from their arrival in America the expected outcome, from the earliest colonial times until the mid-1960s participation of peoples who were determined to be non-white in America has been sharply restricted and their assimilation into American society effectively barred. As a consequence of their being determined by the courts and other institutions to be non-white and therefore unassimilable, Asians, Blacks, Latinos and Native Americans were politically disenfranchised through racially restrictive immigration, naturalization laws, and voting requirements. These groups were economically constricted through the seizure of Native American and Mexican American landholdings, anti-alien land laws and local and state ordinances which had the effect of creating a racially stratified economy in virtually all regions of the country. Finally they were socially isolated.
areas of strength. Such a proposal might, in very concrete and specific terms, lay out the needs and potential for excellence at Brown of Asian American, Hispanic American and Native American studies. It might also provide a very concrete idea of how these studies can be integrated into the approaches to American Civilization as they are currently taught at Brown (eg. Am. Civ. 75). Finally, it might also, provide an important addition to a conceptually powerful proposal to strengthen all aspects of the Program in American Civilization.