

Chicana/os in the Academic Culture:  
Still Struggling for Inclusion and Voice  
Adalberto Aguirre Jr. and Rubén O. Martinez

Abstract

*Colleges and universities reflect and represent the hierarchical relations between the socially constructed racial groups in society and tend to perpetuate those relations in the production of knowledge and in the contested terrain of academic freedom. This article focuses on the struggles of Chicana/os in the academy as descendants of a militarily conquered people that persists as a subordinated population in the United States. The academic freedom of Chicana/os is examined principally through the struggle for and establishment of Chicana/o studies programs and departments. The presence of Chicana/os in colleges and universities set in motion a struggle over academic freedom as they demanded voice and legitimacy within the academy. Today, that struggle occurs in the context of authoritarian movements in society that directly attack academic freedom and democracy itself. In the critical discourses that will ensue, the substance of academic freedom must not only be protected but also be made more inclusive, both theoretically and practically.*

The university is often portrayed in popular thinking as an ivory tower inhabited by intellectuals engaged in critical thinking. However, such a portrayal of the university provides little information on “what the university is” (see Robbins 2008). Whether one looks at its rise in Europe or in Central America, the university is influenced, like all other societal institutions, by the political, economic, and social forces of a given historical period. By the end of the nineteenth century, higher education in the United States reflected industrial changes in society, especially with the rise of land-grant universities, which were given the mission of promoting “the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life” (*Morrill Act of 1862*, para. 1).

During the rise of fascism in Germany, Karl Jaspers, one of the founders of existential philosophy and a major influence on the idea of the modern university, opposed the agency capture of German universities by the Nazis. He wanted a university that was separate from politics so that scholars would not be seen as expressing views in the way ordinary citizens do. The distinction of scholars from ordinary citizens complemented the Kantian and Hegelian portrayals of the ideal university as a site of secular learning as an end. In contrast, Hannah Arendt, a student of Jaspers, argued that the university was influenced by politics, and that its

autonomy had to be protected from dictatorial politics and defended as an ideal grounded in the freedom of speech, which she considered the basis of academic freedom (see Carrabregu 2021).

The history of the relative autonomy of universities and their claims of academic freedom from politics in the United States may be observed during periods of overt and intense struggles over academic freedom, such as during McCarthyism, the Berkeley free speech movement in the 1960s, the civil rights movement, and today's culture wars (Williams 2018).

This article focuses on the experiences of Chicana/os in the academy as descendants of a militarily conquered people and as an internally colonized population in the United States. We examine the academic freedom of Chicana/os principally through the struggle for and establishment of Chicana/o studies programs, centers, and departments.<sup>1</sup> We review the original purposes of Chicana/o studies, the evolution and routinization of the programs, and ultimately their co-optation. We argue that the co-optation of these programs is directly related to issues of academic freedom, landscapes of social power, and the production of knowledge on Chicana/o communities in this country. We hold that academic freedom is contested terrain between dominant and subordinate groups in higher education and that the contestation is situated in the civil rights struggles of the communities of the latter groups.

The struggles and demands for civil rights by ethno-racial minorities occurred during the broad middle of the twentieth century as the country struggled with a losing military campaign in Vietnam and a highly contested War on Poverty. The demands for civil rights by ethno-racial minorities were fueled by their frustration with inefficient and ineffective governmental actions. The movements were driven by a belief that higher education institutions were ignoring their civil right to an education that would improve their access to valued resources in society. The movements cracked open the doors to institutions of higher education and advocated for the implementation of Chicana/o, Black, and American Indian studies programs at colleges and universities. They demanded space, resources, and a voice for ethno-racial minority students and faculty in higher education. According to Robert Blauner (1972, 257), the civil rights movement injected "race relations" into the university with a vengeance, forcing white professors to directly confront the racial crisis in the larger society. It also set in motion a struggle over academic freedom by ethno-racial minorities who rejected their marginalized status in society by demanding presence, voice, and legitimacy in the academy. These groups were the unwelcome strangers who entered the institutions and stayed.<sup>2</sup>

To illustrate how their experiences in higher education mirrored the deprivation of their communities' social opportunity, Chicana/os pointed to the small number of Mexican Americans

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<sup>1</sup> Population changes in the mix of groups that comprise today's Latina/o population have brought cultural changes and shifts in ethnic identities over time. This began with Mexican Americans, shifted to Chicana/os, and over time moved in the direction of Latina/os and Latinx. As such, the labels and the mission of the units changed as well.

