Taskforce on Diverse Perspectives and Global Understandings

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Introduction:

Producing a global citizen scholar, one who understands and appreciates diversity and inclusion not only in the classroom but in the community, the state, and the world, is an institutional priority that both Chancellor Folt and Dean Guskewicz have expressed for the University of North Carolina and the School of Arts and Sciences, respectively. Recognizing the diverse backgrounds and identities of our students, including race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, class, national and geographic origins, etc.—and leveraging this variation in our academic programs is critical for the success
of individual students and for the comparative strength and longevity of each discipline within the School of Arts and Sciences. As an institutional unit, the School’s ability to respond to complex social problems that our students will encounter in an ever-changing and technologically sophisticated world, depends on our ability to harness the variety of unique talents, contributions, and differences among our students, faculty and staff in achieving the fundamental goals of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

To that end, the central charge of the Diverse Perspectives and Global Understandings Taskforce was to make recommendations concerning the best ways to guarantee that all students are exposed to, and engage actively with, widely diverse perspectives and peoples, and that they understand and are prepared for a globally interconnected world. This charge is further reduced to three key questions, which we summarize as follows:

1. How does the College ensure that students encounter, critically evaluate, and understand truly diverse ideas and perspectives?
2. How does the College ensure that students understand how and why their lives are connected to global issues and the need to engage diversities and commonalities among other world populations and cultures?
3. What capacities, experiences, and skills do students need to flourish in a globally interconnected world, including but not limited to language proficiency?

Diversity and Global Perspectives are currently addressed most explicitly in the Connections portion of the “Making Connections Curriculum.” The three general education requirements that arguably engage diversity the most are: 1) BN (Beyond the North Atlantic); 2) GI (Global Issues); and 3) US (U.S. Diversity). Less explicit in their designation but nevertheless essential for our understanding of diversity and global perspectives are the foreign language requirement (FL) under “Foundations” and the Philosophical and Moral Reasoning (PH) under “Approaches.” In general, members of the task force feel that the current curriculum has been largely successful at bringing diversity and global perspectives to the fore. Especially important is the fact that the current curriculum situates diversity and global issues in not just one but five general education requirements. The taskforce cannot stress enough that this five course cluster on diversity must be retained, if not increased in any new curriculum.

However, the taskforce does recognize certain limitations in the current curriculum as well as exciting opportunities for improvement. For instance, the only explicit definition of diversity is limited to the US Diversity general education requirement:
“Courses in U.S. diversity help students develop a greater understanding of diverse peoples and cultures within the United States and thereby enhance their ability to fulfill the obligations of United States citizenship. These courses address in systematic fashion one or more aspects of diversity in the United States, whether arising from ethnic, generational, class, gender, sexual, regional, or religious differences.”

Through courses that currently fulfill the "U.S. Diversity" requirement, faculty from many departments have successfully drawn on their expertise and experiences to develop in our students a critical understanding of diversity and inclusion. These courses are necessary to enhance students’ ability to fulfill their obligations as informed citizens of the U.S. and the world -- the explicit goal of the U.S. Diversity component of our curriculum. Our committee underscores the responsibility of the University, and particularly the College of Arts and Sciences, to retain and strengthen this requirement in any revision of the General Education Curriculum. In spite of these strengths, the taskforce identifies four problems in the current curriculum’s attention to diversity and global perspectives:

1. One problem with the existing curriculum is the isolation of this explicit language on diversity and its relationship to global understandings. The taskforce believes that a new curriculum could profit enormously if an enhanced version of this definition were excavated from its exclusive position within this one general education requirement and transplanted into an explicit multi-course cluster dedicated to the negotiation of diversity and global perspectives.

2. The taskforce identifies in the current curriculum a geographical organization of Diversity and Global Perspectives, one that could be thought of as a set of concentric circles moving outward from the U.S. Diversity and Global Perspectives but are not necessarily trackable according to matters of geographic location. What’s more, this geographic arrangement of Diversity and Global Perspectives displaces the engagement with difference to far off places and potentially exoticizes it without necessarily forging links and connections. We must establish more diversifying connections to these far off places.

3. A cluster approach to Diversity and Global Perspectives must bring into the foreground learning processes for students that allow them to build bridges among the discrete courses comprising the cluster.

4. The taskforce believes that Diversity and Global Perspectives must retain a broad definition of diversity but must also underscore that studying Diversity and Global Perspectives a) is an essential ethical enterprise with real-world outcomes for the health of civil societies; b) overlaps with other basic curricular needs such as the acquisition of core proficiencies in a foreign language as well as Languages Across the Curriculum (LAC); c) engages the causes and effects of social, political
and cultural forces leading to injustice and is therefore potentially thorny and
requires compassion, patience, and empathy.

