**Multiculturalism in Higher Education - Demographics and Debates about Inclusion, An Aerial View of National Diversity Requirements**

Bottom of Form

There have always been debates about what knowledge should be included in the general education curriculum (often referred to as the *core curriculum*). However, since the mid-1960s the debate has focused largely on the inclusion of racial, ethnic, women, gay, and lesbian voices in the curriculum. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the debate is not whether to do it, but how. Although many terms over the years have been used, such as *multiculturalism, multicultural education,* and *ethnic studies,* the term *diversity* will be used here. A more encompassing term, *diversity* is meant to represent all perspectives from groups that have traditionally been excluded from or insufficiently examined in the curriculum. The term also takes into account the external forces that influence how academic institutions meet their educational objectives. The legal struggle over affirmative action in admissions, for example, no longer rests on moral grounds of remedy for past discrimination, but on the compelling interest of the state in the educational value of having a diverse student body.

**Demographics and Debates about Inclusion**

Since the end of World War II, U. S. colleges and universities have become increasingly more diverse (by social class, race, gender, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, and people with disabilities), even though some of these changes have often been fiercely resisted. Some demographic changes occurred not simply because of federal troops but also because of federal legislation. In the 1940s the G. I. Bill made college affordable for vast numbers of working-class men. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 opened the door of academia to African Americans and other people of color, while the Immigration Act of 1965 opened U.S. borders to new sections of the globe. Title IX radically altered how women fared on campuses, just as the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 removed barriers that previously barred many aspiring students. Other demographic shifts were fueled by policy changes or new programs, such as the establishment of community college systems, the creation of programs of continuing education for women, and the creation of the Equal Opportunities Commission. By the end of the twentieth century higher education had actually come close to fulfilling democracy's highest goal of an educated citizenry. In 2000 nearly 75 percent of high school graduates went on to some college experience within two years of graduating. The student profile in the late 1990s was 55 percent female and 28 percent students of color. Forty-three percent of students were over 25 years old, and nearly that same percentage were first generation college students.

Paralleling the shifting demographics of the students was the persistent call for inclusion of diverse perspectives in the curriculum. These calls have come not only from the groups that were previously excluded, but also from faculty, students, business leaders, and the general public. In a public poll of registered voters in 1998, the ordinary citizen was overwhelmingly in favor of diversifying students, faculty, and the courses taught. While 58 percent were concerned that the United States was splitting apart over differences, 71 percent believed that higher education could, and should, help people find a way to bring people together. Although Americans might differ in their rationales for broader inclusion, there is consensus overall about the intellectual, individual, economic, and societal benefits for doing so.

Calls for inclusion stem from the argument that a singular, Eurocentric perspective has had negative consequences for individual students and for the larger society. Proponents of diversity in higher education argue that excluding diverse perspectives in the curriculum has truncated students' learning, leaving them ill-prepared to function in an increasingly diverse democracy. The very purpose of higher education–to deepen students' understanding of what is known, how it has come to be known, and how to build on previous knowledge to create new knowledge–is thus undermined by eliminating the voices of those whose experiences differ from those traditionally represented. Such exclusions reveal an inconsistency between the rhetoric and the practice of democracy. Correcting this inconsistency eventually became the cornerstone of the civil rights, women's rights, and other movements that have pushed the higher education community to offer a more inclusive curriculum.

Conversely, opponents of diversity in the curriculum argue against including African American, Latina/Latino, Chicano, Asian American, women's, and gay and lesbian studies in the higher education curriculum, claiming that these issues are more appropriately discussed and debated in the political arena rather than in academia. They contend that institutions of higher education should be reserved for the pursuit of objective knowledge and truth through rigorous disciplinary study. Critics of diversity education claim that the focus on differences, which is often a characteristic of general-education diversity requirements, weakens national unity and has only a limited (if any) role in institutions of higher learning. They contend that the curriculum of higher education should be the basis for inquiry, discovery, and dissemination of knowledge, open to students capable of contributing to its development, and devoid of social politics.

As the debate about inclusion grew louder, the research on, and practice of, diversity education has accelerated greatly over the years. Initially, diversity in the 1960s and 1970s was located primarily in newly established special departments and programs, usually organized around a single group, such as Asian-American studies, women's studies, or African-American studies. By the 1980s these specialized areas of knowledge eventually spawned hundreds of programs at colleges and universities in what came to be called *mainstreaming, integrating,* or *transforming* the curriculum. Such programs sought to incorporate new knowledge into existing courses, some of which were within a major course of study, others of which were in general education courses.

