Starting in fall 2011 students entering the Bachelor of Arts Completion program in the School of Undergraduate Studies will have the opportunity to select critical psychology as an academic focus.

Critical psychology reflects various theoretical and ideological approaches to psychology that are deeply concerned with social justice. It is not a subdiscipline of psychology, such as developmental psychology, social psychology, or counseling psychology. Rather it encompasses approaches taken by researchers, activists, and practitioners within these and other subdisciplines of psychology. Traditional psychology has historically begun and ended its analysis with the individual. Its main focus has been on the impact of systems on the individual.

As critical psychologists we are interested in the way various institutions—economic, social, and political—impact well-being at a societal level. This includes understanding how systems and constructs such as modernity, capitalism, institutionalized oppression, and “rugged individualism” repeatedly produce large-scale despair, dysfunction, and a sense of meaninglessness.

We make explicit how power is unequal in various institutional settings, which results in the status quo being reinforced, with research and practices in the field of mainstream psychology serving to corroborate power imbalances. Similarly, we explore how such systems produce individuals oriented towards ways of being in the world that reproduce domination, oppression, colonization, and environmental destruction.

For the past twenty years, both through my own experiences within the field of psychology and through those of my students from diverse backgrounds, I have found that more often than not students were already asking broader questions that typically could not be supported by the traditional scope of psychology. These questions were informed by their lived experiences that differed from the mainstream. Students who were most inclined to asking larger systems questions tended to be older and/or from historically marginalized groups. For many students, their experiences were only minimally
Recent veterans can now attend CIIS and have most of their tuition paid through the Department of Veterans Affairs’ Yellow Ribbon Program. The program, also called the G.I. Education Enhancement Program or the Post 9/11 GI Bill, covers both tuition and fees for those veterans. Under this program, the Department of Veterans Affairs provides up to seventy-five percent of tuition for those who have served in the armed forces in Iraq and Afghanistan and their families. CIIS covers the remaining tuition.

“We're delighted to offer the benefits of a CIIS education to recent veterans through the Yellow Ribbon program,” says CIIS President Joseph L. Subbiondo. “We welcome and encourage veterans to apply to our BA completion program or our master's degree programs.”

For the 2011–2012 academic year, CIIS has pledged to support up to ten veterans as undergraduates, and five veterans at the master’s level. Veterans who are students are also eligible in California for housing subsidies through the local Department of Veterans Affairs.

For more information on the Yellow Ribbon Program visit the Department of Veteran Affairs’ website at http://gibill.va.gov.

BAC STUDENT PROFILE

J McFetridge

J McFetridge served in the U.S. Air Force for three years until he developed a disability that caused him to be discharged in 2005. As he transitioned to civilian life, his goal was to earn his bachelor’s degree. However, J soon found that traditional schools could not provide him with necessary physical accommodations, causing him to quit school and put his goal on hold. After years of searching for a school that could support him as a veteran with a disability, J finally found the BAC program and enrolled in fall 2010. J feels fortunate that at CIIS not only are his physical needs met, but also his “life experience is valued, not discounted.”

The program’s non-hierarchical model has been a big adjustment after his years in the military, but J appreciates being treated as an equal, an active participant in the educational process. He is also grateful for CIIS’s Yellow Ribbon Program, which provides much-needed financial support beyond the GI Bill. In addition, the CIIS community has embraced Davis, J’s support dog who accompanies him at all times, and this has in turn made J feel welcomed as he finally works toward his goal of earning his bachelor’s degree.
Prior to starting the BAC program, Collette McGruder lived in New York and worked as a photographer. Reflecting back on that time, Collette says, “Everything was okay, but the idea of not finishing my undergrad degree bothered me. I wanted a shift in my life.” She also wanted a different experience from the schools she’d attended where she’d just “learned and regurgitated information.” McGruder found the BAC program at CIIS and moved all the way across the country because she could not find a comparable program anywhere else. In addition to the personal growth and sense of community she experienced in the program, McGruder gained a better insight into her own learning process: “I learned how I learned things, how I best absorbed knowledge.” Coming from an art background, McGruder appreciated the opportunities she had to express herself in other media besides writing, and interestingly enough, found that her writing improved because she was processing information through art. With the encouragement to use multiple ways of engaging with the curriculum, McGruder started making short films. Since graduating in August 2010, she has continued to create short films and works as a professional photographer: “My goal is to work with youth by bringing art back as a part of the curriculum through workshops and after school programs.” Her films and photography can be viewed at www.bycollette.com.

