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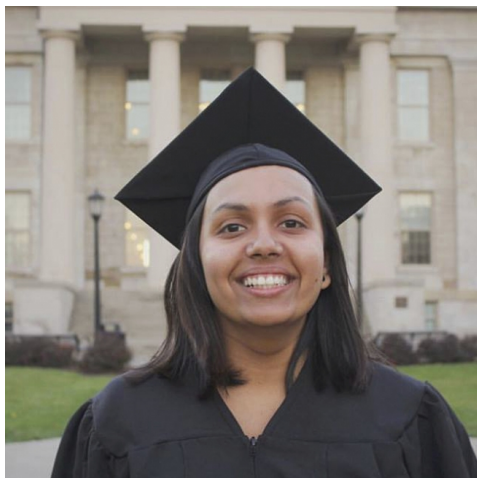
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CURRICULUM

Diversity Courses Are in High Demand. Can They Make a Difference?

By Sarah Brown | JANUARY 07, 2016 ✓ PREMIUM



Sri Ponnada, a former student senator at the U. of Iowa, led efforts recently to persuade the university to tighten its diversity-course requirement. Starting in 2017, nearly all students will have to meet a more-focused diversity-and-inclusion requirement as well as a separate values-and-culture requirement.

When Sri Ponnada arrived at the University of Iowa, in 2012, she immediately noticed a lack of cultural understanding among some of her peers in the classroom. "They would say things like, I never saw a black person before I came to Iowa," Ms. Ponnada, who is Indian, recalled. "And it's probably true, if they're coming from small-town Iowa."

Ms. Ponnada, who graduated in December, loved the university. But while on its campus, she said, she occasionally experienced microaggressions — subtle, offensive comments that made her feel unwelcome. Several racial incidents reinforced her concerns: A Ku Klux Klan-themed sculpture sparked outrage on the

campus in 2014, and around the same time a slew of insults against Asian students appeared on Yik Yak, the anonymous social-media platform.

So last February Ms. Ponnada, then a student senator, sought to address the campus culture by pushing for a change in Iowa's general-education program. She proposed a student-government resolution supporting a restructuring of the university's Values, Society, and Diversity course requirement. She argued that the existing course wasn't specific enough and that students needed an academic space to confront their biases and learn about their differences.

Last month Iowa officials announced that they would do just that. All students in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences will have to satisfy a new, more-focused diversity-and-inclusion requirement, as well as a separate values-and-culture requirement, starting in 2017.

Such mandatory courses are becoming more common. The recent wave of protests over campus racial climates has added fuel to that fire, as many student activists have demanded stronger diversity curricula.

Dozens — perhaps hundreds — of institutions already require their students to take at least one course that explores diversity in some manner. Many colleges have students select from a broad menu of classes that cover issues related to race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, or religion; a smaller group of institutions have focused the requirement more narrowly on racial and ethnic studies.

Some research has indicated that the courses have a positive effect on student attitudes toward other ethnicities and cultures. Still, the classes can be controversial. Some critics argue that the courses are unnecessary and doubt that they produce real results. Other opponents contend that they politicize education by promoting an ideology of social justice.

Learning to Discuss Race

Mandatory diversity courses tend to surface as a result of student protests, said Shaun R. Harper, director of the Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education at the University of Pennsylvania. "Very rarely are these diversity requirements born out of the goodness of the hearts of faculty who just want to do it because it's the right thing to do," he said.

The idea behind the courses is to broaden students' cultural horizons and give them the skills to interact in an increasingly pluralistic society — skills that many of them did not obtain before enrolling in college.

Some students say such gaps in understanding have become more noticeable at their colleges in the past three months as racial tensions have escalated.

Denys Reyes, a senior at Claremont McKenna College — where activists recently forced the dean of students to resign after she sent a controversial email that went public — said she and other student organizers "are having to teach our own student body how to talk about race, because they just don't know how." The California college has no diversity-course requirement, but adding one is among the activists' demands.

By some accounts, the scope of research on diversity curricula is limited, but most studies have found that taking a course exploring some aspect of diversity or race positively affects how students view people of other cultures and backgrounds.

Mitchell J. Chang, a professor of education and of Asian-American studies at the University of California at Los Angeles who has researched diversity curricula, said evidence shows that the courses also improve students' civic engagement.

"These requirements, for those who know little about them, may appear to be purely a political act to appease students," Mr. Chang said in an email. But, he said, he and

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others have found that "fulfilling such a requirement can expose students to academic materials that prepare them for the future in ways that higher education has not yet widely pursued in such a targeted way."

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Camille Z. Charles, a professor of sociology and chair of the Africana-studies department at Penn, was among the faculty members who supported the creation of a diversity-course requirement about a dozen years ago. Throughout her nearly 20 years at the university, she said, some students have entered her class on racial and ethnic relations doubtful of diversity's importance in society — and many of them leave the class less certain of their earlier convictions.

