

**General Education Diversity Requirements:
What the Literature Says About Offering and Structuring these Classes**

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Final Submission

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As the University of Arizona (UA) begins to grapple with what it means to be an Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) issues of racial climate and intergroup relations on campus are becoming increasingly important to understand and address. The specific purpose of this white paper is threefold:

- 1) To explore the relationship between taking diversity courses and student outcomes as demonstrated within empirical scholarship
- 2) To understand from the scholarly literature what constitutes 'best practices' in terms of offering courses that fulfill a 'diversity requirement' (e.g., content, length, and pedagogical approach)
- 3) To chart a path forward for the UA to intentionally define and shape the diversity requirements it offers to fulfill this general education requirement

This is even more pressing with the current revamping of general education requirements at the UA.

Scholarship on Diversity Requirements

Hurtado et al. (2012) offered the most comprehensive synthesis of the scholarly literature on diversity, inclusion, and student outcomes, to date. In particular, their analysis demonstrated how the racially inclusive campus environments produce a number of positive outcomes such as habits of mind/skills for lifelong learning, competencies for a multicultural world, while also being related to increased levels of retention and matriculation. This work linking diversity and student outcomes has been cited in Supreme Court affirmative action decisions (e.g., *Grutter*, 2003; *Gratz*, 2003; *Fisher*, 2013/2016) affirming that diversity represents a "compelling educational interest" in colleges and universities (Chang et al., 2003).

Diversity courses represent and critically important component of these inclusion efforts (Bowman, 2011); however, some caveats are warranted. First, Bowman (2010) empirically demonstrated that taking diversity course requirements are linked with gains in student well-being and positive orientations toward diversity in general, but these effects are not present for students taking only one course. Instead, these impacts exist when students take two or more courses under the umbrella of "diversity."

Second, not all types of course content is equally effective. Sleeter (2011) conducted a critical review of the literature on the impacts of ethnic studies courses, and she found that the increased educational outcomes and positive identity development only occurred when the classes centered issues of structured inequality. This has been a growing trend educational scholarship the past two decades – that a "feel-good" multiculturalism which centers "foods and fiestas" or "heroes and holidays" is ineffective (Lee, Menkart, & Okazawa-Rey, 1997; Sleeter, 2011).

Diversity Requirements at the UA

It is very promising that the UA requires its students to take at least one course during their undergraduate years to explore diversity, broadly defined. It is troubling, however, how broadly defined the course offerings are. From the General Education website, “diversity requirements” are defined as:

One course (or 3 units) in a student’s degree program must focus on one of the following areas: Gender, Race, Class, Ethnicity, Sexual Orientation, or Non-Western Studies.¹

First, it is not clear why “Non-Western Studies” is part of this requirement. Diversity requirements done effectively tend to center issues of inequality along the lines of race/ethnicity, social class, gender, and/or sexuality (Bowman, 2010, 2011; Hurtado et al., 2012; Sleeter, 2011). Non-Western Studies are still important areas of study, but they fall beyond the bounds of a meaningful diversity requirement. Second, the following classes currently count under this umbrella:

- HUMS 150B1 – Mind-Altering Substances in the Ancient World
- RSSL 150B2 – Multicultural Russia
- ANTH 160A1 – World Archaeology
- RELI 160D4 – Introduction to World Religions
- FTV 150B1 – The Haunted Screen: Understanding the Horror Film²

Again, there is a benefit to having students explore these content areas, however, they stray from the purpose of diversity requirements and their associated outcomes in the diversity scholarship. The point here is that “diversity” has been too broadly defined by the UA. Thus, we cannot reasonably expect that our students completing their diversity coursework will experience the outcomes described in the previous section.

Exemplar Institutions

There are several institutions that have implemented diversity requirements almost in line with what the empirical scholarship recommends.³ For example, and despite a very contentious debate, UCLA passed one of the best diversity requirements at a research institution in the country.⁴ The author highlights the difficult campus politics that surrounded the UCLA example not to dissuade UA administrators from following suit, but instead to highlight a high degree of courage will be needed to sanction these requirements that are (a) supported by the empirical scholarship and (b) controversial in the realm of

¹ <https://catalog.arizona.edu/policy/general-education-tier-one-and-tier-two>

² <https://academicaffairs.arizona.edu/gened-courses>

³ <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Diversity-Courses-Are-in-High/234828>

⁴ <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/04/13/ucla-faculty-approves-diversity-requirement>

public discourse. The controversy and the battle are consistent themes throughout the nation when implementing diversity requirements, but they are also necessary to provide our students with the skills they need to succeed in an increasingly multicultural educational and work environment.⁵ The UA desperately needs strong leadership to articulate the value of diversity requirements as central to the values that the UA professes. Diversity requirements are not a convenient add on to 21st century, cutting edge education. They are at its core.

Conclusion/Implications

While diversity courses are not a panacea for all issues of prejudice and inclusion/exclusion on college campuses, they do represent an important, structured way of both promoting student learning *and* fostering social equity. Moving forward, the UA should:

- Make the diversity requirement *at least* a one semester class and *preferable* a two-semester sequence
- Require that to count as a diversity requirement, a class must center issues of *structured inequality*⁶ along the lines of race/ethnicity, class, gender, and/or sexual orientation
- Separate “non-Western cultures” from the “diversity requirement”

To the author’s knowledge, there is not an institution of higher education in existence that requires a two-semester sequence to fulfill a diversity requirement. While the author of this report would like the UA to be a cutting-edge leader in the field, he also understands that at UCLA it was a fraught and contentious struggle to implement their meaningful diversity requirement, and they were only able to institutionalize one course requirement even though the real effects occur at two (Bowman, 2010). If the UA cannot institutionalize a two-semester diversity requirement, it can still create university messaging *encouraging* students to take these courses even if they are not required – especially if the courses are sequential.

When Dr. Gina Garcia, one of the leading scholars on HSIs in the country, provided a keynote on campus in the spring of 2018, she challenged the UA an institution to do more than simply being “Hispanic enrolling” to actually being “Hispanic serving” or even “Hispanic enhancing.” That is, it is insufficient to simply bring Latinx students to campus. Instead, it is a central mission to actually adapt the institutional structures and supports to meet the unique needs of this student population. The UA as a recently designated HSI is

5

<https://www.bsu.edu/campuslife/counselingcenter/additionalservices/diversityresources/creatingtheinclusiveclassroom/diversityandthecollegecurriculum>

⁶ Please see Sleeter’s (2011) literature review for the more depth on the distinction between an effective versus ineffective diversity requirement and the role of centering racial inequality in these classes.

facing this specific challenge right now, and issues of creating an inclusive campus climate continue to remain elusive.

Structuring diversity requirements to more intentionally center issues of racial inequality will not only make them more effective as helping students learn about the realities of contemporary racism, but they will also likely foster a more inclusive racial climate (Bowman 2010; Hurtado et al., 2012; Novais, & Spencer, 2018; Sleeter, 2011). Structured diversity courses can be an important component of this overarching issue, but we currently have lost the potential impacts of this area by having too broad a definition of diversity and not encouraging or offering them as two-semester sequences.

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