Our taskforce met twice before spring break and nearly once every week until the end
of the Spring 2017 semester to discuss and consider a variety of ideas about diversity,
 inclusion, and global understandings for possible integration into the new Curriculum
2019. During our meetings, the scope of our discussions was wide-ranging but always
with the central focus being to address our three main charges. By design, the contours
of our charges are not specific. They are elastic and broad, which presents both
opportunities and constraints. The charges present us with opportunities to be bold and
innovative in our proposals. However, the non-specific nature of the charges also means
that our discussions addressed a host of issues beyond the immediate concerns of the
general education curriculum such as study abroad, research experiences, exposure to
the performing arts, pedagogical techniques and public lectures, etc. Nevertheless, we
think that we have produced a set of substantively meaningful recommendations for
the new curriculum taskforce and the Dean to consider as they move forward.

Our discussions centered initially on several key concepts and ideas, which we felt we
must first understand as a group. These included concepts/ideas such as diversity,
empathy, self-awareness/self-reflection, how to value and measure diversity,
intellectual and experiential curiosity, and the ethics and moralities embedded within
the negotiation of difference in the classroom, University, and the wider
community. We have sufficient understanding of these concepts now to move
forward.

Charge #1: "What are the best ways to ensure that students encounter, critically
evaluate, and understand truly diverse ideas and perspectives that challenge them
intellectually and ethically in terms including racial, ethnic, gender,
political, cultural, and religious diversity?"

We know that the term diversity is fraught with multiple meanings, some more
expansive than others. We recognize the possibilities for conflict among all human
beings and the need for resolution, especially when engaging with diversity and global
perspectives. Member of the taskforce recognize the temptation to define diversity too
narrowly in terms of race, ethnicity, and gender, and in a very "US-centric" way. Our
view of diversity is broader than these limited confines of race, gender, and ethnicity to
include international origins, sexual orientation and other ascriptive identities as well as disability, and socioeconomic status, etc. Our taskforce believes that issues of diversity (as thus properly understood) and students’ ability to understand and negotiate conflicts and injustice arising from diversity and difference are central to a good understanding of what most academic disciplines in the College are about. The idea that understanding, internalizing, and appreciating diversity as a matter of course is a fundamental asset that students must possess to excel in their chosen endeavors during their life course, irrespective of their current discipline within the College of Arts and Sciences.

This goal cannot be achieved without faculty input. Thus, there is an important question of implementation, i.e., how to ensure that faculty are encouraged or deputized to recognize and to actively incorporate lessons on diverse perspectives into their course development and pedagogical methods while recognizing that faculty have the final word on course content.

We fully recognize that some faculty members will be reluctant to accept (and some will outright reject) any effort by the College to require their formal engagement in this ethical negotiation of difference. This might be particularly difficult in the STEM disciplines where the forces of diversity do not intersect naturally with the topical areas within these disciplines and so will require greater faculty interest and initiative to discuss such topics in the classroom. But we agree that it is important for students to recognize and interrogate the realities of racial, ethnic, gender and other disparities in STEM since these problems will not disappear after students graduate and leave UNC and since they will continue to encounter these issues in their professional capacities.

An important issue that we have come up against is a concern about how to appropriately measure the diverse perspectives and global understandings that students will develop through their engagement with the new curriculum. We live in an era where social metrics have become very important in how external actors, stakeholders, and even prospective students, faculty and staff evaluate the performance of universities. On this issue, some members suggest that we consider instituting a diversity point system whereby students will earn points (credits) toward diversity education within their majors or across majors. They will need to accumulate a certain number of points before they can graduate from UNC and be certified as learned about
the issues of diversity and inclusion. There was no consensus on this point in the
taskforce because some members feel that a point-system cheapens the intrinsic value of
diversity as something/commodity merely to be acquired. In terms of effectiveness of
this ideal, some members of the taskforce are of the opinion that the College could
consider tapping into available resources such as the UNC course evaluation system to
leverage and generate metrics for evaluating/assessing what students have learned
about diversity and inclusion during their undergraduate experience.

Another suggestion is that a process-centered approach to diversity
could entail creating a series of junior/senior-year seminars that focus on diverse
perspectives and/or global understandings. These seminars might follow the existing,
highly structured and successful first-year seminar model. Junior/senior-year seminars
would supply many undergraduates, including students who have recently transferred
to UNC-Chapel Hill, with opportunities for mature discussions and exposure to a
greater variety of perspectives emerging from cross-disciplinary conversations. As with
the first-year seminar model, each department might be required to offer a certain
number of seminars, such that all departments across the College of Arts and
Sciences, including the hard sciences, develop exciting and thought-provoking courses
that relate diversity and global understanding to other issues and competencies in the
field. Furthermore, the College could encourage more team-taught seminars by faculty
from different departments, thus furthering its investment in interdisciplinary teaching
and research. These seminars will help students to more deeply embrace empathy, self-
awareness/self-reflection, awareness of others, and a true understanding of the intrinsic
value of diversity.

