

Nancy Topping Bazin



Old Dominion University, a state university in Norfolk, Virginia, enrolling approximately 16,000 students, has successfully established the goal of achieving diversity in what is taught, who does the teaching, and who is being taught. Since 1986, faculty have had to include the perspectives, contributions, and concerns of women, minorities, and/or non-Western cultures¹ in courses that fulfill general education requirements. The university's mission statement and its strategic goals emphasize curriculum transformation and the attraction of more women and male minorities into the faculty and student body. In its 1989 report, the Virginia Commission on the University of the 21st Century stated that students must experience for themselves the diversity and richness of human experience, a diversity rooted in culture but also in gender and race. A coherent framework now exists for

making more rapid progress toward the goals long advocated by affirmative action directors and by programs in women's studies, minority studies, third world studies, and Asian studies.

The transformation in educational philosophy that has occurred at Old Dominion University seems almost miraculous. The process of creating and approving the general education program, the mission statement, the strategic goals, and the report of the Virginia Commission on the University of the 21st Century began in 1983 and concluded in March 1990. The process has been extremely democratic. In a sense, that makes the approval of incorporating the perspectives, contributions, and concerns of women, minorities, and non-Western cultures into the curriculum even more amazing. Except for one protest letter from five women in the College of Business (claiming courses

with this focus were "too narrow"), there was virtually no resistance to this new emphasis on diversity.

Many factors and individuals have contributed to this success: the excellent reputation of Old Dominion University's Women's Studies Program since its creation in 1977; the ability of those in international studies to get major, well-publicized grants for faculty development seminars and trips to the Ivory Coast, Tanzania, Morocco, Japan, and China; widespread faculty participation in women's studies, general education, and writing-across-the-disciplines workshops; and sympathetic leadership not only at the university but on the State Council of Higher Education. However, a major reason for our success was probably the decision to use a cooperative approach that included women, minorities, and non-Western peoples instead of requiring Women's Studies, the Institute for the Study of Minority Issues, Third World Studies, and Asian Studies to struggle separately for representation in the curriculum. This cooperative approach was rooted in efforts that began in 1979-80 to expand the concept of affirmative action to include the curriculum and to have the university commit itself to the ideal of equality in its mission statement (Bazin, 1980).

By April 1980, the director of affirmative action had agreed to expand the definition of affirmative action to include the curriculum. Furthermore, after a series of meetings with members of the university's affirmative action committee, the president and two vice presidents had acknowledged the following:

- The need for a curriculum that would reflect the perspectives of and include materials about women and minorities as well as third world and non-Western peoples
- The need to hire faculty with expertise in these fields
- The appropriateness of including within the university mission statement a com-

mitment to the ideal of equality.

The university president even supported a proposal to seek approval from the faculty and the Board of Visitors for a statement that would introduce these three principles into the university's mission statement.

Before the campus was ready to revise the mission statement, however, changes on other levels had to occur. In October 1984, for example, the English Department held a retreat and totally revised the requirements for the English major. The faculty approved a proposal that every English major take one of three courses: Women Writers, Literature by Minorities, or Literature of the Developing World. Thus, at least three of each major's forty-three required credits would be devoted entirely to literature which, with few exceptions, had been excluded from other courses in the English curriculum.

A few weeks after the department retreat, a more radical proposal did provoke opposition. Encouraged by the creation of the three new courses, a committee proposed the addition of a multicultural or equality studies track to those already available in creative writing, journalism, teaching, professional writing, linguistics, and literature. In addition to the core English courses, majors who chose this multicultural track would take all three new courses plus three English electives (all of which might be in world literature). With this track, English majors (or students with an English minor) could have enhanced their qualifications for jobs that require multiracial and multicultural sensitivity (such positions as school administrator, student activities director, and affirmative action officer). Preparation for positions such as these would have given English majors new possibilities in a period when few jobs of any kind were available.

Although distributed by a white male committee chair, this proposal for an equality studies track

provoked a lively outpouring of statements from colleagues. A series of highly emotional letters appeared in our department mailboxes. One colleague complained that such courses stemmed from an activist impulse inappropriate to academe. To him, those seeking to change the status quo were "political;" yet, in his opinion, those defending a curriculum devoted almost entirely to works by white male writers were not being political. Furthermore, without having read works by women, minority males, or third world writers, he and others assumed they had little or no literary merit. One professor predicted that students would rebel against being required to take even one nontraditional course and that this requirement would provoke a negative response from the general public. Ignoring the influence of sexism and racism on their own interactions with students, others feared that political correctness would be a requirement for receiving a good grade in those courses. They had not noticed how often they had themselves criticized students for taking a feminist perspective or how consistently they had discouraged students even from writing papers on women, minority, or third world writers. Underlying this debate were clear (but often unacknowledged) ideological differences.

