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# On Racial Sensitivity Training for College Freshmen: A Survey of Institutional Opinions and Practices

*With heightened racial tensions on the campuses of many American colleges and universities, some institutions are requiring students to read essays and attend seminars on issues of diversity. Do these types of programs help to create an atmosphere of increased racial tolerance or do they merely heighten students' awareness of racial differences and thus foster racial separatism?*

According to *The Race Relations Reporter*,\* a New York-based database publisher which tracks racial incidents across the United States, there were over 100 significant racial incidents on college campuses in 1993. Clearly, racial tensions are running high on many campuses and a number of universities are taking steps to combat the problem.

At Temple University in Philadelphia, the administration requires freshman students to take one of 14 courses on a wide variety of subjects dealing with race. There are approximately 5,000 black students at Temple who make up roughly 17 percent of the 31,000-member student body. The new race-based curriculum was approved in 1991 and the university hopes to expand course offerings on racial issues to approximately 50 in the next several years. At the present time, course titles range from subjects such as *American Ethnicity* and *Urban Minorities and the American Judicial System* to *Minorities in Sports* or *Dance, Movement, and Pluralism*.

Many other colleges and universities have instituted multicultural course requirements into the curriculum, but at some schools these requirements can be filled by taking a foreign language course. Another approach has been instituted at Harvard University, where student sensitivity to racial issues is being confronted before the students even arrive on campus. This past summer, Harvard instituted a program of required readings for incoming freshmen on race, diversity, individual freedom, and community citizenship. The readings consisted of four articles: Ralph Waldo Emerson's classic essay *Self Reliance*; a transcript of an address by Harvard President Neil L. Rudenstine entitled *Free Expression in a Diverse Society*; Henry Louis Gates

\**The Race Relations Reporter* is an affiliated publication of *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*.

Jr.'s writing on *The Ethics of Identity*; and, finally, a paper by Faye Chiu, a Harvard College junior, entitled *Masquerade: Attired in the Robes of a Woman Warrior*. During freshman orientation, all students were required to attend sessions where the essays were discussed.

We asked a number of university officials for their opinion on the merits of such a program. Each participant was given a set of the readings for review.

Specifically we asked: Can readings on diversity and subsequent discussion groups actually improve race relations on campus? Is "diversity training" really necessary? Will students take it seriously? Do you think the students will actually read and think about these essays? Would you consider instituting a similar program at your institution?

In an era where political correctness is firmly in the saddle, no one who responded to our questions thought the required readings were a bad idea. However, some respondents questioned whether the program would be effective. Here are the replies that we received:

*Leroy Nesbitt Jr., special assistant to the president at Middlebury College in Vermont, writes:*

I reviewed the *Harvard College News* with several students, faculty, and staff at Middlebury. First, let me say that all praised Harvard on its efforts to address diversity and multiculturalism. This task is a foremost challenge for educational institutions steeped in tradition. Second, the quality of the articles is undeniable. Finally, the fact that the first major communication between students and the university, outside of the admissions process, addresses diversity is quite impressive.

However, these readings do not complete the job. Differences and cultural tolerance are still evolving. The articles

begin a vital discussion which should not be concluded with open-ended discussion. I believe that the articles should be a beginning for continuing discussion during the four years of college.

All too often such pieces preach to the converted, alienate the ignorant, and galvanize the righteous. Given the composition of the Harvard student body and many of the traditions of New England's oldest university, I wonder how many students resented this publication. I wonder if such a piece angers those who are viewed as oppressors and keepers of the gate keys. Backlash can be quite bitter.

The readings were intellectual and rhetorical. That is fine for those who like to think. However, young people at my institution wanted to know what behavioral adjustments were envisioned by those who designed the exercise. In addition, students suggested that more student articles be required.

I believe that many students at Harvard will be altered by the effort. Yet I must profess that I am guardedly optimistic about the effort.

At Middlebury, for many years those responsible for new student orientation have included a diversity or difference-tolerance program. Such efforts have included readings and discussions, lectures, and presentations by diversity experts. This year, the effort included theatrical productions led and organized by faculty. This was our most successful effort in years to address issues of difference.

*Elizabeth J. Ciner, associate dean of the college at Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota, writes:*

Carleton has run a similar program for the last six years. During new student orientation we also hold a convocation prior to small group discussions at which three members of the Carleton community offer perspectives on the selected work.

Our students appear to take the common reading seriously, although I do not think we think of this event as "diversity training." In effect, we ask students to reflect on their own cultures and on how that culture along with other cultures and traditions has affected them. Our goals are perhaps more modest; we hope to signal to students the institution's concern for issues of diversity and begin to model for and with them ways of talking about difference. We do this by making sure the presentations themselves present a diversity of opinions and points of view.

