

17. The Region's Politics, Economics, and Social History

“This is a study about quiescence and rebellion in a situation of glaring inequality. Why, in a social relationship involving the domination of a non-élite by an élite, does challenge to that domination not occur? What is there in certain situations of social deprivation that prevents issues from arising, grievances from being voiced, or interests from being recognized? Why, in an oppressed community where one might intuitively expect upheaval, does one instead find, or appear to find, quiescence? Under what conditions and against what obstacles does rebellion begin to emerge?”

— John Gaventa,
Power and Powerlessness

CLP sites typically include courses which give students a strong understanding of their local social, economic and political contexts. While these courses vary significantly, all deepen their students' knowledge of their regions, including lessons from the history of past and present efforts to expand opportunities for marginalized people. These courses also develop the students' analytic skills, enabling them to better analyze and tackle new situations as they face them in the future.

For example, DeAnza College's course introduces students to the history of Silicon Valley where they live, starting with the early Native American tribes, the Mexican colonial period, the American conquest, changing patterns of agriculture, the growth of San Jose and the tech revolution that has transformed the region into "Silicon Valley" over the last twenty years.

CD Tech's course on the "History of Community Development in Los Angeles" reviews the history of struggle over successive periods of deindustrialization and neighborhood decline, redlining and disinvestment, and, more recently, gentrification and displacement.

These courses emphasize the struggles which faced disadvantaged people and how they have organized to cope with those issues. They therefore provide very useful background for devising strategies for bringing about positive change in those communities.

Courses covering these topics come with different labels and are taught by people from different disciplines. DeAnza's course studies the interplay between economics and politics. CD Tech's course focuses primarily on regional housing, economic and community development issues. The University of Baltimore responded to Freddy Gray's slaying by quickly creating a course on "Divided Baltimore", examining the city's deep racial divides on issues ranging from criminal justice to housing to jobs. Importantly, UB invited community residents, local high school students, civic leaders, and foundations as well as their own students to come to a series of seminars with officials from different city departments to discuss the role of race, racism, and discrimination in, for example, policing and schooling. They then met in small groups to learn by exploring possible remedies.

In these courses, students engage in reading, class discussions, learning exercises and the development of projects to help them achieve the following learning objectives:

- Developing an initial understanding of the demographic, economic and political contexts in which public and private institutions make decisions which determine how people live and what opportunities are open to them.
- Developing an understanding of the roles of local government, major public and private institutions, and corporations in determining opportunities within the region.
- Becoming familiar with different approaches which have been pursued by low-income people and others to bring about community change and policy reform, and the challenges and opportunities such efforts have encountered.

- Gaining skills in analyzing whatever context they may face in the future so they can devise strategies which maximize their success in bringing about positive change.

DeAnza College's course on the "region's political economy" is aimed at giving students a deeper understanding of where they live – their neighborhoods, the broader community, the region. What is “Silicon Valley”? What are its different components including older neighborhoods in San Jose, migrant communities and the booming high-tech parts of the Valley? How does it function as a region, or does it? How are decisions made and who makes them? What roles do various communities play?

The course examines the history and politics of economic development in San Jose, the agricultural areas and the newer cities of Silicon Valley, with a particular focus on the housing, employment and social consequences of economic growth. This focus allows students to explore the broader dynamics of political conflict in the region and the vital and difficult choices faced by people in public office as well as those organizing on the issues. The course begins with an overview of the geographic and historical context and reviews several critical political struggles that have shaped patterns of growth and the distribution of opportunities within the region.

The course moves among three poles of analysis: an account of the economic forces which shape growth, an account of the dynamics of political power, and an analysis of the history of community organizing and advocacy to advance the interests of people who have historically had little power. It concentrates most heavily on the following topics:

- An historical overview of San Jose and Silicon Valley.
- Patterns of employment, race and income.
- The growth of high-tech business and the decline of older industries.
- Agriculture, agribusiness and farmworker issues.
- Housing, displacement and transportation justice issues.
- Environmental justice and health inequities.
- Faith-based organizing and other community organizing for social justice.
- Immigrant rights and racial/ethnic community organizing.
- Workplace, farmworker and other labor organizing.

Students read about 25-45 pages for each class, and at one time individual students were asked to take on responsibilities as discussion leaders, summarizing, reflecting on and leading discussion on each set of readings. They participated in choosing the topics they would concentrate on, with their instructor helping them prepare to frame the discussion and questioning. While this taught discussion leaders valuable skills and led to them putting extra effort into the reading and analysis, the instructor found that some others slacked off and skipped the reading. He therefore intensified his questioning of students who were not leading the discussion. He also adjusted the balance between student-led discussions and lectures, lecturing more frequently because he found some students feel they learn more if he plays a stronger role in leading discussion.