<sup>2</sup> In a famous essay, Georg Simmel (1950, 402) described the stranger as "the person who arrives at a community and stays."

who had received a college education up through the end of World War II. One key outcome from the struggles of Chicana/os in higher education for more educational opportunity was the development of *El Plan de Santa Bárbara*, which was a catalyst for establishing Chicana/o studies courses and programs in Southern California and the southwestern states beginning in the second half of the 1960s and the early 1970s. As a blueprint for implementing a Chicana/o educational plan for higher education, the Chicano Coordinating Council on Higher Education (1969, 10) summarized the following objectives in *El Plan de Santa Bárbara*: “1. The recruitment and admission of Chicano students and the recruitment and hiring of Chicano faculty, administrators, and staff; 2. The formal study of Chicano culture and history in all of its unity and diversity in terms of recognizable cultural categories; 3. Support programs for Chicano students; 4. Chicano research programs; 5. Chicano publications; [and] 6. Cultural and social action centers in the Chicano community.”

*El Plan de Santa Bárbara* also promoted the establishment of a unified student movement called El Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (MEChA) and establishment of Chicana/o studies programs. It provided a Chicana/o curriculum framework, proposals for Chicano studies programs, and proposals for associates and bachelor’s degree programs. It called for the establishment of MEChA chapters on campuses to serve as the portal for Chicana/o college students to bring change to their communities and campuses (Gómez-Quíñones 1978).

The Chicano movement was creating Chicana/o programs and a curriculum that sought integration into the academic culture. Consider, however, that academia was using the idea of academic freedom in order to become autonomous from its surrounding environment or, in a very general sense, society. Following the early observations of Karl Jaspers, the university sought to promote scholarship as different from the views of ordinary citizens. In contrast, the Chicano movement was attempting to bridge Chicano/a communities with academia; that is, it called for the integration of Chicana/o communities’ educational needs within the academic culture. This view created a dilemma for academia: Could academia integrate the objectives of *El Plan* in its core culture and climate given that it regarded the Chicano movement as a disruption to its idea of academic freedom?

Given that academic freedom is rooted in organizational principles, one of which is rationality in the pursuit of attaining organizational goals to protect the integrity of its mission (see Blau and Scott 1962), how did academia respond to the dilemma it was facing in the Chicano movement? We argue that academia responded by co-opting the Chicano movement’s emphasis on higher education in order to buffer its culture and climate from an external disturbance. Specifically, academia reduced the threat from the Chicano movement by creating Chicano studies programs at the margins of the academic culture. That is, at the periphery of the mainstream organizational culture. This, in turn, increased the dependency of Chicano studies on academia for resource allocations (Aguirre and Martínez 2006). Unsurprisingly, Chicano studies was placed in the position of having to depend on cooperating faculty from other academic departments to teach

its classes. By situating Chicano studies in a dependent relationship within academia, it also enhanced academia's position to police the actions of Chicana/o students to reduce the possibility of disruptions to the academic culture.

Despite the co-optation strategies used by academia, Chicana/o students pushed forward with demands for presence as the first step to having academic freedom within the academic culture. According to Tomás Rivera (1986, 34), "By having a presence in the academy, the Chicano academic ensured the presence of a Chicano community in curriculum development, in more sensitive student services, in better accessibility for Chicano students and faculty, in basic and applied research, and in the establishment of centers of study that focus on the kindred group." The second step is using presence to establish voice in the discourses and practices of the academy.

In 1972, the University of Chicago Committee on the Criteria of Academic Appointment (1972, 16) defined academic freedom as "the freedom of the individual to investigate, publish, and teach in accordance with his intellectual convictions." Students, too, should have the freedom to study and investigate any aspect of reality that interests them. With regard to Chicano studies, academic freedom implied that it would have a place at the table with other academic units. Yet Chicana/o studies remained an unwelcome guest in the academic culture. Take, for instance, Blauner's (1972, 257) view that white faculty, like other liberals of the day, were supportive of the civil rights struggles in the broader society, but less supportive once the movements began to have a direct influence on colleges and universities. Similarly, Martin Trow (1977) found that university faculty faced challenges in accepting modifications to admissions criteria to increase enrollment of minority undergraduate students, in having ethnic studies programs administered by minority faculty, and in the recruitment and inclusion of faculty of color (for example, Chicana/o faculty).

