

Best Practices in Diversity: Strategic Planning Workshop October 14, 2005

Diversity and Curricular Integration Breakout Session

A Brief History of Diversity in the General Education Curriculum

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My role today is to provide a brief history of Penn State's recent attempts to include diversity as a required part of its undergraduate curriculum. I will divide that history into five stages: 1) before 1990, 2) 1990-94, 3) 1994-97, 4) 1997-2004, and 5) 2004 to the present.

Before 1990, our first stage, PSU had no formal place in its curriculum for the study of diversity. During the 1980's, the Faculty Senate was well aware that universities across the United States were adopting required diversity courses that defined diversity in terms of race and gender. Our Faculty Senate debated the topic, but it had a hard time deciding just what it wanted. Penn State found little comfort in what other universities were doing. While some senators wanted a required course in race or gender, the majority argued that any such requirement should focus on the various ways in which people differ from one another. That split in perspective between the race and gender people on the one hand and the all-inclusive folks on the other has underlain all subsequent discussions from the late 1980's to the present. By 1990, a consensus had emerged that the broad definition would prevail. When diversity designations started to become attached to existing PSU courses, the first course approved was one in American Sign Language. The Senate proved prescient and well ahead of the nation in its broad definition of diversity for very early it allowed us to identify disability studies as

something that belonged within our concept of diversity. The broad definition required us to ask: What are the ways in which we humans differ from one another? What makes us different? What makes us alike?

The second stage began in 1990. After years of attempting to find a way to include diversity as a required part of the curriculum, the Senate reached a decision. All students would have to take either one three-credit Diversity Focused (DF) course or twelve credits in four separate courses labeled Diversity Enhanced (DE). Such courses as English 139: Black American Writers would be Diversity Focused for all of its material dealt with a racial minority. So too would English 190: Women Writers. But, some courses possessed only elements of racial and gender considerations along with its principal concern. While, for example, a course called Contemporary American Authors did not have race or gender as its principal focus, it did include some African-American and women writers. For that reason, it was identified as Diversity Enhanced (DE).

This complex system of 3 DF credits or 12 DE credits enabled the legislation to be passed, and by 1990 Penn State had a diversity requirement. But, the bookkeeping complexity of this arrangement caused headaches for students, advisors, and the machines in the Registrar's Office. In 1994, the third stage began. In that year, the Senate eliminated the 12 credits of Diversity Enhanced. As a result, a three-credit Diversity Focused course stood alone as our sole commitment to diversity within the curriculum. That state of affairs continued until the General Education reforms of December 1997.

Those 1997 reforms, the fourth stage, had their origins in late 1995. Late that year, President Spanier and Senate Chair Peter Jurs formed The Special Committee on

General Education chaired by Dean Robert Pangborn and charged it to 1) assess the current General Education program at Penn State, 2) identify and analyze General Education curriculum models appropriate to PSU and 3) recommend changes in General Education, as warranted, to the University Faculty Senate. In his personal address to the Special Committee, President Spanier stressed his hope that all General Education courses would include writing and an international dimension. The committee took that international dimension very seriously for it reflected the then current national concern with globalization and the need to prepare our students for living in that type of world. After nearly two years of discussions, the committee sent its report to the Senate in the Fall of 1997. The Senate discussed it in a forensic session and then passed it in December 1997.

The Pangborn Report made two recommendations that touched on diversity. First, it required all General Education courses to possess a number of active learning elements, one of which could be “the application of intercultural and international competence.” Second, it eliminated the Diversity Focused requirement. All Diversity Focused designations (DF) were to vanish within a reasonable amount of time. In their place, the Senate required all students to take three credits of a new requirement to be called “Intercultural and International Competence.” The label for this new type of course was GI, G for General Education and I for Intercultural/International. All existing DF courses were to be re-examined and re-approved according to the criteria set by the General Education Implementation Committee. DF’s were to become GI’s. Major headaches resulted from the recertification process by which old DF courses were made to comply

with the new standards. Some departments and colleges have yet to recover from that recertification process.

In the year 2001, two major events occurred. In April, a group of African-American students called Gye N'Yame held a major sit-in at the HUB called the Village. As part of the subsequent agreement reached by Gye N'Yame and the administration, there was to be a review of the new GI requirement. For the next two and a half years, Gye N'Yame leaders met weekly with the Senate officers, African-American faculty members, and administration leaders to hammer out an acceptable solution to what the students had identified as a major hole in the Penn State curriculum. The students wanted a single GI course to be required of all Penn State students, and that course was to be called "Race in America." A variety of logistical and practical problems made the implementation of such a single course to be required of everyone unworkable. But, the students had made it clear to all that the newly adopted requirement called "Intercultural/International Competence" was not satisfactory. Something better had to be devised.

On September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon as well as the plane crash in Pennsylvania indicated that the International Competence requirement was crucial and necessary. The Senate was hearing that we needed one required course dealing with American issues and another course dealing with international issues.

Stage five began in the Summer of 2001 when Senate Chair John Nichols charged the Undergraduate Education Committee to form a subcommittee to study the GI or Intercultural/International Competence requirement. That subcommittee reported its

conclusions late in the Spring of 2003. It recommended that we adopt one course in United States Cultures and another in International Cultures. That recommendation appeared unacceptable because it would further increase the number of General Education credits. Penn State already had the largest number of required General Education credits of any university in the nation. Penn State colleges with highly structured programs subject to nationally established criteria and accreditation could not add an additional three credits to their graduation requirements. Part of their reluctance stemmed from the Provost's campaign to locate all baccalaureate degree programs within the range of 120-124 credits. The subcommittee recommendation seemed doomed.

In December 2003, Senate Chair Christopher Bise formed a special Senate Committee called the Conference Committee that assembled representatives of the Undergraduate Education Committee, the Curricular Affairs Committee, and the Office of the Vice-Provost for Undergraduate Education to reach a solution. That committee proposed just what the subcommittee had proposed: one three-credit course to be called United States Cultures and another three-credit requirement to be called International Cultures. The committee dropped the term *competence*. These courses, however, would not increase graduation requirements because both requirements were to be cross-listed with other General Education requirements. Haunted by the 1997 recertification process, the Conference Committee proposed a ready and easy way of identifying which courses were to be US Cultures (US) and which were to be International Cultures (IL). Once that ready and easy process was made part of the recommendation, the Senate swiftly approved what is now the current state of affairs.

Curiously, PSU was found to have many more courses that could fulfill the IL requirement. We were not teaching a sufficient number of courses dealing with our national culture, the very point that the Gye N'Yame students had made two years before.

This quick review of our attempts to include cultural breadth in the curriculum has revealed some consistent threads in Senate thinking about diversity issues in the curriculum. The Senate has always preferred the broadest possible definition, one that will include courses that deal with the many ways in which we humans differ from one another. Those who want a narrower definition frequently attack the Senate's welcoming attitude, but the Senate has consistently reaffirmed its preference for a wide, broad, and inclusive definition. By doing so, it has made our curriculum flexible and innovative, always open to new and unanticipated requests for inclusion.