All students are required to devote at least 12 hours to a "community engagement research project and presentation". This is time spent with an organization or campaign addressing a social, economic or political problem in Silicon Valley. The students are to write up their experience and make a class presentation on it.

Students take a social justice field trip, visiting various organizations and observers of social justice organizing in San Jose. They meet with organizers, priests and community leaders from various organizing campaigns, reaching back as far as the Community Services Organization in the 1950s through contemporary faith-based organizing involving the IAF and Faith in Action (formerly PICO) community organizing networks.

Guest speakers are an important part of the curriculum, including organizers and issue specialists whose backgrounds add to the richness of the background on the history of struggle in the region. Videos of case studies of organizing campaigns and major community issues are also used for instruction.

As a midterm project, students prepare a photo-essay on a community issue of their own choosing. This gives students some background in social anthropology and makes them more aware of how they have experienced inequality. They create visual documentation of a neighborhood, an urban ethnographic depiction of some aspect of community life such as income level. They prepare a visual presentation of perhaps 20-25 pictures or a video.

The DeAnza course benefits greatly from its ability to attract student leaders, including leaders in the Student Senate and student organizations like the immigrant rights and antitoxic campaigns. These students are incipient organizers and are particularly interested in getting a stronger understanding of the history and politics of the communities where they live.

“In student government, eight of us have been preparing next fiscal year’s \$1.1 million budget. This class directly taught me that equity programs and advocacy groups deserve a voice, and we should empower marginalized communities. I am lobbying for those voices by working to offer better funding for their programs.”

— DeAnza
College student

In Los Angeles, where the nonprofit community planning and technical assistance organization CD Tech designed the Degree program in Community Planning, the course on the **History of Community Development in Los Angeles** is rooted in the history of community-based efforts to improve housing, job and business opportunities, community health and climate justice in South Central and the larger LA region.

CD Tech Director Benny Torres’ goal for the course is to “give students of how we got here, how these issues have developed over decades, what struggles there have been, and why we need to fight”. How did the Los Angeles region come to be a place of such extreme contrasts? The course explores the history of constantly changing demographics and patterns of community development by tracing several primary themes – migration and racial change, rapid growth, racial steering, disinvestment and decline, exploding land values and gentrification, climate change and sustainability.

Students explore the ongoing problems which have resulted from short-sighted development policies and policies which are influenced by the race, class and socioeconomic status of a neighborhood. Students examine how those policies are made and who the decision-makers are. They also learn about alternate approaches to development which engage community residents in planning and incorporate community voices in development decisions.



A forerunner of the DeAnza program at San Francisco State University emphasizes the role of politics and involves a team of instructors with extensive, but widely varied, experience. The "Politics of San Francisco" was taught by a team which at one time included, three community activists, a former deputy mayor, and a university professor.

SFSU students are joined by nonprofit staff and community leaders who attended the course through the university's extension program for a much-reduced fee of \$100. The community-based students earn four units of upper division University credit. Together they study the recent political history of the City with a particular focus on the economic and social context within which policy debates and political engagement have emerged.

The course is unique in that many issues they study directly involved persons teaching the course. Indeed, three instructors were major participants in the land use and development struggles of the past twenty years, often sharply at odds with one another. The course thus allows students to revisit those debates through the eyes and analyses of actual participants and forces students to confront the clash of what "decent opposites".

Each SFSU student is required to secure an intern placement with an agency which has a staff-member enrolled in the course. All students are required to participate in a research/action project as a member of a working group which then collaborates in a research project which results in an analytic piece and a public presentation of their work. Topics always include data analysis, typically of

a demographic, economic or public opinion data linked to a current planning or political issue.

CLP's local partners have found the Regional Studies framework provides them with great opportunities for shaping highly creative courses which enable students and community leaders to develop their analytic skills, their understanding of local politics and history, and their grasp of how government policy, economic forces and vulnerable communities interact in their region, and how they have affected their lives. Through study, discussion and debate, they can sharpen their critical thinking skills and their capacity to assess the strategies of different actors in the politics and economics of the region.

This type of course can be an excellent vehicle for recruiting students into considering a major or Certificate in Community Change Studies. "Divided Baltimore" was an example of how a course can be shaped to build on a dramatic, galvanizing issue to attract students who might not be drawn by an initial course in Community Organizing or Community Development.

Such a course can also be cross-disciplinary, involving faculty from different departments in collaborating in teaching how community engagement, leadership and change management strategies and skills are key to each of their fields of study and practice.

While CLP's work with community leaders and faculty at Morgan State University didn't come to fruition, our design for an introductory course furnishes an example of how such an interdisciplinary course can be constructed. See *Appendix D for course outline.*

"The government they devised was defective from the start, requiring several amendments, a civil war and momentous social transformation to attain the system of constitutional government, and its respect for the individual freedoms and human rights, we hold as fundamental today."

— Thurgood Marshall
