

American Cultures Engaged Scholarship Program

Integrating Communities With the Classroom

For 25 years, Berkeley's American Cultures program has introduced undergraduates to the diverse cultures of the United States through comparative courses on race and ethnicity in a wide range of disciplines. The American Cultures curriculum serves as the academic diversity requirement for all students, regardless of major. In 2010, Berkeley launched the American Cultures Engaged Scholarship (ACES) program to expand and strengthen this curriculum by engaging faculty in developing community-engaged American Cultures courses.

In a nation with persistent inequities, it is increasingly important that colleges and universities engage students in community-based work for the public good while also understanding the differential impact of laws, policies, and cultural practices on people from diverse backgrounds. ACES provides students with this type of firsthand experience. Courses offer the opportunity to develop new knowledge in the service of social transformation through direct engagement with practical problems, democratizing the research process, and enhancing the relevance of the research university to community groups, underrepresented students, and other scholar activists. ACES was developed jointly by the American Cultures program and the Public Service Center. Funding for the program's first five years was provided by the Evelyn & Walter Haas, Jr. Fund as part of the Berkeley Initiative for Equity, Inclusion, and Diversity.

The ACES model pairs faculty members with graduate or undergraduate students who support the development and implementation of a key community partnership in each course. Selected in cohorts of approximately 10 courses per year, faculty and student fellows receive course creation funding and are supported by ACES staff members for 6-18 months. The ACES staff assists with course and syllabus development, community partnership development, assessment of student learning, and the intricacies of implementing a course that fully integrates community engagement. The program is explicitly designed to work across university hierarchies: senior faculty, adjunct lecturers, graduate and undergraduate students, and staff form a collegium dedicated to community engaged scholarship, learning from one another and from the community.

After just five years, ACES has created a signature undergraduate experience, engaging over 5,000 students in deep learning through teaching and practice grounded in racial and social justice.

Highlights

- » Since January 2010, ACES has supported 45 faculty members in developing more than 40 courses, involving approximately 70 student fellows, enrolling more than 5,000 students, and collaborating with more than 70 community partners. Courses are offered across approximately 25 departments, engaging students and faculty in diverse disciplines from engineering to ethnic studies. Two-thirds of these courses have been offered multiple times, involving the same partners and/or developing the partnerships in subsequent courses. See "Shift Course: Revealing Hidden Histories and Cultural Contributions" on page 18 for the story of one ACES course and its impact.

- » Assessments of student learning have shown that ACES courses engage diverse groups of students in real-world community-based learning, increasing their ability to think critically and understand social issues and enhancing their motivation to take action in their communities.
- » ACES spurred the development of a “Handbook for Developing Community-Engaged Courses,” which details best practices for community partnerships, course development, and student learning.
- » To date, ACES has offered four academic symposia on community-engaged scholarship and launched each of the six cohorts with an institute on partnership development that brought together faculty, staff, students, and community partners.

Impact and Institutionalization

In addition to the student outcomes noted above, the ACES program has had powerful impacts on participating faculty, community partners, and the Berkeley campus as a whole.

- » **Community impact:** In community partner interviews, 91 percent of community partners who worked with ACES courses said they would partner with the program again, with 67 percent sharing that the partnership increased their organization’s capacity.
- » **Teaching and learning:** As a result of their work in ACES, seven faculty members have been recognized with awards for Innovation in Teaching, Service-Learning Leadership/Community Engaged Scholarship, and Civic Engagement, and many have received grants for course development from Berkeley’s Center for Teaching and Learning. According to follow-up surveys and interviews, faculty members have also found the program to be deeply meaningful, both personally and professionally.
- » **Catalyzing campus change:** Along with these course-specific impacts, ACES has sparked broader changes on the Berkeley campus. For example, partnerships from two courses helped in the creation of Berkeley’s new disability studies minor. ACES is also featured in outreach and retention efforts for underrepresented communities. ACES classes have sparked increased support for formerly incarcerated students on campus, and several departments are exploring ways to weave ACES courses throughout their entire programs and within capstone courses.

Since January 2015 when initial philanthropic funding for the program concluded, the university has provided staffing and program funds to continue the ACES program. To date, this has enabled the program to develop and offer 12 additional courses across 10 departments. Campus funding and further course development is expected to continue into the future, along with the integration of the ACES model into broader discussions about undergraduate education, social engagement, and public service at Berkeley.