

ED424898 1998-12-00 Multiculturalism in the Community College Curriculum. ERIC Digest.

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Issues of multiculturalism have generated changes in community college curricula in both form and content. This Digest introduces some definitions of multiculturalism, demonstrates why a multicultural curriculum is particularly important to community colleges, and provides case studies to illustrate ways in which multiculturalism is being incorporated into the curriculum and extra-curriculum.

DEFINITIONS

The term "multicultural" has generated considerable debate in educational circles. The purpose of multicultural curricula is "to accommodate and respect the varied cultural origins of our diverse population" (Eaton, 1997). Takaki (author of *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* and professor of ethnic studies for 20 years) defines the objectives of multicultural education: "The multicultural class is the place where students can understand their larger community, and figure out what it means to be an American. It is a place where we study the question, How do our paths intersect?" (Reid, 1995).

IMPORTANCE OF MULTICULTURAL CURRICULA IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Multicultural courses are designed to enhance students' ability to function in an increasingly diverse society and empower them as citizens who can make a difference. Goals for student learning in multicultural courses include developing an appreciation of the "knowledge traditions within the contemporary United States," providing an understanding of the role of racial, cultural and ethnic differences in the formation of our national identity, evaluating diverse views of the interrelationship of self and community, exploring the individual students' own cultural heritage, and developing the ability to read and compare cultures through their cultural expressions (Olguin & Schmitz, 1997). Providing a curriculum which reflects the experiences of a diverse population also helps in retaining traditionally underrepresented student populations by providing a curriculum which is culturally relevant (Reid, 1995). This is nowhere more important than in community colleges which currently enroll 42% of all first time college students as well as 46% of all minority students in higher education (Foote, 1997).

MULTICULTURAL COURSES

The creation of new courses is central to the process of including multicultural issues in the curriculum. Rancho Santiago College in Santa Ana, California serves a community which is largely Latino and Southeast Asian. A course entitled, "American Pluralism in Microcosm: The City of Santa Ana as Text" proved to be an effective means of increasing students' appreciation and respect for cultural diversity in this community (Nixon et. al., 1997). Student teams that prepared reports on the cultural expressions of the diverse populations in Santa Ana resulted in increased interactions among students

of different cultures. Students exhibited creative responses to the assignment by producing thematic maps of the city, videotapes on the city's history, and collages illustrating diversity in religion, art, and other dimensions. Classroom discussion focused on questions of what it means to be an American, what causes divisions, and what binds people together. The basic idea of the course has been transplanted into various existing courses and expanded to include other communities.

CHANGES IN THE OVERALL CURRICULUM

Overall changes to academic disciplines, departments, and degree programs are an equally important aspect of creating a multicultural curriculum. Fresno City College (FCC) has undertaken the development of a new American Studies discipline that will address issues of pluralism and identity. The first step in this process was the creation of a new course, "American Pluralism: The Search for the Common Ground." The college's American Pluralism and Identity Committee is presently working on integrating sections of American Literature, American History and Ethnic Studies into the new discipline (FCC, 1997).

Many FCC faculty reported that class discussions centered on the difficulty of defining a common American identity rather than on issues uniting our society. Others commented that our society was more divided by social class than by race, ethnicity, or gender. These discussions affirmed the importance of a continuing dialogue on diversity in the curriculum (FCC, 1997).

Itawamba Community College (ICC) (Mississippi) has revised curricula across various disciplines according to a framework of four questions: What does it mean to be American? What divides us? What brings us together? What do we have in common? Students consider these questions on a personal level as well as through academic materials. For example, participants in the American Literature class applied these questions to the works of Colonial and Renaissance period authors (ICC, 1997).

EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

Concern for multicultural issues shapes co-curricular as well as academic programs. ICC established a Multicultural Speakers Forum which addressed issues of identity and pluralism from a national perspective and included local, prominent representatives of the Native-American, African-American, Mexican-American, Asian-American and Southern cultures.

FCC includes extracurricular activities in its action plan for including multicultural perspectives. Activities are designed to include the community as well as the campus. The Social Science Division presented, "Growing Together in the Twentieth Century: The Search for Common Values in the Midst of Our Diversity," a symposium which included a student essay contest, a panel discussion by FCC students representing the various ethnic groups who attend the college, and a celebration of multiculturalism. The program was co-sponsored by FCC, Fresno State University, and community service

agencies in conjunction with the National Endowment for the Humanities (FCC, 1997).

REINFORCING THE FOUNDATIONS

Faculty participation is essential to curricular changes. However, faculty who are trained in the traditional disciplines are not necessarily qualified to teach courses with a multicultural perspective (Reid, 1995). To address this issue, institutions do provide in-service forums as well as opportunities to attend conferences but these efforts do not always have an impact on the curriculum. In the Maricopa Community Colleges (Arizona), multiculturalism was made a faculty development priority in 1993-1994. Opportunities for discussion were made available but not required. As a result, only one or two of the 800 faculty members reported making changes in the curriculum as a result of these efforts (Story, 1997). Faculty commitment and preparation are necessary for the success of any curricular change. Story (1997) suggests that the administration must provide both time and resources to allow faculty to create and sustain a more inclusive curriculum.

Curricular changes also require additional supporting materials. ICC's action plan aims to "enhance teaching and learning about American pluralism" through the restructuring of courses as well as a commitment to new resources. The library acquired both print and video materials which focus on the Native-American, African-American, and Latino experience in the United States (ICC, 1997).

CONCLUSION

In recent years, a major goal of curricular change has been the inclusion of a multicultural perspective in order to prepare all students to participate in a society with a heightened sense of its own pluralism. Additionally, since community colleges are responsible for educating a large proportion of traditionally underrepresented students, the curriculum must be relevant and inclusive to encourage success among these students. Efforts at including a multicultural perspective in the curriculum include creating new courses and revamping existing ones, creating new departments and degree programs to support these courses, providing extracurricular activities, re-training faculty, and enhancing instructional materials.

To ensure that students develop at least an understanding of the issues raised in a pluralistic society, Takaki advocates that colleges go beyond creating multicultural courses to establishing a multicultural requirement for graduation (Reid, 1995).

According to a 1992 survey (Reid, 1995), only 20 per cent of community colleges have a multicultural general education requirement while 48 per cent of four-year institutions have this requirement. A general education requirement coupled with the curricular reform activities presented in this Digest are the sign of community colleges commitment to creating environments in which diversity is accepted and valued.

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