

Multicultural education needs to be 'multi' and 'cultural'

Multiculturalism means different things to different people. It can connote crude politicizing, but it can also be broadened into an academic subject that deserves serious study. The University Council's appointment of an academic committee on multiculturalism is a welcome step in that direction as it includes the directors of area centers such as Asian and Middle Eastern Studies.

It is time that multiculturalism lived up to its name and developed into a meaningful study, with various approaches, of different cultures, their interactions, and their contributions to civilization at large rather than of one tribe or the other. That way, we'll be dealing with a rich and substantive subject rather than a narrow and contrived one. Let me comment on various aspects of the definition that I have given.

■ *Various approaches.* My first law (and I haven't patented it under my name yet) about multiculturalism and related phenomena is that the amount of vociferation expended on virtues like pluralism, diversity and inclusiveness is usually in inverse proportion to the willingness to let these very virtues govern their own implementation; the clumsy attempts last year at effecting the new English 306 are a good example.

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We can do a great deal better than that. Justice Brennan, in a famous decision, defined university classrooms as a marketplace for free ideas. They are also a free marketplace of such ideas. Given the longstanding pluralism of the American universities and the intrinsic inclusiveness of multiculturalism, a diversity of formats and choices is appropriate. Let this be an opportunity for genuine creativity instead of dreary regimentation.

In other words, no single, required course will do. The experience on other campuses, which rushed to precipitous and trendy implementation, has been that monopolistic courses are poor in quality, need to be artificially propped up and breed more resentment than they heal. Instead, let there be competition in equality. Students here are starved for good courses. The attempt to capitalize on captive audiences, such as English 306, is a sign of weakness, and an understandable one at that. It comes from a distrust to let people make informed choices.

But this should not be the pattern for other multicultural courses. In the absence of a core curriculum, which is not to be confused

with distribution requirements, universities have become higher education's equivalent to theme parks. The upside is that departments have a great deal of latitude in creating and adding new courses and ditching old ones. Multicultural courses could not encounter a more favorable setting.

■ *Interaction between various cultures.* The phenomenon is nothing new and can be usefully studied from a historical perspective. Examples abound. One is the culture of Christians, Jews and Arabs in medieval Spain before the Inquisition. Another, a big one, is the Hellenistic and Roman world since Alexander the Great. It was a composite of different cultures and ethnicities. So far from being Eurocentric, it encompassed all of the Mediterranean, including North Africa and Egypt, much of the Near East and, at times, sizable portions of the Middle East extending as far as Afghanistan and the Indus Valley.

A closer look at it shows that the current catch phrase about "dead white European males" is as inaccurate as it is racist and sexist: With reference to Greece and Rome, it is more precise to speak about light- to dark-brown near eastern and Mediterranean people whose cultural traditions have remained vital and lively not because of cultural imperialism, but

because of their richness and adaptability.

Because of this wider context, multiculturalism provides a welcome opportunity to open up some more global and historical perspectives. They are not in abundant evidence here: Those who blather about the University's allegedly Eurocentric curriculum obviously have not taken the trouble to look at the actual program of courses taken by graduating seniors in business, engineering, psychology, etc.

It is time to look at reality and not live in a world of slogans. That reality includes the fact that culture transcends race and that creative individuals, regardless of ethnicity, can work in various cultural traditions. The latest adaptation of Homer's epics, e.g., is by a Derek Walcott, a Caribbean poet, and is set in the multicultural milieu of that part of the modern world.

■ *Various cultures' contributions to civilization.* The serious study of history and culture has nothing to do with ethnic cheerleading or denigration. A distinguished cultural heritage is not the passport to automatic esteem (as the Greek and Italian immigrants to this country found out), let alone self-esteem, which is based on a totally different set of factors, most of them related to individual accomplish-

ment. The distinction is important and once more applies to the vitality of cultural traditions: They are not simply static inheritances in which we can take pride and leave it at that. Rather, they are kept vital by constant openness, interaction with others, innovation and creativity.

For me as a classicist, e.g., it really doesn't matter whether the ancient Egyptians were black or a paler shade of brown, and whether they were the ancestors of the Greeks. Rather, the point is what did the Greeks and Romans do with such traditions, how did these traditions evolve, and what kept them vital?

The same applies to many other cultures around the globe. Some have been neglected and need more attention, but not in artificial ways (the teaching in Russian schools that Russians invented just about everything apparently wasn't effective in solving that country's real problems).

Nor should the emphasis be determined by whoever is most vocal on the Mall. That is a serious shortcoming in the otherwise sensible definition of multicultural education which came from the College of Liberal Arts on April 25, 1990, at the height of the Samba aftermath. The "traditions and experience of African-Americans and Mexican-Americans" are sin-

gled out; this is a needless affront, e.g., to the Asian Americans who are the second largest minority on campus and who represent some of the world's major cultures.

Conversely, to give a final example from my own discipline, traditional inattention to groups neglected by students of civilization can be reversed in entirely responsible and substantive ways. The largest component of the population of Greece and Rome was the rural one. For classic archeologists, in their obsession with edifice complexes, the rural population really did not exist until two decades ago when a UT team, under the direction of Professor Joseph Carter, systematically opened up this major aspect of the ancient world. Without any posturing and moralizing, this endeavor has become a much imitated model because of its intrinsic value and quality.

The presence of the same characteristics will determine the success or failure of multicultural studies on this campus. Let there be multiple approaches, and let there be a study of many cultures and their relationships.

This is what multicultural really means.

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