"I may not completely change students' minds by the end of the semester," she said, "but they are more open, and they know how to have these conversations without being insensitive and disrespectful." Students who are already attuned to issues of diversity also benefit, she added, by becoming better listeners.

How to Define Diversity?

At most institutions with diversity-course requirements, students can choose from a range of classes in different departments that cover some aspect of cultural diversity. But Penn's Mr. Harper questioned whether such broad definitions — where "just about anything qualifies" — are adequate, especially right now.

When this reporter mentioned that she had met a curricular diversity requirement with a class called "Sport and American History," Mr. Harper was skeptical. "Doesn't it then suggest," he asked, "that if you're going to learn about people of color, you're going to learn about them in a sports class?"

Ms. Reyes agreed. For instance, she said, a course that covers Japanese history in America might talk about Japanese-Americans mostly in the context of their internment during World War II. "That's not enough," she said. "You need to understand why those things happened and how they relate to today — not just race, but power structures and privilege."

A handful of colleges have more narrowly defined their mandatory courses. At Scripps College, in California, students have been required to take a class focused on race and ethnicity for 25 years, said Julie E. Liss, a professor of history and interim dean of the faculty.

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A range of courses qualify, Ms. Liss said, but the explicit goal is to address the systemic discrimination and exploitation of certain ethnic groups in the United States and relate such issues to contemporary experiences. "Race in Popular Culture and Media" and

and privilege!

"Chicanos/Latinas and Education" are among the classes that count, while "United States History to 1865" does

not.

Matthew E. Hill, an associate professor of anthropology at Iowa, led the committee that initially examined the proposed change in the institution's diversity requirement.

When committee members looked at how other colleges had structured their diversity courses, Mr. Hill said, they found that some small liberal-arts colleges required students to take one specific class that addressed race and ethnicity. That wasn't feasible for a large public university like Iowa, he said.

Still, the committee ultimately decided that narrowing the scope of Values, Society, and Diversity was important, he said. Courses like "King Arthur Through the Ages" and "Food in America" qualified under that broad designation. For a short time, even physical-education courses — including one on table-tennis — counted. The concentration "didn't do any one thing very clearly," Mr. Hill said.

Mr. Harper encourages student activists to make their demands for diversity courses more specific. Many activists might want a course that centers on race and ethnicity in contemporary culture, he said, but they "don't have the full language to specify exactly what they mean. They put it all under the banner of a diversity course."

'Political-Correctness Anxiety'

Few faculty members at Iowa bluntly opposed strengthening the diversity-course requirement, Mr. Hill said. The main concerns had to do with logistics, he said — for instance, ensuring that splitting Values, Society, and Diversity into two requirements wouldn't add to the credit hours required for graduation.

Not everyone was on board, though. Ms. Ponnada said that a number of student-government leaders initially told her that a course specifically on diversity wasn't necessary and that most students wouldn't want another general-education requirement.

Those two arguments are common, and they surfaced recently at Claremont McKenna. Ms. Reyes said student activists have sought to solve that problem by structuring their proposed requirement as an overlay. Under their plan, students would have to take a course covering a specific focus — power and privilege, for instance — but that course would also satisfy another general-education requirement.

There are other reservations, too. Peter A. Lawler, a political-science professor at Berry College who describes himself as a postmodern conservative, said that while students should learn about race, gender, and other cultures in college, classifying courses with a "diversity" label is problematic.

"The word 'diversity' is a bureaucratic word invented by the Supreme Court that

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universities now have to use when they're concerned about racial justice," he said. It's become a meaningless term that "masks what we really want to talk about and argue about," he said.

At the University of California at Los Angeles, faculty members voted down diversity-course proposals in 2004 and 2012.

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During the most recent round of debate there, in 2014 and early 2015, the opposition took two primary forms, said Jerry Kang, the university's vice chancellor for equity, diversity, and inclusion. One was the "standard culture-wars and political-correctness anxiety."

The other doubt, he said, was "disciplinary skepticism." Some professors in engineering, for instance, didn't understand why diversity was an important topic in their disciplines, he said.

When Mr. Kang spoke with unconvinced faculty members, he told them, "I get it." But he tried to present diversity in a frame of conflict and disparity, as an intellectual dilemma "that we need to understand at every level." It wasn't about being politically correct, he said, but about solving a problem that "is unbelievably challenging and important to our mission as a public university."

A requirement eventually won enough faculty support to pass at UCLA. It took effect starting with students who enrolled in the university's College of Letters and Science last fall.

When a college does adopt a requirement, though, UCLA's Mr. Chang said, it's essential for tenure-track faculty members to oversee it.

He said he has noticed a number of institutions where diversity-related courses are largely taught by part-time instructors. Not committing permanent resources to the requirement, he said, "undermines its importance in the long run."

Sarah Brown writes about a range of higher-education topics, including sexual assault, race on campus, and Greek life. Follow her on Twitter @Brown_e_Points, or email her at sarah.brown@chronicle.com.

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