Against the “Diversity” Requirement

Thomas Schwartz

Because “diversity” has become code for certain values of the political left, the requirement would have an ideological slant. You do not have to oppose that slant to oppose having ideological graduation requirements, of the left or the right, in a public university.

Diversity in some sense may be a consensus value, but the “diversity” currently promoted is less diverse than that: it covers but a handful of differences, chiefly ones of race, sex, national ancestry, and sexual preference. To celebrate those differences, as the champions of “diversity” do, is to disparage others and to encourage people to “identify” with their natal categories more than their voluntary affiliations and affinities. It is also to promote feelings of guilt, resentment, and separateness and to reject American exceptionalism and the ideal of a color-blind society.

More ominous than a required “diversity” course is Senate endorsement of an ideological label. In future that could justify ideological scrutiny of admissions, hiring, and promotions. Neither Prop. 209 nor the norm of academic freedom would prevent UCLA from giving extra rewards to those who, apart from their own natal categories, helped advance an official academic objective, in this case “diversity.”

The “diversity” requirement is intended to remedy bigoted attitudes and behavior. Although the malady is deplorable—assuming it exists—the prescribed remedy is costly enough that proponents must bear four burdens to make their case.

One is to show that more than a handful of students are bigots. Where is the evidence? Of the two examples proponents love to cite, one involved hateful printed signs of unknown origin, the other, bigoted medical residents—not exactly students, much less undergraduates. The vaunted Moreno Report, about biased procedures for adjudicating complaints, says nothing about bias among undergraduates. Some student activists sense biased attitudes all around. But student activists typically get so good at hunting witches that they find them not only where they exist. The idea that 21st century American 18 year-olds who have been admitted to UCLA are so afflicted with bigotry that they must be forced to endure an attitude-altering course is preposterous. It is like forcing Norwegians to get inoculated against malaria.

A second burden is to show that a diversity requirement would remedy the problem. Proponents cite studies in which students who took “diversity” courses scored well on tests of “correct” attitudes compared with other students or with their own pre-course scores. But the subjects were volunteers, who in all likelihood had no bad attitudes to begin with and easily learned to give the “right” test answers. More important, despite scraping the bottom of the academic barrel, “diversity” proponents could not find a single study that even purported to show that “diversity” courses cured bad attitudes. Besides, any students who really “need” the treatment are the least likely to swallow the medicine. Certainly they would never pick a “diversity” course whose focus was the group they disliked. Certainly, too, most students would be drawn to courses about their own natal groups; almost all students could find one. That would encourage ghettoization—
something that the most ardent champions of “diversity” actually applaud, by the way, as witness the defense of “racially themed” dorms by a current candidate for Vice Chancellor for Diversity.

The third burden is to say what the “diversity” courses would teach and how the requirement would be implemented. What we have so far is a pig in a translucent poke: a vague criterion, a bizarre list of submitted courses, and a biased procedure. We are told that a “diversity” course must talk about the experiences of two or more groups of any sort and emphasize inequality and conflict as well as fairness and inclusiveness. The obvious problem is that most Social Science courses and quite a few Humanities courses can be described that way. The teeth of the proposal are in the procedure: “diversity” enthusiasts would join a Senate committee and vet course proposals by fellow enthusiasts. The one clear thing in the proposal is its assurance of an ideological slant.

The final burden is to show how students, who have trouble enough meeting all their requirements in four years, would accommodate a “diversity” course in their schedules. We are told that the requirement could be met by courses that also meet other requirements. That would shift enrollment from some current courses to others without helping most students find tolerably congenial “diversity” courses that fit their schedules and were not overenrolled. To their credit, proponents have conceded that an adequate increase in the supply of courses would suck up millions of dollars that could pay for scholarships instead. And who would teach the extra courses? I fear a lowering of standards by the lumpenprofessoriate of junior-colleges adjuncts and interest-group organizers who would have to be hired solely to teach “diversity.”

Proponents tout demand by students—actually by about 10 percent of them. That is a worthy thing to consider when students ask to study something new. But in this case student activists have asked that other students be forced to study something new. As so often, the activists are bullies, who are enjoying themselves too much to be taken seriously. Or if you think their goal is rather to make the UCLA degree more valuable, go ask them whether they would support an increase in math, science, or language requirements, or more written work in their courses.

Opponents of the “diversity” requirement have asked for a poll of the whole UCLA faculty because the earlier, very close vote of the L & S College Faculty was illegally rigged. Contrary to Senate By-Laws, the ballot did not contain a summary of arguments pro and con: professors who were properly too busy to follow the discussion of the issue saw only a yes–or–no plebiscite on a course requirement presented as non-controversial by some official committee.

Stripped of ideology, diversity is a legitimate academic concern. In our world it is not anarchy but a surprising measure of cooperation that has rapidly emerged to fill vacuums of political power. But it is cooperation within ethnic and other natal groups rather than between them, and it is aimed at the subordination, enslavement, even massacre of others. With our expertise in the culture and experiences of many groups, in the social psychology of inter-group attitudes, in the economic and political mechanics of competition and collective action, and in international organization and law, UCLA is in an ideal position to become a center of focused research on conflict and comity between those groups. One reason we have not made more of this opportunity is that, when most of us were not looking, campus crackpots hoisted the standard of
“diversity” on behalf of a costly program to force students to swallow snake oil for a malady they don’t have.