Can Courses Make a Real Difference?

By SARAH BROWN

When Sri Ponnada arrived at the University of Iowa, she immediately noticed a lack of cultural understanding among some of her classmates. She had never been to the state before, and she was shocked by the attitudes of some of the students towards minority groups. She felt that the university was not doing enough to promote diversity and inclusivity.

"Very rarely are these diversity requirements brought out of the classroom," said Ponnada. "The idea behind the courses is to broaden students' cultural horizons and encourage them to think critically about issues of diversity, but they don't go far enough."

Addina diversity-course requirement among activities' demands at the California college.

"These requirements, for those who are in the program, might appear to be purely a political act to appease students," she said in an interview. "But they still hope that fulfilling such a requirement can expose students to academic viewpoints that they might not have otherwise."

Camille Z. Charles, a professor of sociology and chair of the African Studies departments at Penn, was among the faculty members who supported the creation of a diversity-course requirement about a dozen years ago. Throughout her time at the university, A handful of colleges have more narrowly defined their mandatory courses.

she said, some students have entered the class on race and ethnicity, said Julie E. Liu, a professor of history and interim dean of the faculty. "But they go further, they focus on the importance of diversity, not just race, but power structures and privilege." A handful of courses have more narrowly defined their mandatory courses. At Scripps College, in California, students for 25 years have been required to take a class focused on race and ethnicity, said Matthew E. Hill, an associate professor of anthropology at UC Irvine. He said the goal is to address the systemic discrimination and opportunity gaps that exist in the United States and relate such issues to current events. "Race in Popular Culture and Media" and "Chicanos/Latinas and Education" are among the courses that count, while "United States History to 1865" does not.

Matthew E. Hill, an associate professor of anthropology at Iowa, led the committee that examined the proposed change in the diversity requirement. He said that the changes would make the courses more relevant to today's students. "Many of the courses are more narrowly defined and focused on specific areas of diversity," he said. "But they do not have the full language to specify exactly what they mean. They put it all under the banner of a diversity course."

"A BUREAUCRATIC WORD"

Few faculty members at Iowa di- rectly opposed strengthening the diversity-course requirement, said Mr. Hill. The main concerns had to do with logistics — for instance, ensuring that "diversity, Society, and Diversity" is among the two requirements would not add to the already burdensome hours needed for graduation. Ms. Ponnada, the recent graduate and current student government leaders initially told her that a course specifically focused on diversity wasn't necessary, and that most students wouldn't want another general-education requirement. Those two arguments are common, and they surfaced recently at Claremont McKenna. Ms. Reyes agreed that students had responded by structuring their proposed requirements in an overly broad manner. "We would have to take a course covering a specific focus — power and privilege, for instance — but that course would also satisfy another general-education requirement."

There are several other institutions, too. Peter A. Linsell, a political science professor at Berry College who described himself as a postmodern conservative, said that while students should learn about race, gender, and other cultures, classifying courses with a "diversity" label is problematic.

"The word 'diversity' is a bureaucratic word invented by the Supreme Court that universities now have to use when they're concerned about racial justice," he said. "It's become a meaningless term that 'maska what we really want to talk about and argue about."

At UCLA, faculty members voted down diversity-course proposals in 2004 and 2012. During the most recent round of debate there, in 2014 and early 2015, the opposition took two primary forms, said Jerry Kang, vice chancellor for equity, diversity, and inclusion. One was the "standard culture-war and political-correctness anxiety." The other was "disciplinary skepticism." Some professors in engineering, for instance, didn't understand why diversity was an important topic in their disciplines, he said.

When Mr. Kang spoke with un- convinced faculty members, he tried to present diversity as an intellectual dilemma "that we need to understand at every level." It wasn't about being politically correct, he said, but about solving a problem that "is unbelievably challenging and important to our mission as a public university." A requirement eventually won enough faculty support to pass. It took effect starting with students who enrolled in UCLA's College of Letters and Science last fall. When a college does adopt a requirement, though, UCLA's Mr. Chang said, it's essential that ten- ure-track faculty members oversee it. He said he has noticed a num- ber of institutions where most di- versity-related courses are taught by part-time instructors. Not committing permanent resources to the requirement, he said, "under- mines its importance in the long run."