Jimena Quiroga “did not just want to have a piece of paper” for her undergraduate degree program. She wanted a meaningful education in which she could bring her life experience and her knowledge from eight years of working at a nonprofit organization, where she conducted trainings and research on equity and diversity in education. She also wanted to bring her interests in social justice and in spiritual healing, and to learn how to integrate these two important but still separate aspects of her life. After years of searching, Quiroga found the right match in the BAC program at CIIS. She was able to relate her learning directly to her career and interests. She also felt personally empowered as faculty encouraged her to “take stock of how much experience and skills I was bringing; they pushed me to look at what I do know.” Since graduating in spring 2009, Quiroga has gone on to start ThrivePoint Group (www.thrivepointgroup.org), an educational consulting group that provides professional development to educators so they can effectively engage youth of color. She is also starting her own hypnotherapy practice, and finally feels that she can bridge the two worlds of social justice and spiritual healing in her work and in her life.
Having faith in human beings is not an action one can take; it is a belief one must hold. It must, as Brazilian educator Paulo Freire reminds us, come from the heart: “You need to love.” It is important to remember that while Freire’s critical pedagogy is one of the fundamental influences on the educational practice in the School of Undergraduate Studies at CIIS, the practitioner’s relationship with that practice is as important as the practice itself. The belief that our students can learn and grow and change—regardless of their age or background—is what shapes our approach to teaching and learning.

Because of our belief in the capacities of our students, we have viewed learning as a collaborative process from the beginning.

And especially because we have recruited and admitted a largely adult student population (the average age is in the mid-thirties), we are able to rely as much on their knowledge and experience as on that of our faculty teams.

Our educational goal is not simply to deposit knowledge into the brains of our students, what Freire calls the “banking system” of education. Instead it is our goal to enhance their capacities for critical engagement with their knowledge and experience. First, the banking system of depositing and withdrawing information is inherently disempowering to the student, assuming as it typically does, that the student is at best ignorant. Second, in the multicultural information age it begs the question of what knowledge is to be deposited. Half a millennium ago when the idea of the university emerged, it was possible for the educated person to determine what were all the important books ever published and then read them. Today even a serious scholar is hard pressed to keep up with all the significant publications in her field. New fields and knowledge emerge constantly. Many of the jobs our graduates will be applying for in ten years do not even exist now. How can we know what particular knowledge will be relevant? What we can assist our students in doing is knowing how to find information, make discerning judgments about its validity, and engage critically with it to determine its relevance and utility in their lives.

Therefore, we do not prescribe that students know a particular set of facts or read a particular canon. Instead we work with our students to identify their own learning goals and assist them in meeting them. In this way we affirm the value of what they bring to the endeavor as well as their ability to succeed. There are several key elements to this approach to learning.

First, we work to promote a critical relationship with all knowledge, in particular the assumptions that the students have developed in the course of their lives. We term this process of assumption analysis, “critical reflection.” Students are asked to identify the a priori assumptions, whether their own or those implicit in a text, and challenge them. Next, students identify and challenge the contexts that give rise to the assumptions. Then they are asked to imagine alternatives to these assumptions. Challenging assumptions does not necessarily mean that they are wrong; indeed the process of considering them may affirm them as often as reframing them.

Second, our approach is to see all the activities as opportunities for students to learn what is important to them. For instance, in the first semester all students are asked to write a research paper on the nature of the self. In our readings and class discussions we consider the self from multiple perspectives, such as psychological, sociological, biological, spiritual, and literary. Individual students pursue a perspective
COLLABORATIVE EDUCATION IN THE SCHOOL OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDIES

that has particular interest for them. Perhaps, as many of our students do, they want to pursue a degree in psychotherapy or counseling. In such cases they may wish to look at the self through a particular psychological school of thought or to view the impact on the self of a specific psychological condition. Others may choose a particular faith tradition, political framework, or social location.

