PRO STATEMENT – College Undergraduate Diversity Requirement

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Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we lived in a utopia? As it is, we are very lucky to live in the United States of America; a country built on freedom and the democratic values that everyone should be treated equally and fairly. As marked by the 50th anniversary of the demonstrations in Selma, Alabama, that led to the passage of the Voting Rights Act, our country has come a long way in providing people with equal rights and being able to live in a society free from discrimination and oppression. Nevertheless, we still have a way to go before all segments of our society feel respected and valued, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, physical or mental ability, or manner of dress. UCLA is not a utopia and has seen its share of racial, religious, and political tensions in its relatively brief history. Just recently, the political tensions of the Israel—Palestinian conflict made its way into our undergraduate student government. The issue involved the eligibility of a Jewish student to be appointed to the campus judicial panel. Janina Montero, Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs, was quoted in the LA Times as saying that students are learning “difficult and painful” lessons about how to coexist “in a multiethnic, multicultural society and to learn very directly what kind of sensitivities there are and what respect for people means in practice.”

Prejudice comes from a lack of knowledge and ignorance tends to breed fear and anxiety. We live in a golden age of communication where the world is at our finger tips. We live in a global society where we are strongly influenced by the people we interact with and the news media which we prefer to indulge ourselves in. As faculty, we hold ourselves in high esteem for teaching our students about discipline-specific topics. We also require our students to have some proficiency in math and language skills. I don’t think we do a very good job of educating our students about “life skills” and dealing with people from backgrounds different from their own. When our students graduate, their career success will not only depend on how knowledgeable they are within their major subject, but also on how well they can get along with others and see things from a number of different perspectives. I believe that we owe it to our students to teach them about social justice and how to be better, civil human beings. My son will soon be completing the Sheriff Academy. My wife and I are very proud of him but also very concerned, as you can imagine. Being a peace officer these days is riddled with controversy. Given the public focus on police brutality and racial profiling, I would hope that the values he has learned at home, in school, and at the Academy will prepare him to deal with people from all walks of life with dignity and respect.

The opponents assert that there will be costs involved and faculty effort needed to launch the requirement. This is true, but one must also consider the cost-benefit ratio. Will one diversity-related class make a difference? Having been at UCLA for over 30 years, I have seen students take a general education class completely out of their intended major and take on an entirely new perspective in their education from that experience. Is the benefit worth the cost? YOU BET!