*Michael L. Jackson, dean of students at Stanford University, replies:*

We engage in similar activities at Stanford and find them very helpful in helping students discuss these issues, adjusting to a new community, and getting to know students of different backgrounds. These kind of programs also help institutions symbolically and structurally demonstrate to students that these issues are valued and important for communities to discuss.

In addition, I think it is helpful to follow up these introductory programs with other programs throughout the academic year in student residences and other meeting places on campus that afford students the opportunity to hear speakers from different points of view talk about, debate, and discuss diversity, individual freedom, and community citizenship. It is important to encourage students to find their voice by encouraging them to cover such topics in student newspapers, campus publications, and in academic assignments. It is also quite useful to provide them with resources (films, videos, bibliographies, funding, program advice, etc.) to help them design their own programs about these topics.

*Anthony F. Fucaloro, vice president and dean of the faculty at Claremont McKenna College, says:*

During orientation at Claremont McKenna College issues surrounding diversity are discussed. Our approach is based on common purpose and unity — unity of our community and rights flowing from our common humanity. I believe such discussions are necessary and our students take them seriously.

*Lester P. Monts, vice president for academic affairs, at the University of Michigan, says:*

We in higher education firmly believe that there is a critical imperative to create diverse and multicultural institutions of higher education. Yet there may be no one idea, strategy, or right way for all institutions to proceed. Rather, we believe it is a long process of commitment to implementing key strategies; assessing those strategies to determine what is working and what is not working; and, based on those assessments, making the necessary fiscal, policy, and programmatic adjustments.

*Janet H. Shannon, assistant professor of sociology at Davidson College in North Carolina, reports:*

For the past two summers at Davidson College we have required that incoming first-year students read a book which deals with some of the same issues. We also required a session where the work was discussed. Presently, we are in the process of evaluating this program and planning other events throughout the semester to reach other students.

*Stephen S. Birdsall, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, notes:*

This topic is of vital importance to the health of society. I wish Harvard and other schools success in their efforts. However, the benefits of such readings, as with any such material whether in courses or outside, will depend upon the quality of the teacher or discussion leader. It seems to me that, like other forms of education, the better able an instructor is to connect material to students' experiences or aspirations, the more likely there is to be a change in the student herself or himself.

*Peter Goldsmith, dean of freshmen at Dartmouth College, writes:*

There is much to be said in favor of having first-year students read material over the summer in preparation for discussions during orientation. I have seen this done to good effect at Princeton. There are problems of availability and cost; securing the copyright — even to a short journal article or book chapter — can be quite expensive if you are to mail copies to every incoming student. And then there is the problem of seeing that students actually read it. But these questions aside, the merit of having students participate in a common intellectual exercise during orientation seems to me to be indisputable.

### Additional Questions

The content of such exercises raises additional questions. At the University of Chicago, a prominent faculty member is asked each year to deliver the "Aims of Education" address with small discussions following in the residence halls. The content of the address is open to the interpretation of the

speaker, although it is difficult to imagine how the subject could be approached in the contemporary college/university climate without touching on what it is to be a community of scholars. The parallel exercise at Princeton (in place for the last six years) is still more open-ended in content, although the fact that recent addresses were presented by Cornel West and Toni Morrison suggests that issues of race and diversity have been very much on the table.

### Intellectual Content

My own view is that an exercise of this kind during orientation, with some reading beforehand, is an effective way of ensuring that there will be some intellectual content to orientation. It may not be reasonable to expect that all of the issues we might currently wish to see addressed — race, gender, sexual orientation, community values, freedom of speech, tolerance — can be included in every such presentation. Additionally, it is important that we do not believe that our task has been completed when we raise these issues during orientation. It is essential that we find ways of bringing them to the attention of the student community throughout the year. What is certain is that we should use orientation to see that students begin the habit of engaging in difficult — even contentious — conversations that require them to cross boundaries of race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, and sexual orientation.

*Carol T. Christ, provost and dean of the College of Letters and Science at the University of California, Berkeley, replies:*

In the fall of 1991, the University of California at Berkeley instituted the American Cultures Requirement for all entering freshmen. Faculty from many departments teach American Cultures courses, but all courses have a common framework. The courses focus on themes or issues in United States history, society, or culture; address theoretical or analytical issues relevant to understanding race, culture, and ethnicity in our society; take substantial account of groups drawn from at least three of the following: African Americans, American Indians, Asian Americans, Chicano/Latino Americans, and European Americans; and are integrative and comparative in that individual groups are studied in the larger context of American society, history, or culture. JBHE