Perhaps it was Chicana/o studies' emphasis on social action that white faculty viewed as a threat to their academic legitimacy.<sup>3</sup> Clearly, Chicana/o studies was rooted in generating and disseminating knowledge of Chicana/o communities that would benefit those communities. The purpose of knowledge was to benefit the well-being of Chicana/o communities, not to generate universal knowledge that promoted the hegemonic ideologies of the dominant group's body of knowledge. During this time, the New Left was questioning the values that guided social science research. The defense tended to view social action research as violating the norms of neutrality and value-free scholarly work, although today community engagement and community participatory research, albeit in co-opted ways, are accepted within the hegemonic framework of mainstream faculty.

White faculty members' lack of familiarity with the history and status of Mexican Americans and Chicana/os, as well as their own racial attitudes, may have contributed to the academic

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<sup>3</sup> Chicana/o faculty started examining the portrayal of their communities in research conducted by white faculty. They started "examining the examiners" of the Chicana/o experience (Brischetto and Arciniega 1978).

ghettoization of Chicana/o studies programs. The scholarly work of a small number of Chicana/o scholars and graduate students in the late 1960s and early 1970s demonstrated the highly biased research results of studies conducted by white scholars on Mexican Americans and their communities (Romano 1968; Martínez 1969; Vaca 1970a, 1970b; Rocco 1970). Such studies reinforced the subordination of Mexican Americans and limited Anglo-American understanding of Mexican Americans to a cluster of negative stereotypes. Blauner (1971, 52) argues that Mexican Americans tended to be invisible on a national level despite long outnumbering African Americans in the Southwest, with “the racially conscious white [being] attuned much more to black than to brown people. . . . Even the most informed Anglos know almost nothing about La Raza.”

Presence, then, was a necessary but insufficient condition for Chicana/o faculty and students to have voice in the academic culture; their advocacy for inclusion was silenced through marginalized existence. Although academia established standing committees on minority issues within faculty governance units, they were not always proactive or able to transform institutional processes that silenced Chicana/o faculty.

### Faculty Racial Attitudes

Faculty members shape the role of diversity as a value in the institutional climate of colleges and universities through their influence on policy development and implementation (Stassen 1995). Through the micropower of daily work lives, their views, behaviors, and practices relative to race constitute a major component of the substance of academic freedom in the institutional culture. Students have influence as well, but regarding the academic freedom of Chicana/o faculty, once institutionalization took hold, mainstream faculty had and continue to have the greatest influence in accordance with their racial attitudes. Donald Pope-Davis and Thomas Ottavi (1992) found that white racial identity among faculty members predicted racist attitudes toward Black people. Julie Park and Nida Denson (2009) found that faculty members who view diversity as the lowering of standards are less likely to be diversity advocates than those who do not hold the same view. More recently, Rebecca Gleditsch and Justin Berg (2017) found that faculty members who have greater contact with persons of color are more likely to have positive views of them than their counterparts. Finally, Martha Stassen (1995) has noted that white faculty members have tended to be minimally involved in institutional efforts to promote racial and ethnic diversity efforts on campus.

### Changing the Focus of Chicana/o Studies

In 1996, René Núñez, one of the principals at the conference where *El Plan de Santa Barbara* was developed, and one of the founders and leaders of Chicano studies at San Diego State University in 1969, expressed a concern that Chicana/o communities and ethnic studies programs were

under attack by conservative forces in California and that Chicana/os in colleges and universities were not engaged with their communities to address conservative initiatives. Such initiatives underway in the years leading up to his presentation at the annual conference of the National Association of Chicano and Chicana Studies included Proposition 63, the “English as the Official Language Initiative” (1986), Proposition 187, the “Save Our State Initiative” (1994), and Proposition 209, the “California Civil Rights Initiative” (1996). These were followed by Proposition 227, “English Language Education for Immigrant Children” (1998). Together these initiatives attacked, indirectly or directly, the use of Spanish, Mexican immigrants, social welfare programs, affirmative action programs, and bilingual education. In the wake of the “runaway plant” phenomenon of the 1980s and 1990s, disgruntled workers displaced by these plants were mobilized with the usual nativistic techniques that included the use of negative stereotypes of Mexicans (much like what is happening today).

