

Ethnic requirements need more thought

By Kenneth Liberman

Two years ago minority faculty, students of color, and faculty sensitive to the status of non-whites, women and non-Europeans in the U.S. and at the University joined together to propose the new race, gender, non-European-American general studies requirement.

Although some faculty considered the requirement trendy, a voting majority conceded the point that we are facing a new and different world.

Commentary

Eurocentric discourse will no longer be the unchallenged medium for deciding, arbitrating and reflecting upon human affairs in the way it was during the era of colonialism and the decades following World War II.

With the emergence of strong democracies in Japan and India, with the growing economic power of non-Western economies, and with increased travel and international communication, our world, our economic life and our rationalities have become multicultural. Even within the U.S., by the middle of the next century a majority of the population will be nonwhite, and a new political-cultural order will ensue. To restrict the education of Oregon's students to the white, male and exclusively European consciousness whose hegemony is weakening is to prepare them inadequately for the new world order they will be facing.

Our faculty concurred with the notion that our students need to be exposed to the emerging Other — other than white, other than male and other than European-American — at some point in their academic lives, if only to obtain those shadows of a beginning of a cultural appreciation that are consistent with a liberal arts education.

For one course anyway, it was determined that students should expose themselves to a discourse that draws the stu-

dent out of his or her ethnocentricity to witness a reality that is home for some other.

The faculty, through its committees and governing process, drew up a plan for the new requirement that will be implemented with the entering 1990-91 freshman class. Courses were proposed by the various departments as suitable for the new requirement.

Unfortunately, within this process some departments have either not given enough thought to the matter or are more concerned with protecting their academic turf than with contributing to a meaningful requirement. Some departments have not developed and proposed any suitable courses, and others have merely re-labeled the existing fare, including courses that preserve a European outlook.

The University's Ethnic Studies Committee has met to review the courses proposed, and they are recommending rejection of the following courses: Asian Archaeology, Northeast Asia Prehistory, Pacific Islands Archaeology, Human Biological Variation, North American Prehistory, Middle American Prehistory, South American Prehistory, World History and Social Demography. These courses preserve the dominant European rationality that is already the core of our curriculum.

As may be seen, the anthropology department's courses in prehistory and archaeology were seen to be insensitive to the aims to the new requirement. What is wrong with Pacific Islands Archaeology? Does it not address a non-European topic?

The problem is that these courses render the Other as a docile object — the non-European is restricted to a set of objective representations that function only within a European rationality whose hegemony is untouched. Rather than revealing a non-European world produced by the free subjectivity of an Other, the European reality prevails, and the intention of the requirement is de-

feated.

This is not to demean that reality or its rationality; it is not to say that our archaeology courses are not brilliant. They are, and our students are fortunate to have them. But they do not provide an opportunity to think according to a non-European discourse, and the Assembly should not approve them.

Some of our faculty may consider the notion of "Eurocentric discourse" to be suspect. Caught up in the hegemony of the European tradition, they cannot imagine that their own rationality is not "universal" enough. What about Social Demography leaves space for the Other to be heard except with the already familiar scientific rationality? How non-European is the "world" and discourse of World History?

Students of color want to be understood by their classmates; they want to reduce the number of inquiring stares addressed to them in the PLC elevator and improve intercultural communication. Foreign students want to improve the quality of their interaction with American students. To begin with, they want even to be "seen" when passed on the street.

We need to educate our students to difference. Oregon's students are not racist; they are merely ethnocentric. But they are heading into a new world order in which ethnocentrism will be a social and economic liability, and it is our task to offer them a race, gender and non-European requirement that will be meaningful.

If we do not have the political will to do this, then let us abandon our effort. To reword a once trendy slogan — if we cannot become part of the solution, then let us not become the problem itself. If we had a broad multicultural curriculum already in place, then we could afford some courses that preserve the self-interests of our dominant culture, but because we are talking about only one course, then let's do it right.



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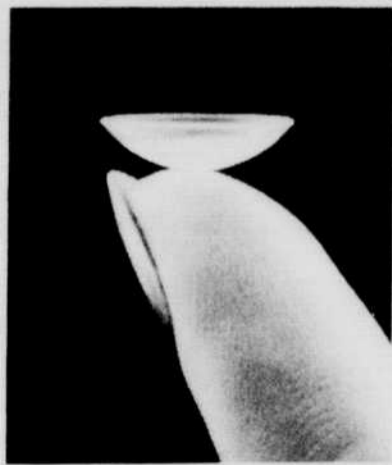
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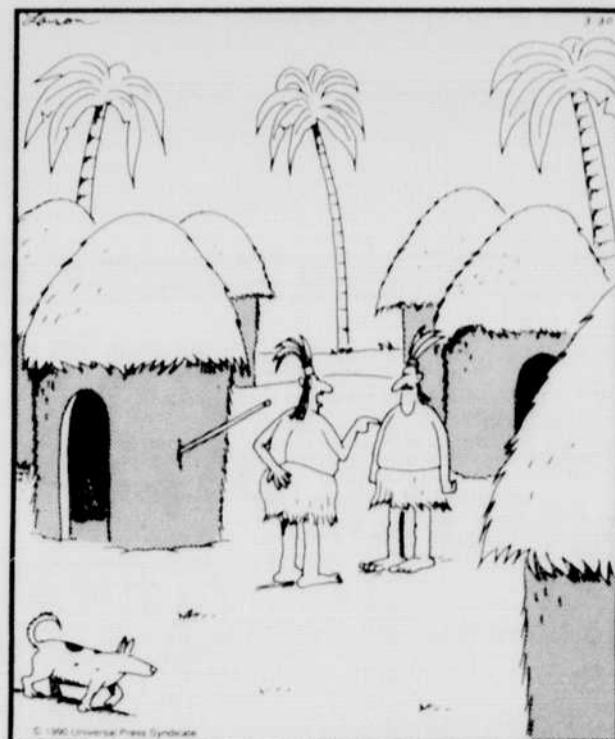
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