

UT deflects a sterile philosophy

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"Multicultural education" took a lopsided licking at the University of Texas the other day. Hook 'em, Horns!

The faculty, by mail ballot, swatted down a proposal that all students take and pass six hours' course work in non-white cultures — African-American, for example, or plain African; or Asian, Islamic, Hispanic, whatever.

Anything wrong, in this complex world, with improving our understanding of other cultures? Not one blessed thing wrong with it — save when, as at UT, the experience is peddled as sociological missionary work.

The multiculturalists, at UT and elsewhere, are out to cut Western culture down to size. The bulk of them consider the West, in one degree or another, racist, sexist and imperialist. They want to show students the moral equality, if not indeed the downright superiority, of other cultures.

The faculty ballot at UT floored them, 759-434, with the science and engineering departments weighing in heavily on the side of traditional academic concerns. This comes on top of the decision last year not to turn a freshman composition course, English 306, into a seminar on racism and sexism. UT's faculty is doing a lot better than its football teams.

A journalism professor complains that "Texas is in its normal position, bringing up the rear." If he means the rear of the multicultural movement, why, praise be! The rear of this misguided endeavor is where every decent university should aspire to be.

You have to give the multiculturalists credit — they're candid. The ad hoc committee that drew up the defeated proposal acknowledged that, at bottom, its purposes were sub-educational.

One purpose, the proposal explained (quoting a faculty committee), was "the empowerment of minority faculty and students." The proposal was expected likewise to reduce "racial intolerance on campus" and help overturn "racial and gender stereotypes."

"Much of the pressure behind multicultural education," the committee confessed, "is due to a growing sense that a fair deal for minorities in this country cannot be achieved by changes in the economic and political arenas alone. Powerful instruments of culture such as universities, museums and libraries must also change if groups such as African-Americans and Hispanic-Americans are to feel at home in their own country without completely accommodating to what seems from the outside to be a monolithic culture derived from Northern and Western Europe."

Indeed we do want people to feel at home here. That's one thing our common (not monolithic) culture was all about, back when we had one — intellectual unity instead of fragmentation; general appreciation of the best and truest, as contrasted with the trendiest.

Various UT profs argued that the curriculum shouldn't be weighed down with the nice but unnecessary. Multiculturalism as a supplement to Western culture? Nobel physics laureate Steven Weinberg objected that "too many (students) are not well grounded in any sort of culture at all. I find that often they have no idea of the order of events in history and no taste for the great art and literature of the past."

The larger society exposes us daily to multiculturalism, he added. "Does anyone believe that our students are less familiar with the films of Spike Lee or the novels of Amy Tan than with the plays of Chekhov or the novels of Stendahl?"

The UT debate reminds us how sterile and dangerous is all this beating up on the West — the fountainhead of our religion, science, technology, manners, morals and political theory.

The West isn't perfect, nor is any other civilization. Not the least of the West's virtues, I am bound to point out, is an appetite for self-criticism and, yes, for reform. In closed, authoritarian societies, the multiculturalists wouldn't get to first base with an alternative viewpoint. Christian literature, or Lockean philosophy, as graduation requirements at Baghdad U? Come on. We men and women of the West not only are better than our campus reputation, we're more truly liberal than a lot of our prissiest critics.

William Murchison's column is distributed by Creators Syndicate.