CON STATEMENT: WHY VOTE NO

A ‘ghettoization’ effect

The proposed requirement is supposed to provide our students “with the ability to understand the perspectives of others whose views, backgrounds, and experiences may differ from their own.” To that end, the diversity courses were to “substantially address conditions, experiences, perspectives, and/or representations of at least two groups using difference frames that include but are not limited to race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, religion, disability, age, language, nationality, citizenship status and/or place of origin.” The aim of the two-group rule was to ensure that the diversity courses would have a relatively broad focus. But the report of the Diversity Initiative Implementation Committee makes it clear that in practice many courses that focus on the experience of just one identity group would fulfill the requirement.

The gutting of the two-group rule is a serious matter in its own right. Indeed, it makes some opponents suspect that the requirement, if adopted, would be implemented in a way that reflects the ideological agenda of the “diversity” lobby. But many opponents also believe it will have one major and under-appreciated effect. Many students would probably end up taking courses associated with their own identity group. As it is, students enrolling in such courses tend disproportionately to be from the corresponding identity group. And it is important to remember that the vast majority of our undergraduates come from such groups. White Non-Hispanics from the United States currently comprise 27% of our undergraduate body. Of that group, more than half are women. Of the remainder, many belong to various identity groups (Gays, Jews, Armenians, and so on). That means that over 90% of our undergraduates belong to one of the identity groups covered by the diversity requirement. Nothing in the proposed requirement obliges those students to take courses relating to groups other than their own, and if they do, as seems likely, end up enrolling disproportionately in courses dealing with their own group, the result would be a form of ghettoization.

The purported goal of the proposal is to sensitize students to the point of view of others whose experiences differ from their own, but in practice the requirement seems likely to have the opposite result. It might well simply encourage students to retreat into their various identity group enclaves.

Thought reform is not our mission

It is clear from the College Diversity Committee’s report that a basic aim of the proposal is to reshape our undergraduates’ “attitudes about race.” One goal, for example, is to break down “White students’ color blind racial ideology.” The aim, it seems to many opponents of the proposal, is to get the University to adopt a kind of official ideology—a set of beliefs and attitudes it would try to inculcate in its students.

A recent statement in the Daily Bruin, signed by nine student backers of the “diversity” initiative, shows what lies in the hearts of some of the most fervent supporters of the proposal. The mere fact that a number of professors wanted the whole faculty to have a chance to vote on the issue proves, to these supporters of “diversity,” that those professors are “bigoted.” They want the University authorities to hold those “renegade faculty” accountable. “There must be consequences,” they say, “for actions that prevent diversity initiatives from being implemented” (link). Voting NO would make it clear that we reject that vision of what UCLA should be—that we do not accept the idea that the University should be a place where a degree of ideological uniformity is expected.

Many of our colleagues thus oppose this measure because they believe the faculty should not sanction the politicization of the University. They think that we, as an institution, should not want to instill in our students a pre-packaged set of beliefs reflecting a particular ideological perspective. They believe that our
business is education, not indoctrination. And they would take the same view if the threat were coming from the right—as in fact was the case during the McCarthy period—and not just from the left.

The case for adopting the requirement is weak.

For many opponents, the most important reason for rejecting the proposal is that it would place an additional burden on undergraduates in the College—students who, in many cases, already have their hands full just completing the coursework required for their major. By forcing them to take a “diversity” course in order to graduate, we would be limiting yet further their already limited ability to take electives that interest them. The burden is particularly great because (according to calculations some of our colleagues have made) there probably would not be enough diversity courses offered to enable students—and especially transfer students—to meet the requirement and still graduate on time. Given these problems (among others), the case for imposing this new requirement should be compelling.

The proponents, in particular, would need to show that whatever problems we have here at UCLA with racial, ethnic, or gender insensitivity, the diversity requirement would be a good way of rectifying them. But the evidence the Diversity Committee cited to prove that the requirement would have the desired effect is not impressive. In some of the studies it cites, for example, students are surveyed at the beginning and then at the end of a “diversity” course (in one case before the grades were in); the “improved” answers they give at the end is then taken as evidence that the course has worked. But such conclusions are suspect because of the tendency of those surveyed to give what sociologists have called “socially appropriate answers.” The favorable findings might simply show that students had learned to give answers those administering the survey wanted to hear.

A question of fairness

This is the second time this proposal is being put up for a vote this year. The October poll of the College faculty produced a margin of 332 to 303 for the diversity requirement. Some of our colleagues feel that that first vote should have been dispositive. That point might have a certain force if the process leading to that first vote had been fair. But it wasn’t. Arguments pro and con, for example, did not accompany the ballot, as the Senate by-law governing this process required. Our colleagues, moreover, have been bombarded with numerous emails from administration officials (including some department chairs) urging a YES vote, while the opponents have not been given a chance to lay out their own views in the same way. On the eve of that October vote, the Daily Bruin, which supports the proposal, simply refused to publish a statement by one of our colleagues outlining his reasons for opposing it. And more recently proponents of this measure have been trying to prevent the whole faculty from getting a chance to vote on this issue. They have complained that “a small group of opponents”—the 80 or so professors who have signed the petitions—have undermined the “democratic process” that culminated in earlier votes by the College faculty and the Senate’s Legislative Assembly by “forcing a campus-wide faculty vote.” But petitioning for a full vote—clearly provided for in the by-laws—can scarcely be seen as a subversion of the “democratic process.” And it is certainly strange to see people who view themselves as the heirs of the civil rights movement—a movement in which voting rights loomed so large—trying so hard to prevent the whole faculty from voting on this important question. What are they afraid of?

Many opponents feel that the whole faculty should have the right to vote because they believe a YES vote would have far-reaching implications. If this measure is approved, we would not just be imposing a new requirement on the undergraduates in the College. We would also, in effect, be giving our seal of approval to a certain vision of what the University should be. To do so would be at odds with the basic idea of a politically-neutral university committed to free and open inquiry.
A more extensive, footnoted, version of this statement, along with other supporting material, is available at http://realdiversity.org/