Further, the opportunity extends beyond simply the choice of subject matter to form and approach. While in many educational environments it is—implicitly—the students’ task to intuit what the faculty want them to do, we reverse this dynamic. When students submit their papers, the goal of the faculty—and of their fellow students, who also give feedback—is to identify the writers’ objectives for the paper and support them in reaching those objectives.

Finally, we emphasize collaboration. This is evident in a classroom experience that is collaborative between faculty and students, and in our curriculum that requires students to work and learn collaboratively. We believe it is especially important that our students enhance their skills in working and learning across differences: differences in beliefs, differences in life experience, differences in social background.

We believe that these are the skills necessary for the world around us today. And our practice of education intentionally models and mirrors these skills. And first and foremost must remain our faith in human beings.

“To be a good liberating educator you need above all to have faith in human beings.” —Paulo Freire
Beginning in fall 2011, students can select a Writing Focus when they enter the BA Completion program at CIIS. The Writing Focus will offer classes both in expository and imaginative writing. In this focus, students become proficient in new techniques and writing strategies, hone their craft, and expand capacities to read and respond as writers. They develop practical skills and knowledge in editing and publishing, grant writing, and writing web copy. The Writing Focus is an ideal choice for someone thinking of a career as a web content manager, editor, or creative writer.

“We’re thrilled to offer this new focus,” says School of Undergraduate Studies Director Michelle Eng. “We always have students who get excited about writing through the program. This will give students interested in writing a chance to deepen their exploration of what they’re learning at CIIS. We also have several faculty members who are successful, professional writers and highly experienced teachers of writing. They’re eager to teach the new courses in the focus.”

To declare the Writing Focus in the BAC program, students must have these lower-division prerequisites: two courses (or a minimum of six units) in composition with a grade of B or better, one course (of three units) in either creative writing or literature, and a writing sample.

Critical psychology does not just call into question the level of analysis employed by traditional psychology, but also research assumptions. We call into question “taken-for-granted” knowledge and how knowledge has been acquired. We recognize that the field of psychology has emerged within a specific sociocultural historical context that has been dominated by middle-class European and American males using positivist methodologies that are deeply entrenched in a colonial mindset. Whereas scientific neutrality is assumed in traditional psychological research, critical psychologists recognize that research can never be neutral, that it, too, is produced within a sociocultural context. We work towards more participatory research, drawing from indigenous and decolonial methodologies. These can include participatory action research, narratives, reframing, restoring, resistance, and envisioning, to name a few. In general, we wish to make more explicit the aims of our research, clearly articulating who stands to benefit, whose interest it serves, who was involved in the process, and how the information will be made accessible. Our research is informed first by the communities we serve.

Our Critical Psychology Focus in the BAC program will blend nicely both with our undergraduate interdisciplinary curriculum and with a number of our existing graduate programs, especially those already addressing diversity and social justice. In general, students in the Critical Psychology Focus will practice critical thinking. They will be repeatedly encouraged to engage in deep, conscious exploration of their own values and assumptions; and how these can be replicated in their research, activities, and practices. This general approach prepares them for graduate work in various fields. Aside from the above, our focus in Critical Psychology will be distinctive in that spirituality will also be explored.

Within many spiritual traditions, social justice and spirituality are not separate. We see this in liberation theology, mujerista theology, Zapatista spiritualities, as well as the writings of Eastern spiritual leaders such as Thich Nhat Hahn. At CIIS we are strongly positioned to inform new directions in critical psychology that recognize that, just as race, class, gender, and sexuality intersect to create distinct experiences in society, so do spiritualities.

For more information on this new academic focus please contact:
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For more on critical psychology, please see:
http://www.dennisfox.net/critpsy/index.html
Michelle Eng, MA, is the director of the School of Undergraduate Studies at CIIS. She has more than fourteen years of experience in higher education, as both an administrator and faculty member. She earned her undergraduate and graduate degrees in English literature from the University of Hawaii, Manoa. Prior to joining CIIS, Eng served as assistant dean of students at Chaminade University of Honolulu, where she developed the curriculum for the First Year Experience course, which focuses on topics of transitioning to college, cultural sensitivity awareness, career planning, and community service. She has also taught writing and literature at TransPacific Hawaii College, Chaminade University, and the University of Hawaii.

