

Diversity in the Curriculum

A JMC program in the Midwest states the problem bluntly: “It is important to consider how to take up issues of diversity in classroom discussions and lectures in a way that does not alienate students or shut down the dialogue.”

The program’s diversity statement proceeds to critique three common approaches:

1. Stand-alone diversity courses. “While offering such courses certainly emphasizes the importance we place on understanding the role of diversity in modern society, there is a tendency to see diversity in this context as a special topic lying somewhere outside the core principles of journalism.”
2. Dedicated class sessions on diversity or tied to a textbook chapter on diversity. “Again, such special treatment can create a sense that this subject matter is an isolated topic, marginalized, taken up in an obligatory bow to political correctness.”
3. Finding natural points of entry for diversity to be discussed across the curriculum. “It potentially is the more effective approach to ‘doing’ diversity in the classroom.... Diversity is introduced to students in an organic, less self-conscious way that encourages them to cross their own boundaries in search of that untold story.”

This program's critique gets at the heart of the debate between curricular separatists and integrationists.

To ensure that students are exposed to diverse perspectives, some programs create a diversity course and require all students to take it. Other programs create a diversity course and offer it as an elective. These courses carry titles such as Race and Media, Women and Media, and Multicultural and Diversity Problems in Communications.

One school places diversity topics within a structured theme, such as media framing that uses the Emmett Till hate crime as a case study to evaluate past and present news coverage of African Americans. Another school reports that its diversity course explores “the extent to which discrimination and prejudice function within news media industries.” That very definition is why many in JMC leadership prefer another way. Rather than turn diversity into a media criticism course, why not affirmatively work with students to create a better model?

Some diversity plans emphasize the second approach, instructing faculty to build diversity units into existing courses. One diversity plan says, “In some cases, this will require a full class period, which should be clearly marked on the syllabus.” Another program requires that every course include a diversity unit or learning objective on the achievements and importance of women and minorities in media.

One school asks faculty to use standard language in syllabi to signal that discussion of diversity is an expectation in courses. Syllabi are to state that the school “complies with national accrediting standards designed to help prepare students to understand and relate to issues of interest to women and minorities in a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-racial and otherwise diverse society.” A concern, of course, is whether such standardized language on all syllabi seems to whack students over the head with diversity rather than embedding diversity into good professional practice.

**Three concepts:
stand-alone courses,
dedicated sessions,
and points of entry
across the curriculum**

'My students don't know we're covering diversity.... Our goal is sharpening perceptions and deepening consciences.'

The third approach integrates diversity into courses in a more naturalistic way. The principle is that “the search for truth demands that students seek information and perspectives from minorities and people of all social, economic and cultural backgrounds.”

A media ethics professor wrote in a self-study about incorporating a discussion of racist hoaxes into a broader discussion about manipulations of media. He wrote, “My students don’t know we’re covering diversity. We do not cover diversity from a political view. We approach it through journalism – as an aspect of our jobs.... Embrace diversity as an aspect of good journalism. Our goal is sharpening perceptions and deepening consciences.”

Diversity plans and self-studies are packed with ideas on how to infuse the curriculum with diversity topics. Here are examples from several schools:

- The basic broadcasting course discusses the rise of ethnic channels such as the Black Entertainment Network and Telemundo for Hispanic audiences.
- Students in an advertising sales course discuss ads that target minors, minorities and other special audiences.
- Students in a media writing course do articles on diversity issues such as physical access for disabled persons on campus and the views of female Islamic students regarding women’s issues.
- An advanced reporting course is paired with a Spanish Conversation and Translation course to interview and write articles for the local Hispanic community.
- Corporate communication students learn that increased sales and market share are enhanced by implementing diversity plans throughout an organization.

Good idea... Faculty need to infuse their courses with diversity issues when appropriate to course content. One JMC program calls it “a curriculum that reflects and expresses the full American pluralism.”

Guest speakers are another way to invite diverse voices into the classroom. A Southern program offers \$500 faculty mini-grants to bring diverse speakers into the classroom, to purchase videos, and to secure other instruction materials focused on diversity.

One school maintains a running list of guest speakers coded by race and gender. The goal is to have an equal number of men and women guest speakers and at least 20 percent racial minorities.

Good idea... Track the use of guest speakers to promote inclusion of diverse voices. Faculty may have an understandable tendency to select people they know, or who are like themselves, to speak with students in class. Encourage faculty to broaden their invitations.

Good idea... Invite someone to do a workshop for faculty on how to incorporate diversity into the curriculum.

If a program has a large or unusual student population, then a workshop on student learning styles might be appropriate. For example, a school invited an Arab American scholar to visit with faculty about teaching Middle Eastern students.

Guest speakers bring diverse voices into the classroom

With the emphasis on assessment, programs now are making quantitative claims about syllabi and courses

Student media are included in some diversity plans as well, depending on whether student media are part of the unit or not. A student newspaper staff may undergo multicultural sensitivity training, or the student radio station may devote a certain percentage of its programming to ethnic music tastes.

While some schools continue to look at diversity through an affirmative action lens, most universities today see internationalization as an important form of diversity and inclusiveness. A stated goal of one JMC department is to see 20 percent of its students have a study abroad experience “to expose them to diverse cultures and ideologies.”

Good idea... Encourage students to broaden their perspectives through study abroad and international studies courses.

With the emphasis on assessment, some JMC programs are now turning quantitative even in their curriculum. One program says, “Syllabi in 80 percent of courses will reflect specific assignments, discussions, learning objectives, or readings dealing with multiculturalism or diversity.” Another requires that every syllabus include diversity-related material or a statement of support for diversity in the classroom.

The stated expectation is more common than evidence of an outcome. Only one of the analyzed self-studies claimed that every class has at least one unit devoted to diversity. It said, “Most often the component is a written assignment on how to cover minorities and women. Reading assignments are also frequently used. Few faculty members are using databases, movies or videos for diversity assignments.”

In terms of assessment, these syllabi requirements seem like stilted efforts to show they *mean it* when they say they’re doing something. On the other hand, awareness is the first step toward understanding and application. Perhaps the syllabus requirement pushes faculty on the awareness issue – if programs are actually taking the time to review syllabi in this manner.

Standard 3 scares programs when combined with Standard 9 in the way it expects curricular assessment at three levels. One Southwestern school reported that 19 of its courses raised *awareness* of diversity, another 19 courses prompted *understanding* of diversity, 16 courses required students to *apply* diversity, and the remaining 9 courses had not addressed diversity.

One school asks diversity-related questions to graduating seniors. Two-thirds said they strongly agreed or somewhat agreed that diversity is discussed in classes and that the program taught them how to communicate with people of diverse backgrounds.

Good idea... Include diversity questions in the program’s assessment methods, such as in a survey of graduating seniors or in an exit examination, if given.