To: Faculty Senate  
From: Daphne Patai, Spanish & Portuguese, Languages, Literatures, and Cultures  
Date: November 3, 2016

Subject: General Education Council proposal for a third “diversity” course to be required of all undergraduates

I am grateful to FHFA Dean Julie Hayes for circulating the new Gen Ed proposal that will be discussed at the Faculty Senate meeting on November 10th. The Gen Ed Council specifically instructed its members to distribute the proposal it approved on 9/30/16 only to those who expressed interest, and thus did not invite a campus-wide discussion of it. But since faculty continues to be responsible for curricular matters, it should be a matter of concern to all of us, not merely to those on the Gen Ed Council or in the Faculty Senate.

Below are my criticisms of the new proposal.

A. Note the language in the following aims (the first three of the five listed in the proposal), each of which narrows the range of perspectives to be welcomed in such courses. The aims presuppose and also reinforce a particular political perspective that faculty must adopt if their courses are to be approved for Gen Ed diversity credit. The aims taken from the proposal are in italics, below. After each of these aims I place my own comments in brackets.

1. Appreciate, value, and respect diverse social, cultural, and political perspectives. [The curriculum should not impose specific attitudes on faculty or students. In addition, this aim presupposes a postmodernist relativism, one that has been the subject of much debate and is far from a generally accepted truth. In fact, however, the subsequent aims make clear that only particular political perspectives are sought.]

2. Demonstrate an understanding of and critically analyze how the legacies of marginalization, prejudice, and discrimination impact current power relations and the life circumstances of people often marginalized by society because of race, ethnicity, language, religion, class, ability, sexuality, and gender. [Presupposes a particular view of the origins of marginalization and the causes of social problems. This aim is rooted in current identity politics, which is often used as a shield or a bludgeon, depending on who is speaking to whom and with what objective.]

3. Critically analyze their own perspectives and identities, develop an awareness of implicit biases, and understand how these perspectives and biases have been shaped by power relations within social and institutional contexts. [Is it only one’s own perspectives, identities, and biases that are to be critically examined, not those of others? Is it necessarily “power” relations – mentioned also in aim # 2—that explain everything? Again, this highly contentious perspective with its very specific conceptual framework is being presented as the necessarily correct one, to be reflected in these courses.]

B. We have already reduced the academic year to 26 weeks of actual classes, 3-credit courses have become 4-credit courses without an increase in class time, and in many instances work requirements have decreased as professors adapt to students’ sense of what preparation they are willing to do outside of class. Students still need 120 credits to graduate with a Bachelor’s degree, and, of these, two courses are already part of the new diversity requirement, circulated last spring.
and containing much the same language as the new proposal. This third required diversity course would mean that a total of 12 credits out of 120 (i.e., 10% of the students’ overall credit hours) will be devoted to “diversity” issues understood in the narrow way the proposal makes clear. This is a disservice to our students who have only a few precious years as undergraduates and entire worlds to explore.

C. My third concern relates specifically to those of us who teach in/about foreign languages, literatures, and cultures. The proposal tells us we must stress oppression and marginalization as themes, as if studying other cultures and languages is of little value unless it is primarily about those themes. This seems like an odd marginalization (to use that very term) of our entire areas of expertise. The themes named, while of interest, hardly tell us all we need to know about the world. Furthermore, they undermine the work that many of us do and that is not subsumed by these particular political preoccupations. It is a serious redesigning of the university’s role and mission to impose such a narrow perspective on what is understood by “diversity.” If “diversity” indeed now means a ceaseless focus on oppression, marginalization, and power, it is being used as a code word. And it is demeaning to those of us who have labored long and hard to actually acquire some expertise in a “diverse” culture – and who see the study of cultures around the world as something other than an opportunity for political posturing. It is far harder to actually learn a foreign language and its cultural contexts than to acquire or pass on to students a few attitudes about particular groups (divided into such broad categories as the powerful and powerless), the very thing we supposedly were trying to overcome.

D. For those of you who want to see where in the university these ideas are already institutionalized, have a look at the School of Education’s Social Justice Education programs, which offer a concentration, a Master’s, and a PhD. There you will find a complete articulation of a political program using the precise language found in our new Gen Ed diversity proposals. Nationwide, in Schools of Education and in certain identity-based programs, these aims have predominated for some time. What is happening now, with the reconceptualization of Gen Ed diversity requirements, is the spread of these avowed commitments to the entire university.

E. The narrow perspective of this proposal is made clear again on p. 5 of the proposal, which states as a goal: “Diminish the perpetuation of discrimination and oppression.” Hubris, or political passions, should not lead us to think that if we can just regulate the content of education thoroughly, we will bring about social justice. I suggest that we hardly know what “social justice” is, let alone how it may best be attained. The whole history of the twentieth century, to stick just with recent times, tells us how dangerous a path that is.

Conclusion: The university may have a social mission to enhance diversity, equity, and inclusion, in the name of “social justice” (which some critics have noted is merely a stand-in for “goodness”), but that is quite different from adopting these words as an educational mission. In addition, these terms have by now become an orthodoxy, constantly reiterated by administrators whose numbers and dedication to these issues keep expanding.

We should be very wary of turning our courses into vehicles for propagandizing particular political views, however popular and well-intentioned those views may be at this moment.

D. Patai