

Dear colleagues,

Please find attached CEPP's proposal to revise the culture-centered inquiry requirement. The description of the proposed implementation has been revised to clarify that the requirement would start for a particular incoming class.

CEPP intends to host a faculty forum to discuss the proposed revision from 3:30 to 5 in Gannett on March 30. Below, we review frequently asked questions regarding the motion, provide our responses to these questions and clarify the evidence and arguments that led CEPP to seek this revision.

Why seek revision to the culture-centered inquiry requirement?

- Evidence from interviews with graduating students of color (by CIGU); surveys of incoming students (via NSSE, and CIRP) and surveys of seniors (via NSSE, and CHAS) suggest that we need to give this requirement more pointed substance and focus. For example, when students were asked whether their college experiences "Included diverse perspectives (different races, religions, genders, political beliefs, etc.) in class discussions or writing assignments" (NSSE question 1e), 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. These documents are available at www.skidmore.edu/academics/CEPP/ReadingMaterials2.html
- 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." CEPP believes the existing Culture Centered Inquiry (CCI) requirement focuses welcome attention towards the first of these three goals, but that the latter two are often expected to be resolved within the context of the voluntary engagement in co-curricular programming and among student interactions. Some of these conversations can be uncomfortable ones, and anchoring them in the required curriculum ensures that all students grapple with them.
- The discourse in higher education regarding diversity and difference has changed since the CCI requirement was first developed. Focus has shifted from *appreciating* cultural diversity to *engaging with* or *interrogating* the power structures that affect different social groups.

Why eliminate the western/non-western binary as a central factor in the Culture-centered inquiry requirement?

- Curriculum Committee routinely rejects proposals for courses to satisfy the Culture-centered inquiry requirement due to the lack of sufficient non-western content in otherwise acceptable courses. CEPP appreciates the role the non-western criterion plays in encouraging the exploration of topics that are unfamiliar to many students, but also recognizes that the existing criteria for distinguishing between west and non-west is arbitrary, and that the boundaries between the west and non-west are increasingly porous. A map can be helpful for identifying the unfamiliar, but it is too blunt of an instrument for the purpose of disqualifying courses, nor should it be used to the exclusion of other

approaches. Further, technology continues to weaken the once strong correlation between the distance that separates two points and their dissimilarity.

- CEPP believes our students will continue to be engaged in the international world, irrespective of a formal non-western criterion for culture-centered inquiry. The College is a national leader in the proportion of students that participate in study abroad (59% of the class of 2011) and the fraction of the student body that is international in origin (and “non-western” by our current criteria) continues to increase. The fraction of students that studied abroad was much less when the criteria for the modern culture-centered inquiry requirement was conceived (35% of the class of 2001). Most importantly, we expect that many courses that satisfy the existing non-western criteria could also be (or become) appropriate for satisfying the criteria in the proposed revision to CCI.
- To be clear, nothing in the motion mandates a removal of the non-western component from CCI courses or mandates the infusion of western elements in existing courses that focus on the non-west.

Why does the proposal define difference so broadly?

- CEPP appreciates that cultural diversity (“difference”) has come to be conceptualized in varied ways. CEPP is following national trends in positing cultural diversity not only in terms of race and ethnicity, or western/non-western, but in terms of the multiple and evolving categories of social identity that contribute to imbalances of power. CEPP does not endorse creating a hierarchy of differences that would be (and is) expressed in a more narrowly defined definition. Further, CEPP believes that creating a hierarchy of differences may place unintended restrictions on the scope of proposed courses and faculty creativity as well as student engagement and learning.
- The language of the proposal provides possible examples of identity categories, not an absolute definition of difference. On the contrary, CEPP wants faculty members themselves to decide what *difference* or *diversity* will mean in a particular course, and to make a case to the Curriculum Committee for the course’s substantive accommodation of the spirit of the requirement, which is to interrogate power structures in relation to categories of social identity. The revision recognizes that, across disciplines, scholars (and instructors) approach difference differently in terms of 1) defining, labeling and measuring difference, 2) applying unique methodological approaches when investigating differences and 3) providing distinct theoretical and practical approaches.

Why seek the “interrogation of difference”?

- The Learning goals include the aspiration that students “interrogate one’s own values in relation to those of others, across social and cultural differences”. Our intent is to describe a rigorous, disciplined, systematic way of examining ourselves and the object of study, not a hostile attack on “the different”. If describing that process as interrogation (or as a Culture-Centered Inquisition) is deemed inflammatory, that is not CEPP’s intent.

How will Curriculum Committee evaluate proposed courses?

- CEPP recommends that each proposal for a DF course shall include a statement addressing how the course meets the DF criteria as defined in the motion rationale. The statement should specify how course learning goals, subject matter, pedagogy,

assignments or activities, and assessment of student learning will address the goals of the requirement.

Is the proposed change a response to campus climate issues?

- This depends on the understood definition of climate. Climate can be defined as “the pervasive, prevailing environmental conditions”. The aforementioned CIGU, NSSE, CHAS, CIRP reports and the 2009 report from the Director of Intercultural Studies (“Survey and Analysis of Cultural Diversity Courses at Skidmore College”) that shaped our conclusions are some of our best climatic descriptions of the past decade, and they largely predate recent events on and off campus - events that in many respects vividly reinforce the concerns raised in those reports.
- A focus on climate, as defined above, is a legitimate concern of the College and the faculty. The faculty’s learning goals assert a value in encouraging our students 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.” While no single curricular initiative creates, sustains, or addresses such campus climate issues, the curriculum in its totality is an important location for signaling our institutional values. Hence, we believe that an improved CCI requirement may indeed *contribute* to creating the type of campus culture to which we aspire. Further, the Culture Centered Inquiry requirement is the logical point of focus for this work.

Why not simply add an additional course requirement and leave the old requirement in place?

- Consultations with the faculty made clear that there is little support for an additional course requirement at this time.

Why not simply add a required diversity element to the First Year Experience?

- Consultations with the faculty made clear that they value their independence in delivering the Scribner seminar and related experiences, that the FYE is already overburdened with diverse aspirations and responsibilities, and that the goals of the all-college requirements should be achieved across the entire curriculum rather than only through the FYE experience or its supporting structures (e.g., orientation week).

Will the Foreign Languages and Literature requirement be changed in this revision?

- No.

Thank you for participating in the conversation regarding this motion.

Best,

Josh Ness (CEPP chair 2011-12)