
A Need For New Type Of Educational Approach

As the face of the American nation continues to change, American colleges and universities must have an action plan that will ensure students are being prepared for the world they will encounter after graduation. The combination of national diversity, the influx of immigrants, and the ever growing globalization in business and general life requires a new type of educational approach for America's undergraduate and graduate students. By creating and incorporating a course specifically focused on diversity topics, the university will afford students the opportunity to explore their own values and beliefs, learn about national and international concerns and view points, and will broaden their critical thinking and writing skills in order to better understand the needs and demands of the globalized society in which they will work and live.

Nationally, "Americans are becoming more nonwhite and more diverse than ever before" (Rendon, 1). No longer is America a nation based upon black and white. Indeed, the country has grown beyond basic racial categories. More and more of the population is of mixed heritage, with different social and cultural influences prevalent in their lives. "White America" is no longer the "majority" as it was once defined. Instead, America is seeing growth in the African American and Hispanic communities that will change the demographic make-up of the US in drastic proportions over the next quarter to half century. "The birth rate among African Americans is double the national average and for Hispanics it quadruples the national average" (Rendon, 3). Internationally, immigration into the US grows each year not only in terms of people coming over to work, but also as exchange students who enter American universities. "In the US, the overall proportion of international students is...just over 4 per cent, although actual numbers are huge, at around 582,000" (King, 165). With figures like these the need to provide structured educational opportunities exploring class, language, ethnicity, gender, exceptionality, culture differences, sexuality and other national and international topics grows stronger each year.

In recent years, many colleges and universities have seen additions to curriculum encompassing courses such as ethnic-specific history classes, women's studies and gay and lesbian studies. Some colleges and universities are expanding students' knowledge base through the use of required courses already in the curriculum, such as African-American studies, women's studies, foreign languages, and cultural history courses (Rendon, 277-279). While this approach is certainly a step in the right direction, none of these courses deal specifically with challenging student views and requiring analytical and critical thinking about concepts such as power and privilege, class, homophobia and institutionalized racism. Seeing beyond the lenses that cloud thinking and judgment is the key to seeing growth and changes within the students. It is the challenges and growth while in the university setting that will equip

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students with the necessary skills to go into the global economy and participate as teachers, business executives, government employees, technology experts and any number of other fields.

“Universities are recognizing that much subject content is too domestically oriented in an era when graduates – domestic as well as international – are facing the prospect of more globally mobile careers, or, even if working locally, doing so for organizations operating in cross-national contexts (King, 166), and yet, when asked, while a majority of faculty supported diversity education, the support did not become practice in the classroom (“What encourages faculty”). In order to ensure that students throughout the university receive a solid foundation in diversity education, university wide implementation of a diversity course requirement would alleviate resistance, discrepancies and short-comings on the departmental and individual level. With the ever-changing composition of the higher education population, and the demand for globally prepared graduates, the responsibility of diversity education must fall upon the university, rather than the individual department.

An article by Kim Case examined research conducted in order to measure prejudice against women in a pre and posttest study of students who took women’s studies courses (2007). It was found that students who participated in women’s studies courses (versus those students who did not take a course) “exhibited a greater awareness of sexism, appreciation for diversity, and egalitarian attitudes with regard to gender ... [and a] greater awareness of discrimination against women” (Case, 426). This study implies that with exposure to topics in diversity and challenging of the “norm” within a structured classroom setting, students are more likely to have raised awareness of the issue, have a greater appreciation for the challenges surrounding those who identify within the issue, be more aware of discriminatory practices and attitudes as well as realize that members of a “minority” group are not any less human simply because they are different.

Within the context of education, future teachers are especially crucial in addressing the ever changing needs of America, and education faculty are less likely to incorporate diversity content than their counterparts in the arts and sciences, business, engineering and fine arts departments (“What encourages faculty”). At the university level, teacher education programs must ensure that its students are prepared to handle the diversity of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, international relations and more when they are in their classrooms. This is true for K-12 teachers as well as Higher Education faculty and administrators. Ensuring that preservice teachers are well educated in a multitude of diversity issues rather than having taken one or two specialized diversity-style courses will provide the guided educational experience necessary for opening their minds and providing them with the tools to enter the classroom with a more competent mindset. According to Milner & Smithey,

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1. Preservice teachers need to recognize differences among perspectives, experiences, values, and beliefs of their own and others' races and cultures.
 2. Preservice teachers need to see color and begin to recognize the political and historical legacy of it.
 3. Preservice teachers need to become researchers and learners in their teaching environments.
 4. Preservice teachers need the skills to assess their growth and progress and to continue strengthening their knowledge and skills where issues of diversity are concerned (2003).