Eventually, the research on multicultural education began to lay out a compelling case that being attentive to diverse voices provides lenses through which richer conceptions of social, political, economic, and natural phenomenon could be revealed, underscoring that there are many ways of knowing. During the 1980s and 1990s in particular, colleges and universities moved from infusing diversity across the curriculum to also creating diversity requirements within their core curriculum. While a general education requirement alone is insufficient in and of itself to prepare students for the complexity of the diverse societies they will work and live in, it is a solid and significant start.

Before examining the emerging contours of twenty-first-century diversity requirements, it is important to recognize their context within general education as a whole. Some institutions, such as Wesleyan University in Connecticut, Bloomfield College in New Jersey, and Brookdale Community College in New Jersey, have invested significant institutional funds over many years in what they argue is a more pervasive strategy of infusion across the curriculum, rather than relying on a single required diversity course in general education. Nonetheless, because students take a prescribed number of general education courses, lodging diversity within core requirements is one visible indicator of an institution's commitment to diversity. While it is not the only measure, or even a sufficient measure, embedding diversity within general education makes a clear statement that knowledge about diversity is viewed as an essential component of a college education.

**An Aerial View of National Diversity Requirements**

The first formal adoption of a diversity requirement in the general education core occurred at Denison University in Ohio in 1979. By 1992, however, a survey conducted by researchers Richard Light and Jeanette Cureton reported that 34 percent of colleges and universities had multicultural general education requirements, 12 percent of which were on domestic diversity; 29 percent on global diversity; and 57 percent addressing both. Of those colleges queried, one-third offered course work in ethnic and women's studies, while a far greater number–54 percent–had introduced multiculturalism into their departmental course offerings. It is not surprising that there is more activity at departmental levels than at general education levels, since, in most cases, general education needs majority support from the faculty to secure approval. But departmental activity is unevenly dispersed and some departments and divisions have almost no multicultural courses or requirements.

Light and Cureton also found that four-year colleges are more active than two-year colleges in integrating multiculturalism into the curriculum, despite the greater diversity of the student body in community colleges. While demographics clearly drive the push for diversity requirements and courses, they are, it seems, not the only factor. Public institutions exceed private colleges in the number of multicultural indicators, just as research universities have more comprehensive multicultural efforts than either comprehensives or liberal arts colleges. Not surprisingly, geographical regions varied significantly in the amount of multicultural programming, with the Mid-Atlantic states and the West outpacing New England and the South.

In a 2000 national survey about diversity requirements, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) found striking progress among the percentage of colleges and universities polled–the number of institutions with diversity requirements had almost doubled from Light and Cureton's figures in 1992. Sixty-three percent of colleges and universities reported either having a diversity requirement in place or being in the process of developing one. Fifty-four percent of survey respondents had diversity requirements in place; another 8 percent were in the process of establishing them. Of institutions with requirements, 25 percent had been in place for more than ten years, 45 percent had put them in place during the previous five to ten years, and 30 percent had requirements in place for less than five years. All indications are, therefore, that the number of colleges with diversity requirements is likely to continue to expand.

Regional distinctions were also found in AAC&U's survey. For example, 78 percent of colleges responding from the West had diversity requirements, while 68 percent of those in the Middle States (Mid-Atlantic) region and 60 percent in the North Central region had such requirements. By contrast, only 45 percent of the institutions in the New England region had diversity requirements in 2000, followed by 36 percent of those in the South and 35 percent in the Northwest.

**Incorporating Diversity into General Education Designs**

But what do diversity requirements look like? A majority (58 percent) of institutions with such requirements demand that students take one course; while 42 percent require two or more courses. Not surprisingly, the most common model, surfacing at 68 percent of the AAC&U survey respondents, asks students to take one diversity course among many offerings. Typically these courses examine attitudes and cultures that are different from the dominant culture. At the University of Arizona, students can take a class that focuses on gender, race, class, or ethnicity, while the requirement at the University of Maryland focuses on all those plus non-Western culture as well.

Some institutions include several courses, but more restrictively define their purpose. At the University of Michigan, for instance, while there are many different courses to choose from, each course needs to pay attention to (1) race, racism, and ethnicity; (2) intolerance and resulting inequality; and (3) comparisons across race, religion, ethnicity, religion, social class, or gender. Similarly, Denison University in Ohio, whose requirement dates back to 1979, requires a course on women and/or minorities in twentieth century America that examines the effects of discrimination in the American context. Haverford College in Pennsylvania, whose original 1983 diversity requirement asked that students be introduced either to cultures they did not know or to systems of inequality and discrimination, revised its requirement after ten years to a social justice requirement focused on analyzing systems of inequality and discrimination.

