

Proposed Changes to the Culture-Centered Inquiry Requirements

Motion

To expand the Culture-Centered Inquiry requirement, to be renamed the “Intercultural Literacy Requirement,” by one additional course from a newly-named and defined “Considering Difference” cluster that would include both existing Non-Western and Cultural Diversity courses and incorporate other courses meeting the new criteria. The “Intercultural Literacy” requirement would be three-fold: two courses in “Considering Difference” and one course as in the current Foreign Literature and Language requirement.

Rationale

The Goals for Student Learning and Development call for our students to “understand social and cultural diversity in national and global contexts,” to “interact effectively and collaboratively with individuals and across social identities,” and to “interrogate one’s own values in relation to those of others, across social and cultural differences.” NSSE data has identified areas of concern in the degree to which we pursue these goals within the curriculum. For example, when students responded to question (1e) “Included diverse perspectives (different races, religions, genders, political beliefs, etc.) in class discussions or writing assignments,” the answers revealed perceived decreases in that content over time (between student cohorts in 2003 and 2010), and increasing divergence in the experiences reported by seniors at Skidmore and peer institutions.

Currently, students take two courses to complete the Culture-Centered Inquiry requirement: one course in a foreign language or literature, and one course from either the “Non-Western Cultures” or “Cultural Diversity” cluster. There has been discussion in some quarters of expanding the current Culture-Centered Inquiry Requirement for several years, and CIGU has endorsed “A Survey and Analysis of Cultural Diversity Courses at Skidmore College,” a December 2009 report that urged CEPP to consider a proposal expanding the requirement. We can accomplish these goals more effectively if students confront these issues explicitly in a robust three-course general education requirement, one that provides greater depth of exploration and offers sufficient curricular flexibility. Courses that meet the current CD/NW requirement, when coupled with current courses in the curriculum that address other issues of diversity, will offer students a deeper opportunity to engage issues of difference from a variety of disciplinary perspectives.

We believe the aforementioned Goals will be better supported when diversity is more broadly defined. The guiding principle behind the creation of the existing Cultural Diversity courses was straightforward: “In completing a Cultural Diversity course students are encouraged to compare at least two markedly different cultures, one of which must be non-Western in origin.” However, the emphasis placed on a Western/Non-Western binary is no longer satisfactory in determining whether a course should receive the proposed “Considering Difference” designation. There are both historical and contemporary examples of two or more fundamentally Non-Western groups that may see one another as “markedly different.” Contemporary and increasingly transnational scholarship and pedagogy also call for revisiting this principle. Several fields (including Africana Studies, Caribbean Studies, and Latin American Studies) illuminate intra-group tensions along fault lines of class, gender, ethnicity and sexuality that run as deep as those that cross racial lines. Further, a survey of existing Cultural Diversity courses suggests that *race* and *ethnicity* are synonymous with societal difference. However, issues of societal difference also can be analyzed in terms of *gender*, *gender expression*, *religion*, *sexuality*, and *socioeconomic class*, both in

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national and international contexts. The proposed “Considering Difference” guidelines should reflect this fact, particularly given the growing number of courses that apply an intersectional analytical frame that explicitly interrogates relationships among gender, race, class, sexuality, religion and other variables.

Proposed Language for the Intercultural Literacy Requirement

Students fulfill this requirement by completing one course in a foreign language and two courses designated as Considering Difference.

- Foreign Literature and Language: All students must choose one course at the appropriate level in a foreign language or foreign literature in its non-translated form.
- Considering Difference: Students must fulfill the requirement by successfully completing two 3- or 4-credit courses designated as Considering Difference (CD) from two different departments or programs.

Proposed Language for the Considering Difference cluster of courses:

In completing a Considering Difference course students are required to interrogate a range of social identities in order to develop a greater appreciation for and understanding of differences between and within social groups, and to operate as citizens in a diverse and interconnected world. In order to broaden students’ perspectives on difference and the various methodological approaches disciplines take towards difference, students must select the two courses from two different departments or programs to satisfy the requirement. Courses that meet the requirement address substantively one or more of these social identity variables in historical or contemporary contexts: race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, gender expression, sexuality, disability, religion, and/or socio-economic class. Courses might focus on a single group or might undertake comparisons in either a national or international context. Students can satisfy the requirement through any courses recognized by the Registrar as Considering Difference, including courses in approved study-abroad programs.

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Current language for the Culture-Centered Inquiry Requirement

Students fulfill this requirement by completing one course in a foreign language plus a second course designated as either non-Western culture or cultural diversity study.

- Foreign Literature and Language: All students must choose one course at the appropriate level in a foreign language or foreign literature in its non-translated form.
- Non-Western Culture: Students may fulfill the requirement by successfully completing one 3- or 4-credit course designated as Non-Western (NW).
- Cultural Diversity Study: Students may fulfill the requirement by successfully completing one 3- or 4-credit course designated as Cultural Diversity (CD).

Current language for the Non-Western Cultures cluster of courses:

In completing a Non-Western Cultures course students are required to study culture(s) that are neither European, nor derived from European culture.

a. The students may focus on a particular dimension of a culture or culture-area (e.g., social institutions, artistic productions, religious beliefs, historical experiences) as an organizing principle, but that dimension must be continuously placed in reference to others that also significantly shape the culture(s) in question;

b. If the context for these courses is comparative and cross-cultural in nature the students must study in depth a culture, cultures, or culture area; such comparative courses will be focused on a small number of cultures;

c. The NW course will normally include the cultures of Asia, Africa, Oceania, and the indigenous, pre-European cultures of Australia and of the Western Hemisphere. Courses concerning areas with both Western and non-Western elements such as the Near East or the Western Hemisphere must include a significant focus on non-Western culture or cultures, e.g., American Indians in the case of the Western Hemisphere, or Muslim peoples in the case of the Near East;

d. If the context for the course material is historical in nature, the students will not deal primarily with cultures from which Western culture is derived, e.g., ancient Greece or ancient Israel, nor with cultures that are primarily influenced by Western culture, e.g., modern Israeli, Brazilian, or Afro-American culture history, unless such a course meets criterion "c" above.

Current language for the Cultural Diversity cluster of courses:

In completing a Cultural Diversity course students are encouraged to compare at least two markedly different cultures, one of which must be non-Western in origin. a. Students investigate the interaction of peoples from culturally distinct origins within a given socio-political context. These courses may focus on diversity in the United States or on inter-cultural relations in other contexts. However, at least one of the groups examined will have non-Western origins;

b. Students examine the non-Western cultural forces that are manifest in the interaction of peoples of non-Western origin with peoples of Western backgrounds, and they pay particular attention to the cross-cultural influences that shape such interactions. These forces and influences will be examined from the perspectives of the peoples involved;

c. The socio-political context for the interaction between the groups studied need not be non-Western. Students study interactions between two populations, one of which must be non-Western in origin. These may include diasporic populations that are not traditionally considered to be Western in origin (e.g., African-Americans, Asian-Americans, South African Indians) as well as commonly included non-Western populations.