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What Colleges Can Do to Diversify Their Curricula

By Corinne Ruff MAY 27, 2016

Student protesters at Seattle U. are seeking the resignation of a dean and, like their peers at other colleges and universities, the diversification of curricula.



For the last two weeks, a small group of students at Seattle University has held a sit-in outside the office of the dean of the institution's Matteo Ricci College. Like many student protesters across the country in the past year, they're demanding a resignation — of the small college's dean, Jodi O. Kelly.

Also like other student groups, many of their demands center on issues of diversity — in short, fewer "dead white dudes" in the college's curriculum, one protester told *The Seattle Times*. Some of the groups have called for specific [diversity requirements for undergraduate curricula](#). Other demands are more open-ended, seeking curricula in all disciplines that better address modern inequalities.

Many college leaders are beginning to recognize the need to take action. A [survey](#) this year by the American Council on Education revealed that one in five college presidents were overseeing curricular changes based on students' demands for diversity.

As colleges and universities take on those concerns, many — including Seattle — are forming committees to rethink the role diversity should play in what they teach. What does that process look like?

It comes in many layers, says Paul C. Gorski, an associate professor in the School of Integrative Studies at George Mason University, in Virginia. Administrators walk a fine line when it comes to rewarding curricular changes without stepping on the toes of faculty members who choose courses and syllabi.

When approaching the task of diversifying a curriculum, Mr. Gorski says, one question looms large: "Do the courses in this general curriculum reflect the present reality and our students?"

If the answer is no — and a college lacks courses that dive into issues of racism, homophobia, or sexism — it may expose another layer: a lack of diversity in faculty expertise.

That problem can overlap with another common student demand: hiring more faculty members from marginalized backgrounds who could offer diverse perspectives. The problem, Mr. Gorski says, is that those faculty members are often brought into alienating environments.

"One of the worst things an institution can do is have a requirement and hire part-time faculty to teach them because what happens is it marginalizes the requirement and students pick this up right away," says Mitchell L. Chang, a professor of education and Asian-American studies at the University of California at Los Angeles.

An effort to diversify a curriculum needs to be faculty-driven, Mr. Gorski says. Even in a single classroom, professors can ask themselves: "Is it so bad to take out one of the Shakespeare writings and put in Maya Angelou or James Baldwin?"

But that can be a problem if the faculty doesn't have or hasn't been provided with the expertise to teach on those topics.

Mr. Chang, who has studied the effectiveness of diversity courses in reducing student bias, says that ideally "diversity literacy" would be sprinkled across all disciplines. But getting to that point is a huge undertaking for any institution.

‘Voluntary Wouldn’t Work’

Since the early 1990s, when a student protested that the curriculum lacked diversity, Northern Illinois University has convened a Committee on Multicultural Curriculum Transformation.

Each summer for more than two decades, the committee has helped more than 220 faculty members make their curricula more inclusive through workshops. But volunteers have steadily dwindled, and nearly half of those professors have since retired or left the

university. "Voluntary wouldn't work anymore," says Kristen Meyers, a former chair of the committee and director of the women's-studies program. "It doesn't transform the culture or department."

Vernese E. Edghill-Walden, the university's chief diversity officer and senior associate vice president for academic diversity, says the voluntary program will end as the committee shifts to focus on a new human-diversity requirement for students.

The committee will develop criteria for the courses this summer and put in place the requirement in the fall of 2017.

Ms. Edghill-Walden says courses that might qualify include a women's-studies class on gender in the workplace or a class on racism in America.

Similar demands sprouted in 2015 at Colorado College, which has created a curriculum executive committee. "We are trying to keep up with societal changes," says Sandra L. Wong, dean of the college and dean of the faculty. "We are trying to look into the future."

For the last year, the committee has held forums to gather how students view diversity and what they want to learn in the classroom. Ms. Wong says the demand is clear for critical-perspective courses on global cultures and inequality.

The group, made up of more than a dozen faculty members, students, and administrators, will not meet over the summer but will pick up the effort in the fall, with a goal of carrying out changes in 2016-17. But, Ms. Wong cautions, she can provide only pressure and incentives.

"Faculty have independent authorship of their own syllabi, and just stimulating awareness and consciousness around this is an important point," she says, adding that many faculty members may decide to diversify their syllabi over the summer.

As administrators convene such curriculum committees, Mr. Chang cautions against too much top-down action.

"You don't want this kind of diversity policing," he says. "It seems to undermine the whole effort." People on committees should focus on developing a diversity strategy for curricula, he says.

The key question, Mr. Chang says, is what qualities do universities want their graduates to have? "If one of them is to prepare them to thrive in a diverse democracy," he says, "I imagine this is one of many things they would want to invest in."

Shaun R. Harper, a professor in the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania and executive director of its Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education, has spoken to faculty members at Brown, Georgetown, and other universities about how to start conversations on diversifying their curricula. One thing to stress, he says, is moving the talk beyond blaming faculty resistance — a product of "the inexperience and lack of consciousness and competence to teach about these issues and knowing what to assign."

He recommends conducting external reviews of course syllabi to gain feedback on how course content could be made more culturally relevant.

Colleges and universities should use a "both/and approach," which incorporates diversity into specific courses as well as the curriculum as a whole, Mr. Harper says. Simply adding a diversity requirement, he says, isn't enough.

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