GENESIS OF THE IDEA OF AMERICAN CULTURES

Notes on comments by
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American Cultures Colloquium
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Panel Discussion on the History of the American Cultures Requirement

Members of the Special Committee had intellectual agreement on four ideas.

1. The requirement would not focus on racism, discrimination, oppression. Though these themes are important in US history, structuring courses on them would automatically assume a vertical relationship (i.e., whites over minorities), would focus on victimization, would reinforce the view of minorities as objects and not subjects (e.g., minorities moved by societal forces rather than individuals with own volition). Also, blacks would, again, be robbed of their culture.

2 & 3. The requirement should be multicultural, i.e., more than one, and multicultural, i.e., focus on culture. It is not good enough to say that courses that focus on minorities are multicultural because you have to include the dominant group in order to discuss the "other" group; would still have verticality.

The courses should deal with the relation between groups as they created the US as a multicultural people, nation, culture; how groups interact, conceive of themselves and each other, relate to each other. The vertical model would penetrate only one part of the phenomenon; it wouldn’t explain blacks’ contribution to American culture, the internal life of minority groups, cultural refuges, etc.

The major question is: what is the connecting link that makes us one people. The job of faculty is to help students understand the answers to this question. How cultural interaction among various peoples produce one people. The biggest misconception of opponents of the requirement is that there is one culture to which all others are subservient. Some faculty cannot conceive of any other way of seeing the US. For them to change their way of thinking would threaten the security of their knowledge. This was the biggest obstacle to
approving the requirement. Frequent question: what is the intellectual content of African American studies, Asian American studies, Chicano studies, Native American studies?

The courses should stress the interaction of cultures to make a common culture. A common misconception is that cultural diffusion is one way, i.e., from whites to minorities. The notion of interaction assumes that diffusion is multidirectional.

4. The requirement represents an opportunity and faculty have an obligation to be innovative in creating courses. This is a chance to focus on heretofore ignored groups, ignored subjects (e.g., folk or popular culture), and interdisciplinary approaches that break through departmental barriers, which may be required in order to do justice to the subject.