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Advancing Cultural Literacy in the Core Curriculum

As the cultural tapestry of America becomes more variegated and the digital communication revolution narrows global divides, scholarship concerned with cultural pluralism is gaining prominence in the general education curricula of American colleges and universities. Some educators embrace this trend as a critical curricular shift. They argue that engaging students in scholarship, critical discourse, and experiential learning concerned with cultural diversity prepares them to manage the complexities of living in and contributing to a pluralistic society and workplace. But educators from another camp are less enthusiastic. They worry that an increased emphasis on cultural literacy can lead to segregated learning environments. Moreover, some are concerned that cultural literacy may perpetuate zero-sum perceptions, the concept that students may view sensitivity toward select groups and issues as devaluing and denigrating others (Ross and Patton 2000).

The reality of cultural pluralism is not debatable. Diverse cultures coexist in our modern world, and members of different cultures grapple daily to maintain their uniqueness while respecting others' differences. At the core of vigorous debate, however, is the question of *how*, not *whether*, to address cultural pluralism in the general education curriculum.

Researching the State of Cultural Literacy Education

TABLE 1: Departmental share of contribution to cultural literacy in core curriculum*

Department	Percentage
History	21.9
English	20.8
Geography	8.3
Anthropology	7.3
Interdisciplinary Studies	7.3
Political Science	6.3
Sociology	4.1
Art	3

As chair of the Curriculum Advisory Committee of Minority Affairs at the University of West Georgia, I attempted to approach this question by researching current treatments of cultural literacy in the general

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Economics	3
Psychology	3
European Studies	2.1
Gender and Women's Studies	2.1
Humanities	2.1
Social Science	2.1
Chemistry	1.1
Communication	1.1
Criminal Justice	1.1
Health Professions	1.1
Honors	1.1
Music	1.1

** Based on a cohort of ten system institutions within the thirty-five-school University System of Georgia.*

Six Key Questions about Cultural Literacy

1. Does the institution place explicit value on cultural literacy through its general education mission statement?
2. Does the mission statement outline expected cultural literacy outcomes, and does it specify the courses that will fulfill these expectations?
3. Does the institution offer a range of courses in cultural diversity that supports the principles of the mission statement?
4. Do courses that address cultural literacy focus on "macroscopic" issues (such as equity and discrimination) or "microscopic" issues (such as relations between particular groups of people in specific situations)?
5. Does the institution, through its mission statement and course offerings, offer a balanced (in terms of focus) and sustained (over many years) cultural literacy curriculum?
6. Do cultural literacy courses compete with other course requirements, allowing students to circumvent the cultural literacy curriculum?

education curricula of a cohort of peer institutions. My research, which involved ten comprehensive system institutions in Georgia, focused on two particular items: institutional mission and the coursework used to implement that mission. I'm convinced that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to curricular reform. Nevertheless, my analysis suggests that critical benchmark discussions are necessary to position cultural literacy in the general education curriculum.

GENERAL EDUCATION MISSION STATEMENT: General education mission statements drive decisions about where to position courses that attend to cultural diversity. If an institution (or a system of institutions) values cultural literacy, its general

education mission statement should reflect this. The

general education mission statement should stipulate an integration of appropriate courses and define clear learning outcomes for each component of the core. In doing so, the statement may reveal the best curricular approaches to cultural literacy. In some cases, however, institutions may discover that their mission statements do not explicitly value cultural literacy. These institutions must reconsider their mission statements and place greater emphasis on cultural literacy.

COURSE AUDIT: A course audit is essential for an institution trying to evaluate its commitment to cultural literacy. An audit gauges the number and nature of courses that treat cultural diversity in significant depth, and offers a sense of how frequently such courses are scheduled. A successful course audit requires meticulous attention to current and past course catalogs and bulletins. My experience suggests that the audit should comprise at least four years of data to capture a representative sample of the curriculum.

Embedded within the audit task is the presumption that the institution has an operational definition of cultural diversity, as described by its general education mission statement or institutional values. Comparing this working definition with the actual range of courses offered is a substantial part of the task at hand.

For some institutions, the course audit may reveal a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary commitment to examining macroscopic issues: equity, discrimination, prejudice, oppression, and privilege. For other institutions, the audit may reveal a more microscopic focus on the economic, social, and political relationships between societies and particular populaces: white women, women and men of color, or people with disabilities. Whatever the audit reveals, it prepares an institution to move forward by allowing it to understand its current curricular capital.

The Big Picture

I recently conducted a Web site analysis of the general education curricula for the cohort of Georgia institutions under study to explore options for my institution. My research revealed unexpected results. The ten institutions offered a total of ninety-six courses as required or elective cultural literacy options. An overwhelming share of these courses—80.2 percent—centered on global literacy, compared to 10.4 percent that focused on multicultural literacy within the U.S.

In addition to suggesting an imbalance in focus between American and global pluralism, my research indicated an imbalance of disciplines that contribute to cultural literacy in the core curriculum. Twenty programs offered at least one course that centered on cultural diversity within the U.S. or abroad. Yet only five disciplines provided 65.6 percent of the cultural diversity courses (see table 1). My

analysis also indicated that in most cases, students could circumvent cultural literacy courses, choosing instead to fulfill core requirements with other courses within the institutional options, humanities/ fine arts, and social sciences areas.

These findings suggest an important lesson—consider the big picture. An institution's mission statement will be an important factor in the way it implements cultural literacy. Yet institutions must also take care to implement their mission statements in a balanced way throughout the general education curriculum. Cultural literacy should be a true multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary experience. Otherwise, its pedagogical benefits are minimized. Beyond considering their pedagogical approach, institutions must consider how graduates will interact in society. They must balance course offerings to equip their graduates with the requisite knowledge and skill sets to manage the complexity of cultural differences that they will encounter in their future communities and workplaces.

Reference

Ross, F., and J. Patton. 2000. The nature of journalism courses devoted to diversity. *Journalism and Mass Communication Educator* 55 (1): 24–39.

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