

RAINBOW CURRICULUM

Minorities hunger for a well-balanced education



University administrators are bending over backward to make minorities feel less isolated in the campus environment.

By Paul Heltzel, *Collegiate Times*, Virginia Tech

When Charlene Hernandez was threatened last spring after publicly chastising her student government for being racially insensitive, she wasn't afraid. She was angry.

She was used to the intimidation often associated with standing up for her convictions. Just two years earlier, the U. of Northern Colorado senior's car was shoved down a hill after she criticized the university for choosing a commencement speaker who opposed bilingual education. Several days later she received phone threats at the Hispanic Cultural Center, where she spends much of her time.

"We know what you look like," the voice said. "We know where you live."

The threats, although unnerving, drove home Hernandez's earlier suspicions — the day when people of different races can live together and accept each other's differences is a long way away.

"It just reconfirms a lot of the feelings you have when you come into school," Hernandez says. "I don't expect anyone to understand how I feel. Acceptance is mainly what I've asked for, not necessarily understanding."

For minority students nationwide, going to college can be a lonely and frustrating

experience. And as the number of minority students entering college increases — by 213,000 between 1988 and 1990 — so increase minority student demands for more culturally diverse campus environments and curricula that explore their heritages.

And colleges are listening.

At the U. of California, Los Angeles, students can major in Afro-American studies, East Asian languages and cultures, women's studies, Chicano studies or Asian-American studies. Students also can request an adviser of their own ethnicity.

Williams College in Massachusetts has worked since the 1960s to broaden its curriculum by exploring American minority cultures and non-Western views. The faculty voted in 1988 to make the multicultural class "People and Cultures" the first required course in the college's history.

According to recruiting materials, the goal of Occidental College in Los Angeles is to become the premier multicultural, liberal arts institution in the country. Formerly dominated by white students, minority students now make up more than 40 percent of the school's enrollment. John Brooks Slaughter, president of the college, is fond of saying the school is "devoted to equity and excellence."

At Arizona State U. administrators are working to increase enrollment of under-represented Hispanic women through its Hispanic Mothers and Daughters Program. The university recruits girls

from 13 to 18 years old whose parents did not attend college. Mothers and daughters attend sessions throughout the year on campus and discuss their culture.

The purpose of the program is to make mothers advocates of higher education for their children. The results are encouraging, and some of the mothers have decided to attend college themselves.

Still, with all of the care going into planning multicultural curricula, many say a predominantly Anglo veil continues to shroud the environment of many campuses.

"There is a strong Western European slant to education in schools today," says Robert Griffith, a U. of Southern California graduate student. "They will stress how much blacks picked cotton, but they won't tell you that a black man invented the first cotton gin."

The U.S. education system and its almost institutionalized exclusion of minority history has created feelings of alienation and anger in students who now are calling for more varied education.

When feeling culturally dislocated, minority students can feel like their classmates are speaking a foreign language, Griffith says.

"They're all relating to and talking about things that you don't know anything about," Griffith says. "And depending on how insightful the instructor is, different

points of view may be brushed aside."

It's that lack of insight that may prevent universities from developing strong ethnic studies programs, a critical requirement in attracting and retaining minority students, says Cliff Sjogren, assistant vice chancellor at the U. of Southern California.

When minority needs are not met, a backlash can result. Like at the U. of Massachusetts, where a black student allegedly was assaulted by a white non-student this fall, triggering ongoing racial unrest at the campus.

In an effort to quell the hostilities of his racially divided campus, UMass President Michael Hooker agreed to have minorities make up 20 percent of the freshmen class and 20 percent of campus professionals and executives by 1995.

Forty full-tuition scholarships are being provided, and two recruiting positions will be filled by minorities.

Enrolling more minority students doesn't necessarily provide a more culturally diverse campus or education, says Vandana Venkatesh, who last year earned a combined bachelor's and master's degree from UCLA.

"That having more minorities leads to greater understanding is not a given," Venkatesh says. "That depends on how the university environment works. It doesn't necessarily create some kind of bridging of all gaps."

Schools are listening, though, and making a concerted effort to close those holes by requiring more minority students.

Though a large minority population may not provide a better education, says Ronnie E. Stephenson, a sophomore at Virginia Tech, increased minority enrollment helps to foster an environment conducive to learning.

"I attended a predominantly black institution, and you receive basically the same education as at any other university," Stephenson says. "It has to do with whether a person feels comfortable."

Developing that learning atmosphere where minority students feel at ease can be

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difficult, says Natalie Young, a senior at Arizona State U. It's an ease that can come from security in numbers.

"Non-minority students find it hard to deal with black students wanting to be together," Young says. "We want our own community."

Young says minority students feel further misunderstood when they protest university policies on campus. She says protesting is a necessity if this trend toward equality and multiculturalism is to continue — as she hopes it does.

"The perception is, 'Look at them, there they go again — militants,'" Young says. "But our voices aren't heard if we don't protest." □