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The significance of multicultural education in the post-secondary institution

Accepting the challenge of multicultural education

By James B. Boyer

The post-secondary institution in our society has always held a rather "lofty position" in the academic arena of America. The university is particularly considered somewhat infallible because of the impact it has on America's thinking. While there are many contours of the post-secondary institution, our concern in this discourse will be with the **university which prepares teachers**. While institutions of higher education have prided themselves on being highly selective and intellectually discriminating, major changes have occurred in America which forced the post-secondary institutions to re-examine their missions, to analyze their instructional service delivery, and to reassess their **curriculum—especially their curriculum**. Since 1636 when Harvard University provided the foundation for curriculum substance, we have lived with the traditionally-identified components of post-secondary curriculum: (a) the Natural Sciences, (b) the Social Sciences, and (c) the Humanities. Our concern with the preparation of public and private school teachers emerged sometime later and we depended heavily on the traditional disciplines for the professional preparation of our practitioners.

The post-secondary institutions in America can boast of having their alumni hold the most significant positions in our society: governorships, presidencies, deanships, high level management, and every conceivable dimension of professionals in America. Needless to say that the university curriculum influenced our total lives. Today, though, we can no longer perceive the university as the private domain of the rich, the economically able, and the

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socially-sanctioned—to the exclusion of all others. Yet, the curriculum of the post-secondary institution is still considered the "legitimate vehicle" through which America somehow decides who are to be our leaders, whether the society is to be governed only by an elite, and how far the concept of equality is to be carried.

In the process of our re-examination, we have become more thorough in our questions, more anxious in our quest for answers, and more assertive in our efforts to build new understandings of major documents including the Declaration of Independence. The post-secondary institution belongs to the people, to **all the people** and it refuses to decrease its impact on our standard of living. We hold high regard for the post-secondary institution, but we also want it to be more **reflective of all the people**. No participant in the academic community can deny that every college and university in the country is engaged in the major determination of values—through the required impact of the university **curriculum**. That curriculum has been essentially **mono-cultural**. As recently as 1959, (according to Frederick Rudolph in **Curriculum: A History of the American Undergraduate Course of Study since 1636**), over half of Harvard's undergraduates professed to having had their political values changed while at Harvard,—over half of them by lectures and course reading.

Values are delivered through the post-secondary curriculum both indirectly and directly. Practices are perhaps the most visible reflection of those curriculum values, but an examination of **course content** and **curricular substance** reveal additional, more formalized sources of value declaration.

Much of the curriculum involves **knowledge**. The knowledge we have directs our behavior. Collegiate curriculum knowledge is perceived as that which a student needs to know in order to do that which he or she has chosen to do. The post-secondary curriculum has been described as a civilizing agent for the masses of college educable. The **masses**—not the classes.

Multi-Cultural Education and the Curriculum

Unlike so many of the academic efforts of recent years, multi-cultural education has consistently entered academic circles through strong channels of emotional dialogue and research. While some researchers and writers preferred to ignore its impact and retain the traditional academic approach to non-emotional subjects, others have recognized its impact and have moved vigorously to define, refine, and provide a rational conceptualization of many of the factors employed in this aspect of American education. In **teacher education**, we are particularly sensitive to the nature of such factors and to the extent to which they may be employed when delivering instruction to children and young people.

Teacher preparation programs in colleges and universities in America have frequently placed such studies (multi-cultural studies) at a low priority among the many demands on programmatic time. Recently, however, the times and some accrediting agencies have required that it be placed at a higher priority than ever before. But it should be remembered that college and university curriculum (particularly teacher preparation curriculum) has three major characteristics which follow:

(1) **Reactionary:**

The university curriculum has often been refined and/or upgraded as a result of major human needs, changes or concerns, and as a result of other

domestic problems. (Example: driver education classes for preparing driver education teachers became part of the university curriculum when our highway accidental death rate became so alarming that something had to be done.) We reacted with programs to prepare teachers. Our reactionary function has, by far, been the greatest force for curriculum change in all colleges and universities.

(2) **Projectionary:**

The university curriculum development efforts are sometimes based on our projections of needs, our projections of enrollments, and our **projections** of economic resources among other things. While our abilities to make decisions based on future realities have been limited, some substantive planning and development have resulted from such projections and teacher preparation continued to expand.

(3) **Equitable Regeneration:**

The university curriculum has rarely been refined, revised, developed, changed or evaluated in terms of this characteristic. It suggests that appraisals be completed in terms of the extent to which present functions are serving the total populace. In other words, which group are consistently being excluded from the academic services provided through teacher preparation? Specifically in the case of multi-cultural education, we are concerned that the **university curriculum be regenerated** so that it better serves the handicapped, the economically poor, the racially different, the ethnically different, the aged, and that it eliminates inherent practices of sex discrimination. These particular functions and concerns become much of the domain of multi-cultural education. **It is emphasized, however, that such training is essential for all teachers in all schools regardless of student body composition, geographic location, degree of ethnic/racial diversity, and extent of economic diversity represented.**