Targol Mesbah, PhD, is an adjunct associate professor in Interdisciplinary Studies and has been teaching at CIIS since 2008. She received her BA in film studies from the University of California, Irvine and her MA and PhD degrees in history of consciousness at University of California, Santa Cruz, where she studied poststructuralist philosophy, psychoanalysis, and media studies. She is currently working on a book manuscript based on her dissertation *Why Does the Other Suffer?: War, Trauma, and the Everyday*. Her interests include critiques of the normalizing effects of biopower and its implications for decolonizing work in human rights, experimental media, critical pedagogy, and multilingual literacy. In addition to teaching the core curriculum in Interdisciplinary Studies, she teaches courses in film and media studies. She also works as a consultant, editor, translator, and photographer. Mesbah has also taught at the University of California, Santa Cruz and New College, and has appeared as guest lecturer at various institutions including California College of the Arts and Harvard University.

Alec MacLeod, MFA, core faculty member, has more than twenty years of experience in higher education. He was a member of the team that designed the undergraduate degree completion program at CIIS, and served as the program’s inaugural director. He received his undergraduate education at Hampshire College, where he studied philosophy and fine arts. MacLeod also holds an MFA in sculpture from Stanford University and has studied information science at the University of California, Berkeley. His current areas of interest include explorations of culture through the use of language, visual explorations of theories of perception, and pedagogies for multicultural education.

Sandra M. Pacheco, PhD, is a core faculty member and associate professor in the School of Undergraduate Studies. She received her doctorate from University of California, Santa Cruz in psychology. She is a critical social psychologist who engages in topics related to social justice, making explicit the manner in which mainstream psychology compromises well-being and reinforces the status quo. She specializes in Chicana/Latina/indigenous spirituality and feminisms, borderland theories, decolonial methodologies, and alternative pedagogies. Her research in feminisms and spirituality explores the use of narratives to subvert dominant discourse, especially among women of color living between cultural borders where identity and meaning are continually negotiated. She is currently working on a manuscript exploring Chicana spirituality in higher education, drawing on Gloria E. Anzaldua’s theories of spiritual activism.

Sonya Shah, MFA, core faculty member, holds a BA in visual arts from Brown University and an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where she was a Jacob Javits Fellow. She held a Fulbright Fellowship in India in 1996. As an educator, she is dedicated to developing progressive pedagogy, teaching, and learning. She has been teaching for fifteen years. As a media artist, she has produced community outreach programming for KQED public radio and television in San Francisco. Her most recent documentary, *Something Between Her Hands*, examines the growing problem of sex work and labor for women in Southeast Asia. As a literary artist, she is currently working on a collection of essays and articles. Her most recent works have been published in *Sou’wester* and *The Rambler*. 
Each semester I attend the School of Undergraduate Studies (SUS) orientation to welcome new students and to tell them about the services of the Dean of Students Office. I always ask how many students in the room have been to three or more colleges before coming to CIIS, and at least 50% of students in the room raise their hand. I assure students that this will more than likely be the last stop on their way to getting a BA degree. SUS has a graduation rate higher than 80%. This is in part because it’s a twelve-month program that most students complete in three semesters, inclusive of summer; other bachelor’s completion programs often take much longer.

The most important thing I like to tell students at orientation is that I will see them at their SUS closing ceremony in three semesters. Many students don’t believe me. Three semesters later, I attend the closing ceremony. As I’m passing out gifts with Michelle Eng, the program director, shaking hands and hugging students as they walk across the stage to the applause of family and friends, I whisper in their ear, “Remember when I told you I’d see you here?” Most smile, nod, or shake their head in recollection. Students complete because the SUS pedagogy (way of teaching) is unique.

The closing ceremony is one of the most moving experiences that I’ve witnessed in the course of my time at CIIS. Family and friends offer testimony and congratulations to students who have finally arrived at this moment of receiving their degree. There are lots of tears, rejoicing, and celebration. It’s one of those triumphant moments that marks a person’s life. Each graduate can say, “I’ve run the race, I’ve finished the course, I’ve crossed the finish line, and now I can move on to the next phase of my life, a new job, graduate school, a family—but this part is behind me.”

As dean of students, I would like to assure you that CIIS stands willing and ready to offer you the support you need to complete your degree and accomplish your goal at long last.