Not only are those skills detrimental for teacher effectiveness, but because the United States of the 2000s is truly a global society, these skills are useful for everyone who intends to participate within American business or professional venues, especially since "most Americans live in segregated and homogenous environments" (Rendon, 268) and their university experience will be their primary training ground for success in the global economy.

If the prevailing view of diversity education is that "to educate for and about diversity is to fundamentally change the curriculum in virtually every field" (Rendon, 269), then the creation of a specific diversity curriculum addressing the needs of many would be more viable than trying to rewrite entire departmental curricula. Minorities, women and GLBTQ (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transsexual, Transgender, Queer & Questioning) all want to augment curriculum, and there is a concern that due to limited resources, each of these areas will suffer (Rendon, 23). A university wide course designed with the sole intention of addressing national and international diversity topics, would provide most if not all students exposure to a wide array of diversity-related issues as compared to the more narrowly focused diversity-spirited courses which are not designed to reach the masses, nor delve as deeply into the targeted issues of race, gender, ethnicity, et al.

Proposed diversity course

As a university wide requirement, ideally this course would be a mandatory during the freshman term, but all transfer students would be required to enroll upon entry into the university. The course would be a two semester sequence based on the text book *Thinking Critically* by John Chaffee with additional readings from recent research and studies.

Thinking Critically is a reading and writing intensive curriculum, and while it is possible to complete the basic text work within a single semester, in order to delve deeply into topics such as race, class, gender, et al. more time should be devoted to allow for student growth and insight. A wonderful benefit to utilizing this text as the foundation for freshmen is that it also is a tool for critical thinking, analytical writing and research, all of which are necessary tools for collegiate success.

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The first semester of the course will cover the first six chapters of the book which include self examination, critical thinking activities, asking questions, listening, organizing and discussing ideas, problem solving skills (personal and non-personal), perception believing and knowing, and language and thought. In addition to the chapter readings, specific articles related to different areas of diversity studies can be used in order to provide discussion and written responses relating to the various themes each chapter presents. The thinking and writing activities throughout the chapters are designed to encourage students to begin their critical analysis careers through a combination of personal and non-personal themes and topics. Students are taught to evaluate reasons for supporting an argument, and are led through exercises to enable them to learn to write based on reason rather than emotion. Articles about race or gender (for example) can be used as group activities to determine reason versus emotion. Sources can be analyzed for accuracy, reliability and validity, all the while getting students to begin thinking about diversity topics in an academic environment. Personal writing to examine individual feelings can be combined with research oriented, or critical thinking exercises in order to assist the student in finding the balance between self-examination and personal growth with academic pursuit of knowledge.

During the first semester, students will examine evaluating the quality of internet sources. Combined with the research and critical thinking skills already learned, students will be reasonably prepared to write a collegiate research term paper. As a necessary skill for university survival, as well as business writing or research grant proposals, by the completion of the first semester, students will have been able to learn critical thinking analysis and problem solving skills while examining their beliefs about various diversity topics and be prepared for university level writing and research.

The second semester will build upon the skills learned during the first semester, and will add topics such as forming and applying concepts, relating and organizing, reporting, inferring, judging, and constructing arguments. Since the foundational critical thinking skills are already in place, the second semester allows for much greater study of diversity, with greater emphasis on articles and exploration of more diversity topics. There will be less emphasis on personal writing, except as newly introduced topics dictate the need for self-examination. Rather, the second semester will focus on critical reading and writing, as well as more thorough research and development of ideas on how to take the knowledge learned in the course and apply it not only to student life within the university, but beyond into the global world.

“One of the greatest challenges in teaching [a] course is to provide an open forum to discuss potentially divisive and emotionally difficult issues related to race, culture, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexual orientation” (Organista, 13). It is important that ground rules be established for class discussions, students should be reminded not to personalize comments, and efforts should be made to minimize or eliminate as much inflammatory or accusatory language during

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discussions. It is also recommended that students should be warned that the topics to be discussed might evoke negative emotions because in offering that forewarning students may be better prepared to grapple with difficult topics (Organista, 13).

With a course in place as outlined above, students attending the university will receive the opportunity to examine their own beliefs, learn about the inner workings of society through academic readings and research, and delve into international topics. Over the course of two semesters, students will have covered race, religion, gender, class, sexual orientation, exceptionalism, language, institutionalized racism, power, privilege, and authority. While diversity education is never finished, students completing this course will be equipped with the tools and knowledge in order to continue on their path in challenging themselves and others. Future educators will be better prepared to handle issues of diversity within their classroom, school and community. Students venturing into the business community will be better prepared for the global economy in which they will work. Future doctors and social workers will have a better toolbox of skills at their disposal. With the continually changing face of America, a comprehensive diversity course will prepare university students for whatever path they choose. As a university dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge and continued growth and learning, it is imperative that this course be designed, implemented, funded, supported and offered to every student passing through these ivy-covered walls.

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