Toward An Expanded Concept of Multi-Cultural Education

Because the notion of multi-cultural education has so many ramifications, we have elected to confine our concept to relationships to teacher education which is the source of curriculum content for public schools—and that curriculum becomes the basis for decisions of persons who are acculturated through it. Initially, we restrict our definition **from Education to Curriculum**. This is because education (as a concept) is so broad that it is difficult to refine its borders and limitations. Our use of the term, curriculum, suggests that our reference is to that part of the university's program which is planned, measurable, coordinated, designed, and which we expect the school practitioner/teacher/administrator to articulate, implement, evaluate, and refine. Such a component (curriculum) includes the transmission and analysis of values reflecting cross-cultural emphasis. It further incorporates the utilization of instructional techniques which foster respect and appreciation for persons who are racially or ethnically different from each other. Finally, it seeks the enhancement of human awareness which recognizes and utilizes the Black Experience, the Spanish-Speaking Impact (as well as other bilingual combinations), and the Native American (Indian) dignity within the daily interac-

tions of a culturally-pluralistic school program.

In order to improve the "non-discriminatory" thinking patterns of America, the post-secondary institutions must now assume fuller responsibility for the inclusion of multi-cultural education in its programmatic thrusts. In a country which prides itself on democracy, equality, respect for human life and human dignity, diversity, and the full range of concerns on which the nation was founded, the American post-secondary institution must share the responsibility of making that a **reality**. Further, those groups who have historically considered themselves as recipients of these qualities/factors—must now be helped to overcome their false sense of superiority over others while those who felt excluded must rid themselves of their sense of inferiority. These become major tasks of the post-secondary institution—**particularly those preparing teachers.**

Multi-Cultural Studies

The anthropological concept of culture is extremely broad and includes the physiological, psychological, sociological dimensions of a group of people. Multi-cultural studies are those instructional sequences which attempt to reflect the totality of American culture, not through assimilation, but through acculturation. They address themselves to both the similarities and differences among people within the framework of equal respect for these traits. (Boyer & Boyer)

Multi-Cultural Education: Basic Functions

While no attempt will be made here to provide a total rationale for the broad aspects of multi-cultural education, it seems appropriate to indicate that multi-cultural education (frequently referred to as multi-ethnic, non-sexist) deliberately works toward the elimination of five basic **societal ills: Societal Ills: (Re: Multi-Cultural Education)**

(1) **Racism**

The belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority or inferiority of a particular race. Racism also involves the operation of those institutions which directly affect the lives of people and the philosophies on which their operations are based.

(2) **Sexism**

Sexism is the belief that one sex (male or female) is inherently superior to the other. Such belief manifests itself in behaviors which restrict one sex from opportunities, activities, advancements, and privileges normally granted to the other sex. Sexism is also demonstrated in the behavior of persons and institutions which directly affect the lives of human beings. While in recent times, this term (sexism) has referred to discriminatory behavior against females, its elimination is **not limited** to traditional view of women's liberation. Our concern includes the substance of textbooks, the personnel policies, the design of student activities and the full realm of decision-making about schools and life.

(3) **Elitism**

Elitism is the idea that one group (usually an economic group) is better than another based on value judgments of that group regarding attributes and characteristics. Elitism involves the concept of social superiority because of economic advancement. Further, it incorporates the idea that one group in society is better able to govern

and, therefore, should hold the political power. Elitism, however, may be practiced on several economic levels and may reflect a number of contributing factors. Some researchers use the term, **classicism**, as a synonym for elitism because of the consistent use of social class in sociological studies. We prefer the term, **elitism**, because of the comprehensive impact of economics in describing people, practices and learnings.

(4) Ageism

Ageism is the belief that age (both the older person and the younger person) is a legitimate basis for decisions about inclusion or exclusion. America has historically worshipped **youth** (primarily young adulthood), but age discrimination in recent years has demanded that we re-examine assumptions regarding older people. At the same time, we began acknowledging the strengths of young persons (including adolescents) and their abilities to analyze and make judgments. Ageism is also the belief that the time of life at which some particular capacity or disability arises dictates the opportunities, responsibilities, activities and privileges of other human beings.

(5) Handicaps

Handicapism is the **assumption** that persons (regardless of age, race, sex, or ethnic identity) with physical or other kinds of visible exceptions should be excluded from opportunities, activities, privileges, and responsibilities because of the exceptionality. This belief becomes the basis of a philosophy which prevents the normal inclusion of such persons (students, teachers, administrators, others) in the normal on-going programs of learning, teaching, employment and other activities. Only recently did school and university buildings become sensitive to the mobility needs of persons who depend on wheelchairs and other supportive equipment for movement. Other kinds of handicaps have become equal basis for discriminatory practices which victimize human beings. Multi-cultural education attempts to remove such assumption and discrimination.

Reduction of Societal Ills Through Multi-Cultural Understandings

With the five foregoing societal ills as a basis for conceptualizing the broad tasks of multi-cultural education, it becomes imperative that both undergraduate and graduate education increase the proficiency of American school personnel for delivering instruction to multi-cultural populations. While some individuals will not embrace the totality of the multi-cultural responsibility, it will be important to develop some commitment to these as a basis.