The advantage of a more flexible diversity requirement is that it creates fewer turf battles between departments, is more easily approved by curriculum committees, and often needs less faculty development because the people who already have the expertise in a given area submit their existing courses as possible choices for the diversity requirement. These broad diversity requirements typically involve people across disciplines. When paired with faculty development opportunities, as it is at the University of Maryland, they can be a significant source for change in the curriculum overall, since newly acquired faculty expertise and perspectives will extend beyond the approved general-education diversity courses. The disadvantage of this approach is that without more tightly defined learning goals for the students, it is not always clear exactly what knowledge the institutions want students to acquire from taking such wide-ranging diversity courses. Students taking a course in twelfth-century Chinese art, for example, will learn very different things than those taking a course on the U.S. civil rights movement.

By contrast, only 17 percent of respondents in AAC&U's survey require all students to take a single diversity course that is part of a more tightly defined core curriculum. The great advantage of required cores is that every student is introduced to diversity issues, regardless of their major. Implementing a core curriculum, especially a newly designed one, typically calls for offering faculty development opportunities, which will, as a by-product, result in widespread influence on the content and pedagogy of many other courses outside the core.

Having a required core curriculum seems to work more easily and effectively at smaller institutions, for obvious staffing reason, but there are examples of large research universities implementing core curricula as well. The State University of New York at Buffalo, with approximately 16,000 under-graduate students, has such a core curriculum. After careful piloting and faculty development workshops, it instituted a well-thought-out required core course called "American Pluralism and the Search for Equality." While a variety of different courses meet the curriculum requirement, all such approved courses are united by their commitment to a common set of learning goals for students. Buffalo's 1992 American Pluralism Subcommittee included specifically defined learning goals for students, such as: (1) to develop within students a sense of informed, active citizenship by focusing on contemporary and historical issues of race, ethnicity, gender, social class, and religious sectarianism in American life; (2) to provide students with an intellectual awareness of the causes and effects of structured inequality and prejudicial exclusion in American society; (3) to provide students with increased self-awareness of what it means in our culture to be a person of their own gender, race, class, ethnicity, and religion as well as an understanding of how these categories affect those who are different from themselves; (4) to expand students' ability to think critically, and with an open mind, about controversial contemporary issues; and (5) to provide students with an intellectual awareness of diverse visions of the future as well as processes leading to a more equitable society.

A much smaller institution, St. Edward's University in Texas (approximately 3,300 undergraduates), adopted a fifty-seven-hour core that includes two first-year courses, "The American Experience" and "American Dilemmas." They have also adopted a vertical core that extends from freshman through senior year, thus allowing students opportunities to develop advanced analytical skills and revisit issues over time. By their senior year, students are asked to use insights acquired through their major to solve a pressing social problem as part of their senior culminating education requirement.

Yet another example of an interesting approach to a core diversity requirement is the regionally focused one adopted by the University of Memphis, where the general-education core requirement, "Cultural Confrontations," focuses on the relationships among the three major populations in the mid-South: European Americans, African Americans, and Native Americans. Parallel comparative courses that analyze power and justice can be found in the expanding number of general education courses focused on world cultures.

A newly developing approach to diversity that is located both in general-education diversity courses and in electives and majors focuses on what is called *service learning,* or, less frequently, *community-based learning.* Such credit-bearing courses teach students new intellectual knowledge about diversity, while also providing hands-on experiences that help them become more informed and skilled in creating more just societies. At Rutgers University in New Jersey, the Civic Education and Community Service Program combines community service with academic investigations about how to work alongside people with diverse backgrounds, while also teaching students more about what is needed to sustain an egalitarian, pluralist democracy. Hobart and William Smith Colleges in Connecticut created more than seventeen courses within two years' time that integrated service learning into academic courses that sought to expand students' capacities to be nation builders through a commitment to justice. Wagner College, located on Staten Island in New York, adopted a new curriculum in 1998 that integrates service learning as a thread woven through all four years as part of the general education requirement.

Whatever model is chosen for diversity requirements, courses across all these designs are more frequently organized through a comparative approach between groups, rather than by focusing on a single group alone. Conceptually, more courses also use an integrative analysis by helping students learn how to analyze multiple kinds of intersecting differences, either within a single group (studying gender or ethnic differences within Latinos/Latinas) or across several groups (studying class and religious differences across European Americans, African Americans, and Asian Americans). Diversity courses within general education also more typically explore moral and ethical questions, and are more likely to analyze systems of injustice, intolerance, inequality, and discrimination–as exemplified in Oregon State University's general education course, "Diversity, Power, and Discrimination."

Another emerging characteristic of diversity courses in general education is their interdisciplinary approach and the reliance on collaborative, student-centered pedagogies where intergroup dialogue and engagement are deliberately cultivated. In addition, there are also growing examples of innovative couplings between curricular and cocurricular activities, often but not exclusively incorporating living/learning residential dimensions to enrich classroom experiences. In an effort to escape the too prevalent option of choosing either a course on U.S. diversity or a course on world cultures, there is some evidence that more institutions are seeking ways to explore the interconnections between global and domestic diversity, sometimes by teaching U.S. diversity within a global context.

