

## Report for PIG on Black and Indigenous Studies in the Whitman Curriculum

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### Project Description:

Last year's Financial Sustainability Review proposed renaming Whitman's "Race and Ethnic Studies" program "Black and Indigenous Studies." This renaming of the program might help both to draw student attention to what faculty in the program are already doing and to harness student interest in Blackness and Indigeneity. Initial conversations with faculty members last spring were fruitful and confirmed that there is strong interest among the RAES faculty to pursue the change to Black and Indigenous Studies. The aim of our PIG was threefold: to explore what this change would entail, to study existing models of Black and Indigenous Studies at various liberal colleges and universities, and finally to evaluate the feasibility of this shift at Whitman.

### What we did:

During the grant period, we actively discussed how the notions of Blackness and Indigeneity circulate at Whitman inside and outside RAES. We talked about the need to cast Blackness and Indigeneity as global concepts without at the same time losing sight of the ways anti-Blackness and settler colonialism touch and are informed by the local (Walla Walla as a case in point). We discussed some of the current debates within Black and Indigenous studies, paying attention to the generative friction between the two fields. We also spent time engaging each other's visions of what a reconfigured RAES program would look like: how it would be staffed and what new courses it would need to offer (in order to fill existing curricular needs).

We were all excited about the prospect of a cluster hire focused on Blackness and/or Indigeneity; we discussed how, if it were to happen, the cluster hire could help launch a Black and Indigenous Studies program. But the failure of the cluster hire to materialize left us skeptical about the feasibility of creating a Black and Indigenous Studies program staffed with only a handful of faculty of color. **Without a deep investment in hiring faculty of color in critical Black and Indigenous studies, a new program will be significantly impoverished.**

At the same time, we are committed to finding a way to signal to current and future students that RAES is a program that foregrounds both Blackness and Indigeneity. We asked: How can we make our existing program cohere around Indigeneity and Blackness? How can we structure a program where both concepts are central and serve a generative function? We discussed the value and limitations of a couple models:

- Keeping the current model, with some changes to its description to better communicate its offerings to students

- Maintaining Race and Ethnic Studies as the program name and broad conceptual framework but restructuring it to give students “track” options in Critical Black Studies; Indigenous and Settler Colonial Studies; Racism and Ethnicity studies
- Replacing RAES with a single one of these tracks
- Renaming the program Indigenous, Race, and Ethnic Studies (IRES) and restructuring its electives and major requirements

We ended up finding consensus on IRES for numerous reasons. While there was interest in the tracks model, we worried that it would ironically disentangle Blackness and Indigeneity, suggesting that a student could pursue these fields separately. The tracks option makes the major more complicated to advise (for faculty) and to understand/complete (for students), and might also hinder the possibility of building a sense of cohort among the majors. On the other hand, the addition of Indigenous makes it clear that the program foregrounds Indigeneity (and the concerns that surround it, namely the ways in which remedy to Indigenous injury does not operate along the liberal axis of inclusion/exclusion) in its curricular vision. Adding a third term to the program name also helps dispel some lingering binary perceptions of “race” and “ethnicity” as about “biology” and “culture” respectively (when these categories take on different meanings in different contexts and are, moreover, frequently entangled with one another).

We also found this model more sustainable given our current resources. In addition to current course offerings on the books across departments, the likely hire in Politics of a position in Global Indigenous politics will also solidify the offerings in the Whitman curriculum that deal significantly with Indigeneity. The RAES program is also planning to work two new courses into its rotation in the near future: Global Indigeneities (RAES 2xx) and “Settler Colonialism and Native Resistance” (RAES 2xx).

We are also making several recommendations for the RAES steering committee to take up this spring:

- Change the program title from RAES to IRES.
- Provide a new description of the major that centers Blackness and Indigeneity (we developed some preliminary language for the committee to use)
- Cross-list a number of selected courses with IRES (we identified several courses—such as POL 312 “Humanism Europe & Others” and REL 117 “James Baldwin’s America”—that are or will be frequently taught, that and have been intellectually generative for our majors, and that we think should be foregrounded in the new program).
- Revisit and restructure our current major requirements (none of the programs that we’ve looked at have a language requirement, for instance).
- Update and streamline the current list of courses that count for credit in the program (in conversation with contributing departments, using a revamped set of criteria for inclusion).

All of the RAES steering committee members participated in this PIG and plan to take on these next steps in the first weeks of the spring term.