PRO STATEMENT IN SUPPORT OF THE MOTION

My first reaction when I heard last fall about the new College Diversity Initiative was, “What? What could possibly be the point of another vote when the one we had just two years ago in 2012 had been defeated?”

I thought I understood some of the arguments against the proposal – there already were too many undergraduate course requirements, progress to a degree could be affected, there is no proven value to such courses, it would “force-feed” undergraduates material they have no interest in, it could waste faculty resources and students’ time and money, there is no need since we live in a “post-racial” society. But after reading through the new diversity proposal and doing some research on my own, I found no credible support for any of those suppositions.

A perusal of mass media on any given day reveals the extent to which violence and other conflicts at home and abroad derive from cross-cultural and cross-class assumptions, prejudices and misunderstandings. Among our responsibilities as UCLA faculty is to help diminish narrow, egocentric worldviews that come from a lack of understanding and empathy for people different from ourselves.

A recent article in the Scientific American by Victoria Plaut, “3 Myths Plus a Few Best Practices for Achieving Diversity,” reports on a spate of recent studies demonstrating that “unconscious” racial, ethnic and gender bias can have profound effects on behavior, and that “merely caring about diversity is not enough” to overcome biased thinking. This is why so many U.S. institutions of higher learning, including all of the UCs except for UCLA and UC Merced have diversity course requirements.

But can classroom-based diversity education help ameliorate the sorry state of affairs beyond campus settings? Extensive empirical research shows that courses that introduce undergraduates to diversity concepts and issues contribute
demonstratively to cognitive development, openness to having one’s views challenged, ability to cooperate across differences and work through controversial issues, civic engagement and the amelioration of racial, ethnic and gender-based tensions.

There are more prosaic reasons for our undergraduates to become more cognizant of diversity issues. A 2010 survey by the Association of American Colleges and Universities on the competencies employers seek in recent graduates found a large majority wanted graduates to have “knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world.” Furthermore, the National Science Foundation and National Institutes of Health now require that a variety of categories of research proposals specify how diversity will be incorporated or addressed.

As to whether students’ progress to degree will be affected, the diversity initiative proposal indicates that it would not, based on its assessment of demand and seat capacity from nearly 100 syllabi submitted in summer 2014 by interested faculty. In addition, Chancellor Gene Block has committed resources for developing additional diversity-related courses.

In fact, the entire UCLA administration has demonstrated deep support for this initiative. Moreover, the College-wide elected Faculty Executive Committee, the Faculty of the College for Letters and Science, the Undergraduate Council, and the elected representatives of the Legislative Assembly voted it on favorably.

I urge you to do the same and vote for the College Diversity Initiative.

Adapted from “College Diversity Requirement would promote unbiased thinking,” Daily Bruin, posted October 23, 2014.

Browner is a research professor in the Center for Culture and Health of the Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human
Behavior, and in the Departments of Anthropology and Gender Studies.