In 1995, the statewide California conference of the Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán at the University of Southern California had as its theme “Taking Back Chicano Studies.” Núñez reports that the students felt alienated from Chicana/o studies programs and departments, and some faculty members expressed that working with communities was not valued by their universities. Also highlighted at the conference was the gap between what students and faculty considered progressive. In this context, Núñez (1996, 22) raises questions about the role of the university and its political agenda as a public university as well as “the inability of Chicana/a politics to protect its interests and to struggle for the recognition of its needs” (see also Lopez 2019). Núñez called for Chicana/o studies to return to its original mission of serving Chicana/o communities by providing them with critical knowledge of their social, economic, and political status; and marshalling university resources to serve Latina/o communities; and generating Chicana/o identities. That was approximately a quarter of a century after Chicana/o studies programs were first established.

### Final Observations

Colleges and universities reflect and reproduce the hierarchical relations between socially constructed racial groups in society that underscore the production of knowledge and the contested terrain of academic freedom. The academic culture, despite its claims of democratic ideals, continues to be one in which the peripheralization of Chicana/o studies programs and faculty persists. Since the assessment by Núñez, the national political context has worsened to the point where colleges and universities are at the center of intensifying cultural wars in an extremely politically polarized nation whose very democracy is under attack by conservative forces.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For some excellent articles on the recent attacks on academic freedom, see the *Journal of Academic Freedom* 13 (2022).

Chicana/o studies and Chicana/o faculty are situated at the center of attacks on academic freedom by conservatives. The attacks challenge the legitimacy of Chicana/os in the knowledge-production process. Proponents of the conservative attacks on minority and ethnic studies in higher education argue that the knowledge production process has been transformed by racial and ethnic minority scholars into a political process that challenges the ideals of democracy.

Not only are Chicana/o studies faculty research- and teaching-restricted, but what students learn is increasingly defined by anti-indoctrination forces, which results in conservative indoctrination. This goes against the liberal view that intellectual development is grounded in the clash of perspectives. Regarding teaching, in order to remain true to an enlightened view of the development of humanity, the view of colleges and universities formulated by David Grossvogel (1970, 144) should serve as a point of reference for the defense of academic freedom: “[The academy] should teach its students how to remain a witness and a conscience in the world beyond the university when the temptation to do so begins to weaken in proportion as results come less readily, encounter more hostility and require a lifetime of possibly solitary stubbornness.” In addition, when it comes to subordinated populations, it is equally important to keep in mind that “an institution that fails to recognize and address the needs and demands of previously underrepresented groups and individuals may maintain the forms but not the content of academic freedom” (Reichman 2020, 42). The current attack on academic freedom will surely lead to a robust defense of it and to a critical discourse on what academic freedom should entail in colleges and universities vis-à-vis Chicana/o faculty and other faculty of color located in group-focused scholarly units. It is our hope that the current clash of perspectives will yield a higher and more inclusive set of practices in colleges and universities relative to academic freedom.

In this article, we have examined the multilayered presence of Chicana/o studies in higher education and the academic culture’s attempt, in response, to co-opt the Chicano movement. Over fifty years since *El Plan de Santa Barbara*, Chicana/o communities are still seeking incorporation into the academic culture. Chicana/os need presence and a voice in an academic culture that continues to regard them as unwelcome guests. This article’s topic is uncomfortable because academics are reluctant to examine themselves in relationship to issues of domination, inequality, and oppression. Chicana/o studies has been a mechanism for Chicana/os to challenge their invisibility in the academic culture and their subordinate status in US society. This article is the first step in the critical examination of the status of Chicana/o studies in higher education in this country and in relation to academic freedom.

*Adalberto Aguirre Jr. is professor of sociology at the University of California, Riverside. Rubén Martínez is professor emeritus at Michigan State University and former director of the Julian Samora Research Institute.*

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