

## 98. The Shape of the Curriculum to Come

September 27, 1991

One of the liveliest curriculum issues confronting American higher education these days relates to cultural diversity, or what has become known as multiculturalism. This fall, freshmen at the University of Minnesota will be expected to fulfill a "cultural pluralism" requirement, choosing from courses that include Introduction to Black Women Writers and American Ethnic Literature. All freshmen at Stanford university will complete a course on cultural diversity before they graduate, and undergraduates at the University of Michigan will study race and ethnicity issues as part of their core program.

These new requirements frequently have generated hot debate on campuses. Some academics feel that these major changes in the focus of collegiate education are misdirected. Others argue that they are being too hastily introduced. However, too few remember that reshaping the curriculum has, in fact, been a continuous process in this country, with regular periods of re-examination, followed by reform. In the 1730s, according to historian Frederick Rudolph, "the time allotted to logic and other staples of the old course of study was reduced, while increasing attention was paid to natural philosophy, mathematics, surveying, and navigation."

In 1828, the Yale University faculty, reacting to the push for more practical courses, defended the classical program of academic study. They insisted that specialization should come only after students had demonstrated mastery of those branches of knowledge that "are the common foundation of all higher intellectual attainments."

Educational institutions in America are continuously evolving, and the curriculum is, with regularity, being reshaped. The current multiculturalism debate, like the changes that preceded it, has its antecedents. Early in this century, for example, scholars began to focus more thoughtfully on the history of black Americans. The study of the heritage and traditions of Native Americans increased, and more recently, the contributions of Asian and Latin American cultures have drawn scholarly interest.

For years, this new scholarship was limited to the narrowly defined academic circles in which the specialized investigations were conducted. But by the 1960s, dramatic social and demographic changes in this country lifted multiculturalism to a new level of importance. Thirty years ago, for example, only 6 percent of all college students in America were non-white; today, they comprise fully 20 percent of collegiate enrollments. In 1960, nearly two-thirds of all college students were men; today, the majority of undergraduates are women.

In response to this changing social context, the academic program on many campuses began to focus increasingly on non-Western cultures, and on the history and contributions of women. Thomas Sobol, Commissioner of Education in New York state, makes the case for the new curriculum this way: "The people of a nation as diverse as ours, living in a world which seems to shrink each year, must know more about one another than they do. Greater knowledge of one another will not guarantee community, but it may well be a necessary precondition. The capacity to take multiple perspectives, to understand the other person's point of view, can help us live well with one another while also developing our intellect."

However, some educators remain unpersuaded. Critics of multiculturalism argue that American universities simply cannot teach everything, and that they have a special obligation to focus on Western intellectual thought. There is a fear that the multicultural emphasis will lead to a diminished respect for our heritage and a deeply flawed understanding of history and literature.

Other academics go still further, viewing multiculturalism as intellectually irresponsible. It opens the door, they argue, not only to frivolous academic activity, but also to social and political abuses.

In response to charges such as these, a new organization, called Teachers for a Democratic Culture, has been formed by faculty from universities across the country. These professors argue that the current curriculum debates are "signs of educational health, not decline." And they criticize those who, in their opinion, reduce complex questions to "a simple choice between civilization and barbarism."

Here, then, is the situation. Those defending a more traditional course of study are accused of having too narrow a view of our heritage and of failing to give adequate recognition to the works of women and minorities in this country. Advocates of reform are charged with lowering academic standards, or worse, with politicizing higher education. In such a climate, prospects for reasoned discourse and thoughtful reflection are greatly diminished.

How, then, should the nation's colleges and universities respond? Clearly the challenge is to find an intellectually authentic middle ground, and Professor Nathan Glazer of Harvard University illustrates quite precisely how this integrative process can occur. In an article in *The New Republic*, he discusses how the teaching of American history might be enriched through a multicultural approach. In a revised curriculum, he wrote, "we will find the story of the settlement by the English, but students will also be told that the Spaniards got to New Mexico and Florida first. The constitution will maintain its centrality, but we will now emphasize the argument over slavery, the references to the Indians. The skeletal structure will remain," he concludes, "because we still live under the polity established by the constitution, and it is in that polity . . . that racial and ethnic and minority groups and women seek to expand their rights."

Multiculturalism, if appropriately defined, can offer students a deeper, more authentic understanding of the world in which they live. But viewed more largely, the current curriculum debate is vitally important, I believe, not just to students, or even to colleges and universities, but to society itself. What are being confronted in the current academic discourse are, in reality, profoundly consequential social questions: Just what are the traditions worth remembering in America today? How do we, as a nation, celebrate diversity while affirming community, as well? And what are the commonalities that hold us all together?

These concerns, these essential issues, force us to re-examine our fundamental values as a people. And our responses surely will shape both the quality of higher learning and the character of the nation in the century ahead.