AAC&U's president, Carol Geary Schneider, argues that diversity requirements are, as she puts it, "filling the curricular 'civic' space once assigned to 'Western Civ.' That is, diversity requirements signal the academy's conviction that in the early twenty-first century citizens need to acquire significant knowledge both of cultures other than their own and of disparate cultures' struggles for recognition and equity" in order to be adequately prepared for the contentious, complex world they face (p. 2). But Schneider asserts more progress needs to be made in developing general education courses that examine diversity in the context of democratic values, histories, and aspirations. Students have too few opportunities to systematically debate the premises and meanings of democracy itself.

**Conclusion**

Despite the remarkable transformation and innovation in general education courses and models since 1980, the job is not done–and rightly so. In the best tradition of academic practices, most institutions would admit they don't always get it right the first time and need to submit their established general education designs to regular critique and assessment. While there has been increasing local and national attention paid to evaluating the impact of diversity courses, assessment needs to be more systematically embedded in the institutional life of the college and its faculty. Moreover, in the distinctively fluid, ever-changing environment of higher education, re-examining the effectiveness of the curriculum is a necessity, especially in light of what has become a common fact that students might attend two or three different institutions before acquiring their college degree.

Getting it right also matters because so much is at stake, both educationally and civically. Research examining the impact of curriculum transformation efforts reveals some significant findings. Several studies, for instance, confirm that serious engagement of diversity in the curriculum and the classroom has a positive impact on attitudes toward racial issues, on opportunities to interact in deeper ways with those who are different, on cognitive development, and on overall satisfaction with institutions. Longitudinal research on the effects of the focused use of intergroup dialogues confirm measurable progress in identity development, more comfort with conflict as a normal part of social life, more positive intergroup interactions, and long-term effects on participation in activities with members of other racial and ethnic groups among dialogue participants.

For all the notably proud progress of U.S. democracy, the United States is a stratified society that continues to be segregated racially in its residential patterns, whether within inner cities or in surrounding suburbia. Higher education is therefore precious mediating public space where, unlike most of American society, different groups live, study, and think side by side. As such, it offers the genuinely authentic daily experience of a multicultural, pluralist, democratic environment. If higher education can seize the rich educational and societal benefits inherent in such a mix, it promises to have far-reaching consequences on the quality of the nation's, and the world's, communal life.

Research has conclusively shown that a racially and ethnically diverse student body has far-ranging and significant benefits for all students. Students learn better in such an environment and are better prepared to become active participants in a pluralistic, democratic society once they leave school. Patterns of racial segregation can be broken by diversity experiences in institutions of higher education.

So it matters that general education courses incorporate diversity in ways that capitalize on the presence of diverse students and the potential for deep and lasting knowledge that affects actions during and after graduation. As Bobby Fong, the president of Butler University, said so eloquently at his inauguration, "The ideal of the academy is to be able to represent fairly the viewpoint of those with whom one most disagrees. But dialogue, however necessary, is not sufficient. The unending conversation is what we must, at all costs, preserve in the academy, but our students need to be equipped for living, in most cases, beyond the academy, in a world where moral decisions, in all their contingency and uncertainty, must be made."

Of course, general education courses cannot carry the intellectual and moral weight of accomplishing all this in one required course, or even in a sequenced series of courses. Each institution needs to take a holistic look at the entire curriculum, the interrelationship between general education and the major, the cumulative kinds of developmental experiences a student might have in progressing towards a degree, and the increasingly complex and demanding questions students are able to pose and answer as they are challenged to use their new knowledge and civic, intercultural capacities to address real-world problems. If students graduate with the ability to think critically, act responsibly, and negotiate borders that might otherwise divide, then higher education will come closer to meeting its historic mission of not only advancing knowledge, but contributing to stable, more equitable democratic societies.

***See also:*** [AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDIES](http://education.stateuniversity.com/pages/1742/African-American-Studies.html); [GAY AND LESBIAN STUDIES](http://education.stateuniversity.com/pages/2003/Gay-Lesbian-Studies.html); [GENERAL EDUCATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION](http://education.stateuniversity.com/pages/2006/General-Education-in-Higher-Education.html); [MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION](http://education.stateuniversity.com/pages/2252/Multicultural-Education.html); [RACE, ETHNICITY, and CULTURE](http://education.stateuniversity.com/pages/2346/Race-Ethnicity-Culture.html); [SERVICE LEARNING](http://education.stateuniversity.com/pages/2414/Service-Learning.html); [WOMEN'S STUDIES.](http://education.stateuniversity.com/pages/2550/Women-s-Studies.html)

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ALMA R. CLAYTON-PEDERSEN

CARYN MCTIGHE MUSIL

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