

## **Rationale for Proposed AES Major**

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### *Overview of Willamette's AES Program*

The American Ethnic Studies program is a discipline that, as the it's mission statement indicates, explores "how complex social relations of race, ethnicity, culture, and indigeneity, in conjunction with other social systems and structures, can give rise to unjust social relations, limit human endeavor, and normalize privilege and oppression." The primary focus of this program is on People of Color and their lived realities of racism and ethnocentrism, as well as their efforts to resist such oppression and bring about social change. Furthermore, the program allows its students to learn and explore how societal structures and ideological discourses shape and influence our everyday lives and perspectives. The courses also often examine the issues of white power and privilege as well as the normalized structures and culture that preserve social inequalities in the workplace, public policy, education, and so forth.

The goal of the program is to confront issues of social change and social injustice by the study of practices that are often overlooked and do not receive time for critical analysis. The American Ethnic Studies program and its courses cover a broad range of historical and contemporary topics, both in the humanities and in the social sciences. AES is a model discipline for a liberal arts education because of the different disciplines it is able to incorporate. It is through this program that I have fine-tuned my thoughts and life experiences before college into focused comparative theories and methods of inquiry during college. My coursework in AES has also enabled me to see responsibility to fight for change and equity in an ever growing multiethnic and multicultural U.S. society. The AES program immerses its students in a complete and involved experience that no other discipline offers. The effect the program has on its students can be clearly seen in the activism on our own campus community and institutional involvement of students as the classes not only spark interest, but a desire to help Willamette and society change.

### *Rationale for Application*

During my freshman year I was lucky enough to take Intro to American Ethnic Studies with Professor Drew. Needless to say, after the first day I felt as though I had found what I wanted my college learning experience to be focused around. Finding something that sparks one's interest as quickly as it did seems like a rare occurrence. However, there was only one problem: AES is not a major. Since second semester of that same year I have had thoughts and an extremely strong interest in creating my own major in American Ethnic Studies. As a Mexican-American I felt an instant attraction and connection to what I was learning everyday in the classroom. The offerings of AES courses in different disciplines have allowed me to see how the realities of racism, ethnocentrism and social resistance are incorporated in history, economics, and literature. I feel as though it was not only a coincidence that the AES program's first year was mine as well, but instead, that there truly is a connection and that it is what am supposed to do during my time at Willamette. Although I already have a declared major in History I feel that AES is intellectually and personally meaningful enough to me to declare two majors.

### *My Integrated Major*

I have had quite a bit of time to think about how the major should be designed. I have looked over American Ethnic Studies department requirements at other universities as well as looked over other major requirements in different departments at Willamette. Furthermore, I have also worked on the application with Jenne Schmidt, who had this same plan approved for her AES major. Looking at my own major requirements it is clear to me that the AES major should be spread across the standard disciplines. Within the History major, one must take courses that touch on three different areas of the world (i.e. at least 1 class in Latin American or East Asian History, European History, and American History) and I see no reason that the AES major should not be modeled in a similar fashion (i.e. at least one class in African American Studies, Latino Studies, Native American Studies, and Asian American Studies). After all, liberal arts institutions pride themselves on the interdisciplinary areas of study a student is required to complete so that one will receive a “well rounded” education. An AES major would incorporate all of these aspects as the course finds itself intersecting with other departments in many classes such as History, Sociology, English, Anthropology, Politics, Religious Studies, and Rhetoric. This American Ethnic Studies major is rooted in two core classes: “Introduction to AES” and “Theory and Methods of AES.” These classes are the foundation for my major which allow me to progress in my learning from start to finish as I would in any other major. “Introduction to AES” allows the student to first learn and experience what the department represents in its mission and “Theory and Methods of AES” should come at the time when the student has begun to truly understand and embody the teachings of AES. Anchored in the four thematic areas of this program (History, Power, Culture, and Citizenship), these two courses provide a solid foundation for all other elective AES courses. The third core class, my Senior Thesis, will allow me to pull together these foundational courses and the seven additional electives to investigate more comprehensively my own area of research. The other seven elective courses that would build upon the core classes and prepare me for my senior experience are also integrated and intentional. I have taken “Chicana/Chicano History,” “Native North American Cultures,” and “The World of Jim Crow” all of which have contributed to my understanding of each group’s relationship in the U.S. and their history. I will be taking “Asian American Diaspora” this coming spring from the post-doctorate fellow Sudarat Musikawong. At this time, I have already enrolled in comparative courses within a variety of disciplines including Anthropology, Sociology, and History so as to obtain the true interdisciplinary experience and a true liberal arts education.

In addition to focusing upon ethnic-specific groups and class disciplinary courses, my AES electives are also fulfilling the goals of the AES program. Within the thematic areas of history and culture the “History of American Immigration” class and “Chicana/Chicano History” class have allowed me to analyze the historical construction of race and ethnicity and how it has affected the past and present landscape of the United States. My family’s Mexican American history has allowed me to integrate life experiences within what I am learning and share experiences with others. Furthermore, as well as my focus in AES I have been very involved in Willamette Academy as a tutor, academic mentor, and summer camp RA/TA. The stories that I have heard from the young students in the program and my experience in helping them “beat the system,” as they hope to change how history has shaped the abilities of People of Color, has further developed my understanding of AES. Not only have I used my classes to attempt to understand of how to change construction of culture, privilege and oppression but I have

experienced the process of the transformation in Willamette Academy. Power, the third thematic area, can be seen as one of the primary themes in every AES course offered. Power is used as the key topic in both “Introduction to AES” and “Theory and Methods in AES.” Through all of the classes I have taken I have gained a more complete understanding of the “power” involved in political, economic, and societal dimensions of race and ethnicity. Citizenship, the fourth thematic area is present in most of the American Ethnic Studies classes I have taken. It can be seen in my class of “American Immigration History,” “Introduction to AES,” and many others. Other AES courses such as “Chicana/Chicano History” included the teachings of voice, resistance, and protest while showing how a group of little power and influence can enable itself to rise and fight for their rights and beliefs without compromising their history, but instead looking to change its future. The American Ethnic Studies program has allowed me to apply myself educationally to what my family has always understood and to learn more about my own history. It allows me to feel passionate about the education system of Willamette and a class to look forward to going to every time.

#### *Value of My AES Major*

I believe that one of the greatest teachings within American Ethnic Studies is the idea that we can never truly stop learning the issues and history of inequality, racism, and social justice because they are constantly occurring and developing each day. In this way, the program inspires us to become life-long learners. Furthermore, I believe that the effect of the discipline has already been shown in actions of our students. With the activism seen over the past 2 years and the establishment of the Council on Diversity and Social Justice, which I am a student member of, it is clear the influence AES has had on the Willamette community in the short time it has been a discipline. However, these are the events and establishments that can be seen physically. What cannot be seen is the strong effect the classes have had on the students’ minds. My AES classes have enabled me to understand my own past experiences in much greater depth and have transformed me into someone who is dedicated to bringing about positive social change.

I see my AES major as being an important role in any future profession I may choose as the issues of race and social justice surround us in our everyday lives. At this point in my life my hope is to one day become a lawyer or teacher at either the college or high school level. If I become a lawyer I would like to work in issues of civil rights and social justice in which my major in AES would create a relevant background. If I decide to teach I wish to have a focus on American history including classes involving issues of AES. It is clear to see that a degree from Willamette with a double major in History and AES would be extremely relevant and provide the valuable framework needed to accomplish the goals for my future.