As a new member of the UCLA faculty and having recently come from an institution that adopted a diversity requirement within the last few years (UCSD), I was surprised by the aggressive opposition to this curricular change at UCLA. As is the case with many faculty, I came to UCLA because of its outstanding research environment and incredible commitment to educating the next generation of thought leaders. The extreme opposition to curricula that supports students’ abilities to navigate an increasingly diverse and complex world seemed inconsistent with the values professed by the institution. I could only assume that most of the opposition stemmed not from a rejection of diversity, but from concerns about implementation. So I sought out information to understand the feasibility of a diversity requirement at UCLA. In particular, I wanted to address three key questions: (1) Will this increase student time to degree? (2) Are there enough courses for students to fulfill this requirement? (3) Has there been a transparent and thoughtful process for vetting the concerns of faculty and fine-tuning this curricular change, and is there institutional support for it?

(1) Will this increase time to degree? At UC San Diego, all undergraduates are required to take a course that fulfills the Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) graduation requirement. In order to prevent students from increasing their time to degree, the diversity requirement can be fulfilled by a course that also fulfills another requirement, such as a GE requirement. The SAME approach has been taken at UCLA. In fact, the College of Letters and Science requires 3 courses in “Foundations of Arts and Humanities” and 3 courses in “Foundations of Society and Culture” (http://www.registrar.ucla.edu/ge/GE-LS14-15.pdf). It is easy to see from the 160 or so syllabi that are under consideration by the undergraduate council that by taking one of these courses, students can easily fulfill a GE and the diversity requirement simultaneously.

(2) Are there enough courses to fulfill the requirement? In year one, approximately 4800 students will need to fulfill the requirement at some point during their four years at UCLA. In 2017, the requirement will also apply to transfer students. When the 110 or so courses that are already in the queue for approval are formally approved by the Undergraduate Council to fulfill this curricular requirement, a typical process for all courses at UCLA, then there will be approximately 15,000 seats. This does not account for 50 syllabi that have been submitted since the list was released at the time of the diversity requirement approval in November, and it presumes that there are no additional courses added to the queue, which seems unlikely since the number of courses have more than doubled at UCSD since the requirement was adopted in 2011, and nearly all of the courses approved at UC Berkeley and UC Davis were added in the years since the requirement was adopted. The Undergraduate Council committee charged with evaluating syllabi to fulfill the requirement also identified approximately 9,000 additional seats in lower division courses with relevant content.

With this in mind, I was not surprised to learn that the Robert S. Cox, Director Enrollment Planning and Academic Performance Analysis (and the unbiased professional whose job it is to determine course capacity) reported that there is no problem with the implementation of the requirement at UCLA.

I’ve read with keen interest the e-mails sent to us all by a particularly vociferous group of opponents. I have worked to square the speculative doomsday scenarios about course enrollments with the experiences at all of the other UC campuses, including my former institution, and the “what if” scenarios bare little resemblance to reality. Nonetheless, watching the skill with which these arguments are crafted has made me more excited to re-read Naomi Oreskes “Merchants of Doubt” and see Robert Kenner’s documentary of the same title.
(3) Has there been a transparent and thoughtful process for vetting the concerns of faculty and fine-tuning this curricular change, and is there institutional support for this change? Looking back through my inbox, I found invitations to town hall meetings about the diversity requirement before the campus vote. I, like many of you, received a number of reminders to vote and was able to see pro and con arguments when I logged onto the CCLE website. I also found notification of the Legislative Assembly (LgA) meeting containing the entire diversity requirement proposal, and at the LgA meeting this curricular change was opened up for public debate for over an hour leading to a vote of 85 in favor and 18 in opposition. This type of vetting and careful consideration feels consistent with the value UCLA places on faculty engagement. It is unlikely that this requirement will be left to languish, since both the Chancellor and the EVC have committed to providing the necessary support to make the diversity requirement transformative for our students, and a group of faculty from across the college, many of whom are in important positions of leadership at the university, have spent the better part of a year working out the feasibility of this proposal.

In my experience, a diversity requirement can make an important impact on a campus. At UCSD, it created an intensive dialog about pedagogy that encourages intergroup dialog, it enhanced TA training for effective discussion of such subject matter, and it fostered interdepartmental collaboration; one need only look at such faculty driven activities as the “Teaching Diversity Conference: Strategies for Creating Inclusive Classrooms and Communities” to see evidence of this. These are a far cry from the now infamous Compton Cookout, an event that helped motivate the adoption of the DEI requirement at UCSD. A recent look at the way UCLA students have been portrayed in the NY Times suggests that our students need these tools as well (http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/06/us/debate-on-a-jewish-student-at-ucla.html). Perhaps most importantly, adoption of a diversity requirement communicates that we value and support tooling our students with the knowledge they need to succeed in an ever-changing cultural, social, and political landscape. For these reasons, I feel I have an obligation to our students to support the College of Letters and Science Diversity Requirement.

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