Pro Statement
Vote Yes and Approve the College Undergraduate Diversity Requirement

As we consider the issue of whether to adopt a diversity requirement for students of the College of Letters and Science, our most important concern must be whether and how the change would advance the university’s primary purpose: Education. I draw on the wisdom of several thinkers, from ancient philosophers to a contemporary journalist and on Malcolm Forbes and Margaret Mead, from parts of the ideological spectrum that are not always so much in tune:

“The direction in which education starts a man will determine his future in life.”—Plato

This foundational bit of wisdom implies a standard by which all educational institutions should construct their curricula: What knowledge and skills will our current undergraduates need to pursue professionally effective and personally rewarding lives? Clearly the answer will depend on how we envision that future. One thing is certain, in this instance. We are well into a dual revolution: (1) a demographic change that has brought people of many backgrounds to our society and (2) a communications transformation that has shrunk the distances between nations and cultures and lowers the borders that once kept us tidily in our separate places.

For the most part our students already know this. They live it. Some have called on us to give them the tools they need to operate more successfully in lives where they will be called upon to interact productively and constructively with those of various races, ethnicities, languages, religions, cultural and class backgrounds, gender orientations, and so forth. In this endeavor an anthropologist offers a simple goal:

“Children must be taught how to think, not what to think.”
Margaret Mead

Besides providing students with information, we must help them develop strategies for evaluating what they learn and drawing their own reasoned conclusions about what it means and how it might form the basis for sound and ethical decisions. An economist provides a similar insight:

“The purpose of education is to replace an empty mind with an open one.” Malcolm Forbes

To help students develop an open mind is by definition not the inculcation of values. We simply want them to examine a great variety of alternative perspectives before settling on the values they will live by. The kinds of content that would be part of the diversity requirement would certainly work toward this goal. We sell them—and ourselves—short if we think we can simply lift the lid and pour in the beliefs and values we think they should hold. An ancient philosopher’s advice is sound:

“It is the mark of the educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it.”  Aristotle
Indeed, our faculty provide an excellent example of how educated minds can draw different conclusions from the same facts. Our students will be no less able to choose for themselves.

I have so far avoided some of the other issues that have arisen in the course of a discussion that was supposed to focus on education. Some have challenged whether UCLA is capable of providing a diversity requirement. But why would we fall short if other campuses of the UC system and major universities elsewhere have accomplished the same task with minimal disruption?

Others put disparaging quotation marks around “diversity” and blatantly refer to it as a code word that stands for some nebulous but malicious conspiracy to brainwash innocent students. I would like to laugh, but this sort of discourse has accompanied virtually every step in UCLA’s path to become an institution of increasing diversity in student, faculty, and staff demographics, in research areas, and in service goals—the very diversity the university asserts pride in having achieved. Every step has faced similar challenges and has been hard fought and won only with great effort and dedication.

And then there’s the intervention of politics, which some opponents argue is a poisonous tool that should be evicted from the premises. In fact, politics is the time-honored way of resolving conflicts without warfare, especially in a democracy. The opponents are employing politics in issuing their challenge, and I respect their right if not their reasons.

But this is all a dust storm that threatens to disguise the crucial question at hand: Will a diversity requirement provide a meaningful enhancement to the undergraduate education UCLA provides? While we can only hope that issues related to our diverse nation appear regularly in our curriculum, setting a requirement ensures that no one leaves town without examining perspectives other than their own. As a journalist has written:

“*The whole purpose of education is to turn mirrors into windows.*” Sydney J. Harris

Beyond learning more about themselves and their heritage, we want our students to gaze upon the multicultural society we have become and to understand it as a source of enrichment as well as to learn how to deal with its challenges. I support the proposed diversity requirement enthusiastically as a means to ensure that College of Letters and Science undergraduates are provided an education that more fully articulates with the world they live in. I urge you to support this vital curricular innovation in the up-coming Academic Senate Divisional referendum.

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