Historically, multicultural education grew out of the country's efforts to desegregate its schools and public facilities. These efforts grew out of the need to dismantle the caste system of America. The movement was also part of our gradual transformation **from desegregation to integration**. Today, we are still working toward the integrated school and multi-cultural understandings are essential to such goals. Without elaborating on these phases of movement, we offer the following:

Desegregation Multi-Cultural Education (Brief Historical Sequence)

1. Reduction/Elimination of the Caste System (Rejection of the Melting Pot Theory)
2. The Reality of Civil Rights for all Americans (esp. Racial Minorities)

3. Poverty and its Impact
4. Human Relations/Social Disfranchisement
5. Women's Rights
6. Children's Rights
7. Quest for Multi-Ethnic, Non-Sexist Patterns of Thought (Multi-Cultural Education)

The limitations of this paper will not permit elaboration on each of these phases of our movement which, today, is still less than three decades old. However, each of the **stages of sensitivity** contributed to the broad scope of multi-cultural education as it must be employed today for teacher preparation.

Why are these concepts referred to as multi-cultural studies? We hold the theoretical basis that there is a (1) culture of poverty, (2) a culture of middle-income "western civilization" Caucasian socialization, (3) a culture of non-European, non-western, non-middle-income lifestyles, and the list is much longer. It should be pointed out, however, that these same notions are treated under other headings or titles: Multi-Ethnic, Non-Sexist Education; Urban Education; Minority Studies; Cultural Pluralism; Bilingual-Bicultural Studies; and occasionally—Studies of Ethnology, Studies of Ethnicity; Studies of Ethnocentrism. In still other settings, these efforts are handled completely by traditional social science researchers and treated as any other cultural variation. **To be sure, there are differences but they are beyond the scope of this paper.**

Multi-Cultural Knowledge

The multi-cultural curriculum is designed to broaden the knowledge base of learners regarding practices of stereotyping and discriminating reflected through the historical exclusion of this data (cognitive data) about non-White Americans. Such knowledge includes:

- (1) Knowledge of persons/groups who made contributions to our culture whose identities were non-European. This is now extended to include minorities and women.
- (2) Perspectives of persons/groups whose ideas, perceptions and attitudes were historically omitted from the decision-making settings on economic, educational, political, and social matters.
- (3) Understanding of issues and problems affecting those groups who are racially-ethnically different and economically less able than the majority of American citizens.
- (4) The heritage of even more groups whose psychological survival in America has depended on having role models, images, and patterns from which to build their career-lives and personal lives.

At the same time that such knowledge is being shared, there must be an equal commitment to the original goals of multi-cultural education: the elimination of racism, sexism, elitism and related social ills which plague our country. Without reservation, multi-cultural curriculum accepts the challenge of its role to reduce conflict, enrich the lives of culturally-different people as well as others, and to serve as a change-agent for the educational hierarchy which controls research and practice.

These are significant challenges. Since the post-secondary institution in America likes to base its development on research findings, we hasten to add that re-

searchers like James Banks, Carl Grant, Jane Mercer and Robert Williams have all attacked institutional practice regarding multi-cultural entities and their work is widely known. The classic work of Hunter (for the AACTE) related to multi-culturalism and competency-based education, though never given the attention by the academic community which it warranted, stands on its own as a piece of research loaded with implications for future effort. Given the adequate consumption of equitable research, the post-secondary institution which prepares teachers can meet the challenge of revising its curriculum in light of new demands. We can no longer afford the luxury of educating teachers as though all the learners they teach—will reflect the same human/cultural profile as the “majority of people now in the university setting.” To do this, we practice **curriculum bias** and demonstrate **instructional discrimination**.

The Professorial Challenge

Because the American college professor (himself or herself) was prepared with a European-oriented curriculum, we tend to deliver that same thrust in the courses we design, the degree programs we approve, the examinations we give, the lectures we give, and the co-curricular experiences we require our students to attend. Most of the poets, writers, scientists, historians, painters, sculptors, artists, musicians, inventors and playwrights studied in the American post-secondary institution are people of European identity.

But the post-secondary institution (particularly the university) still remains an agency of social authority be-

cause its graduates hold the most powerful seats in America. Therefore, we (the professorial team) must re-examine our knowledge base, our philosophical positions, our teaching practices and a host of other factors making up the academic community.

The Challenge of Post-Secondary Education

The essentials of American education suggest that we will continue to depend on the post-secondary institution to polish the natural talent and academic potential of our human resources. Because of its continued impact on the total quality of life in America, we must increase the rate at which we examine philosophies, practices, procedures and programs. Our efforts will range from slightly affective to highly emotional—particularly in these times of decreasing enrollments, inflation, limited economic resources, and professorial survival.

The essentials of multi-culturalism would include new perspectives on research design, broader thrusts on teacher education research topics—to include topics which further analyze the institutions themselves, and continued theoretical constructs which tie the dimensions of our social/academic relationships together—including the dynamics of school desegregation, curriculum desegregation, affirmative action, equal employment opportunities and regular programmatic enrichment. There must also be continued examination of administrative/policy-making relationships which exist in the teacher education arena—as well as other arenas of post-secondary institutions.