

Can Courses on Diversity Make a Real Difference?

By SARAH BROWN

WHEN Sri Ponnada arrived at the University of Iowa, in 2012, she immediately noticed a lack of cultural understanding among some of her classmates. “They would say things like, I never saw a black person before I came to Iowa,” Ms. Ponnada, who is Indian, recalled. “And it’s probably true, if they’re coming from small-town Iowa.”

Ms. Ponnada, who graduated in December, loved the university. But

RACE

while on its campus, she said, she occasionally experienced subtle, offensive comments that made her feel unwelcome. Several racial incidents reinforced her concerns: A Ku Klux Klan-themed sculpture sparked outrage on the campus in 2014, and a slew of insults against Asian students appeared on Yik Yak, the anonymous social-media platform.

So last February Ms. Ponnada, then a student senator, sought pushed for a change in the university’s general-education program. She proposed a student-government resolution supporting a restructuring of the “Values, Society, and Diversity” requirement. It wasn’t specific enough, she argued, and students needed an academic space to confront their biases and learn about their differences.

Last month Iowa officials announced that they would make just such a change. All students in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences will have to satisfy a new, more-focused diversity-and-inclusion requirement, as well as a separate values-and-culture requirement, starting in 2017.

Such mandatory courses are becoming more common, amid a wave of protests over the racial climate on campuses in which student activists have demanded stronger diversity curricula.

Dozens, perhaps hundreds, of colleges already require students to take at least one course that explores diversity in some manner. Many colleges have students select from a broad menu of courses that cover issues related to race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, or religion; some have focused the requirement more narrowly on racial and ethnic studies.

By some accounts, the scope of research on diversity curricula is limited, but most studies have indicated that the courses have a positive effect on students’ attitudes toward people of other ethnicities and cultures. Still, the classes can be controversial. Some critics argue that they are unnecessary and doubt that they produce real results. Others contend that the courses politicize education by promoting an ideology of social justice.

LEARNING TO DISCUSS RACE

Mandatory diversity courses tend to surface as a result of student protests, said Shaun R. Harper, director of the Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education at the University of Pennsyl-

vania. “Very rarely are these diversity requirements born out of the goodness of the hearts of faculty who just want to do it because it’s the right thing to do,” he said.

The idea behind the courses is to broaden students’ cultural horizons and give them the skills to interact in an increasingly pluralistic society. Some students say such gaps in understanding have become more noticeable at their colleges in the past three months as racial tensions have escalated.

Denys Reyes, a senior at Claremont McKenna College — where activists recently forced the dean of students to resign after she sent a controversial email that went public — said she and other student organizers “are having to teach our own student body how to talk about race because they just don’t know how.” Adding a diversity-course requirement is among activists’ demands at the California college.

Mitchell J. Chang, a professor of education and of Asian-American studies at the University of California at Los Angeles who has studied diversity curricula, said evidence shows that the courses improve students’ civic engagement.

“These requirements, for those who know little about them, may appear to be purely a political act to appease students,” he said in an email. But he and others have found that “fulfilling such a requirement can expose students to academic materials that prepare them for the future in ways that higher education has not yet widely pursued in such a targeted way.”

Camille Z. Charles, a professor of sociology and chair of the Africana-studies department at Penn, was among the faculty members who supported the creation of a diversity-course requirement about a dozen years ago. Throughout her nearly 20 years at the university,

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she said, some students have entered her class on racial and ethnic relations doubtful of diversity’s importance in society — but many of them leave the class less certain of their earlier convictions.

“I may not completely change students’ minds by the end of the semester,” she said, “but they are more open, and they know how to have these conversations without being insensitive and disrespectful.”

Students who are already attuned to issues of diversity also benefit, she added, by becoming better listeners.

At most institutions with diversity-course requirements, students can choose from classes in different departments that cover some aspect of cultural diversity. But Penn’s Mr. Harper questioned whether such broad definitions — in which “just about anything qualifies” — are adequate, especially now.

When this reporter mentioned that she had met a curricular diver-



Mitchell Chang, a professor at the U. of California at Los Angeles who has studied diversity courses, says evidence shows that the classes can also improve students’ civic engagement.

sity requirement with a class called “Sport and American History,” Mr. Harper was skeptical. “Doesn’t it then suggest,” he asked, “that if you’re going to learn about people of color, you’re going to learn about them in a sports class?”

Ms. Reyes agreed. For instance, she said, a course that covers Japanese history in America might talk about Japanese-Americans mostly in the context of their internment during World War II. “That’s not enough,” she said. “You need to understand why those things happened and how they relate to today — not just race, but power structures and privilege.”

A handful of colleges 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 Julie E. Liss, a professor of history and interim dean of the faculty.

A range of courses qualify, she said, but the goal is to address the systemic discrimination and exploitation of certain ethnic groups in the United States and relate such issues to contemporary experiences. “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.

When panelists looked at how other colleges had structured their diversity courses, Mr. Hill said, they found that some small liberal-arts colleges required students to take one class that addressed race and ethnicity. That wasn’t feasible at a large public university like Iowa.

Still, the committee decided that narrowing the scope of “Values, Society, and Diversity” was important, he said. Courses like “King Ar-

thur Through the Ages” and “Food in America” qualified under that broad designation. For a short time, even physical-education courses — including one on table tennis — counted, too. The concentration “didn’t do any one thing very clearly,” Mr. Hill said.

Mr. Harper encourages student activists to make their demands for diversity courses more specific. Many activists might want a course that centers on race and ethnicity in contemporary culture, he said, but they “don’t 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 directly opposed strengthening the diversity-course requirement, Mr. Hill said. The main concerns had to do with logistics — for instance, ensuring that splitting “Values, Society, and Diversity” into two requirements wouldn’t add to the credit hours needed for graduation.

Ms. Ponnada, the recent graduate, said a number of student-government leaders initially told her that a course specifically 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 said student activists had responded by structuring their proposed requirement as an overlay. Students 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 other reservations, too. Peter A. Lawler, a political-science professor at Berry College who describes himself as a postmodern conservative, said that while students should learn about race, gen-

der, 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 “masks 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-wars 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 unconvinced 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 tenure-track faculty members oversee it.

He said he has noticed a number of institutions where most diversity-related courses are taught by part-time instructors. Not committing permanent resources to the requirement, he said, “undermines its importance in the long run.”