A third possibility would be to emphasize different concepts and methodologies that
disciplines do employ to understand diverse experiences and inclusion. To recognize
these important distinctions, students could be required to fulfill their general
education requirements with courses from at least two programmatic areas (social
sciences, humanities, natural sciences, and fine art).

The development of these clusters, like the development of all curriculum, must be
faculty driven. New course submissions can identify potential course clusters and
students can submit petitions for additional courses for inclusion into the clusters. We
suggest that directors of undergraduate studies should be involved in the maintenance
of course clusters. To assist in negotiating clusters of aligned diversity and/or global
perspectives courses, we propose using a tool like a Rhumbl map (http://www.rhumbl.com).
This tool, developed at MIT, provides an interactive solution to display associations among
various courses, thus enabling advisors and students to make better-informed course selections that satisfy the more complexly associated group of General Education courses.

**Charge #2: How does the College ensure that students understand how and why their lives are connected to global issues and the need to engage diversities and commonalities among other world populations and cultures?**

UNC undergraduate students must encounter the histories, experiences, perspectives, expressive cultures, and knowledge of populations and communities who are not merely different from themselves, but who have historically been excluded from, and marginalized and distorted by the US academy and its canons. Students must also learn to think critically about the processes by which such excluding, marginalizing, and distorting have been and are achieved and the effects of those processes on students' own lives, communities, and futures. On this second charge of how we ensure that students understand how and why their lives are connected to global issues and the need to engage diversities and commonalities among other world populations and cultures, we have discussed several ideas. These include:

1) Cultivate and deepen cultural experiences formally through the classroom and informally through intermingling with students from a variety of backgrounds. We understand that there are build-in structural limitation to our ability to achieve this goal because the population of foreign and minority students (broadly understood) at UNC-Chapel Hill is small. We must increase our commitment to diversity by admitting to the University more nonwhite and foreign students, poor students, as well as students from various religious backgrounds and sexual orientations to enhance cross-cultural connections.

2) Increase the level of commitment to faculty diversity in the College, both in hiring, resource support, and retention.

3) Encourage cross-international group projects between UNC undergraduates and students in foreign universities. This will foster cross-cultural understandings, build empathy across geopolitical spaces through the pursuit of common intellectual/research goals, and foster the building of comparative connections among different components of the curriculum.

4) Expand course offerings to include unpopular regions and cultures, histories, and societies of the world.

5) Provide greater funding for the global exchange of foreign scholars/speakers/intellectuals through various UNC institutes and centers of learning. This will enhance our goal of producing a global citizen scholar.
6) Institute a procedure whereby students are strongly encouraged to make a connection in every course to a global issue.

7) Encourage faculty to introduce such global connections in their courses through the history of an important topic, object, or idea. We think this will enhance students’ ability to build comparative skills.

8) Assess whether students are truly building such skills. This will not be easy but, once again, we can leverage the course evaluation system to develop metrics for assessing successes.

**Charge #3: What experiences, skills, and capacities do students need to flourish in a globally interconnected world, including but not limited to foreign language proficiency?**

Whereas our first and second charges are very broad and elastic, our third charge, we feel, is quite concrete in that it asks for capacities, experiences, and skills. Some of the ideas that we have discussed under the heading of *experiences* include:

1) Broadening participation in study abroad and building capacities not only in terms of expanding access to more students (especially students from underrepresented backgrounds) but also enhancing opportunities for the incorporation of past study abroad experiences into students’ remaining UNC course work (i.e., through blog posts, classroom presentation, poster presentation at a UNC research fair.)

2) Encouraging students to engage with difference and global perspectives on a local level by drawing on community engagements programs in North Carolina and the region.

3) Emphasizing diversity of ideas and participants in research experience for undergraduates in conjunction with coursework either individually or via group projects.

4) Improving experiences through global diversity programming via institutes and centers at the University.

Under the heading of *skills*, we have discussed:

1) The need to encourage the cultivation of greater foreign language skills through coursework and interpersonal connections (e.g., LAC courses).
2) Development of comparative skills (the ability to assess difference and make interconnections across different countries, communities, and languages).
3) Building a portfolio of research skills with one or more members of the faculty within and across different departments.
4) Historicizing difference across time and space.

Finally, under *capacities*, the Diverse Perspectives and Global Understandings Taskforce has discussed the need for students to develop four core capacities:

1) Recognition
2) Understanding
3) Empathy and critical self-reflection
4) Action

Students must be able to comfortably engage in the ethical and moral negotiation of difference and to this end they must first recognize and interrogate inequality and bias, understand difference on its own terms, and develop empathy and engage in critical self-reflection. Diversity and Global Perspectives only matter if in the end it informs how our students bring this vital knowledge to their lives and those of others; action can manifest itself in their lives in countless ways, but in every instance the previous three capacities - recognition, understanding, and empathy - will ensure that how they interact with difference is guided by an ethical imperative to do what is right.