After a week during which letters from colleagues appeared daily in our mailboxes, discussion of the equality studies track at the the next department meeting was quite heated. Fearing that we might lose the three-credit course requirement we had already gained, a committee member moved "in the interests of the unity and serenity of the department" to drop the discussion of an equality or multicultural studies track for the time being.

Meanwhile, a university committee was drafting the goals for the new general education program.

Two of the nine goals were to develop understanding of the perspectives, contributions and concerns of women and minorities and to develop understanding of Western and non-Western cultures and values. These goals were discussed and approved in the six colleges and then approved by the Faculty Senate. Next, the committee wrote a more specific document outlining the areas and kinds of general education courses to be required. According to this document, general education courses in English, history, and sociology must develop students' understanding of the perspectives, contributions, and concerns of women and minorities; those in history, philosophy, and sociology must develop students' understanding of Western and non-Western cultures and values. To satisfy upper-level general education requirements, students may choose from a list of minors which includes women's studies, international studies, or East Asian studies; or they may take twelve credits of which three *must* be in non-Western, minority, or women's studies.

The guidelines for general education courses provided for departmental monitoring of what was being taught. The department affirmative action officer, its chair, and its curriculum committee are required to check whether teachers are following the guidelines in their particular courses. Despite the concerns expressed by some faculty, the English Department has made a sincere effort to include literature by minorities and women in the basic courses, and there is a growing interest in world literature and the concept of "world literature written in English." The latter would bring into the mainstream, literature written in Canada, New Zealand, and Australia as well as literature written in English in Africa, the Caribbean, and India. Moreover, English is the only department that has its own elected affirmative action officer who monitors both hiring and, with the

help of a committee, the curriculum.

The new general education program went into effect in 1986, the same year the new requirements for English majors went into effect. During 1987-88, a committee was created to rewrite the university mission statement. The new mission statement describes the general education program, which "places emphasis upon . . . understanding the perspectives of women, minorities, and non-Western cultures." Furthermore, "mindful of present and future needs for a multicultural academic climate, the University deems recruitment and retention of minority and women faculty members and staff to be essential." Finally, "the University seeks in its student body a diversity of age, gender, ethnic, religious, social, and national backgrounds. It actively recruits American minority students along with students from other countries worldwide in such numbers as to have their presence make a discernible impact upon the University's educational processes" (*Old Dominion University Catalog*, 1990-92, p.1). The new mission statement was approved in January 1989.

Meanwhile, work had begun on the strategic goals. After every department drew up its goals, a college committee combined these departmental objectives and established priorities for the college. Based upon the goals set by each college, a university committee wrote the strategic plan for the university as a whole.

The English Department renewed its commitment to staffing the three courses, Women Writers (to include women of different races and cultures), Literature by Minorities (to include female and male minority writers in the United States, with emphasis on differences created by race, gender, class, and national origin), and Literature of the Developing World (to include both female and male writers from developing nations in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and

Central and South America). It also proposed that the next two literature positions be for American literature with a specialty in Chicano, Native American, or ethnic literature and for world literature with a specialty in Latin American or Middle Eastern literature.

The strategic plan of the College of Arts and Letters (home of the English Department) recognizes an obligation to offer programs responsive to the needs of adult women and of racial and ethnic minorities in the area. Under the goal of strengthening undergraduate programs, the college commits itself to emphasize metropolitan issues, especially issues concerning ethnic and gender diversity. The dean is to request that the vice president give priority to these areas for faculty development. (The State Council of Higher Education has funded a grant for faculty development in minority studies for 1991-92.) The college plan also directs the Women's Studies Program to maintain a strong relationship with the community group, Friends of Women's Studies; it directs the Institute for the Study of Minority Issues to strengthen its ties with the Urban League. The committee examining teacher preparation is to consider recommending that at least one course in women or minority issues be included in each teacher certification program. On the graduate level, such courses are to be designed for high school teachers. The English Department had already demonstrated what could be done. For four years it had been offering Women Writers, Literature by Minorities, and Contemporary World Literature on site for teachers in two school systems.

In March 1990, almost a year after the six college plans had been submitted, the university strategic plan was finalized. It advocates increased recruiting of female, minority, and foreign students and special efforts to encourage women and mi-

norities to consider academic careers. To support the hiring of women and minority faculty, the university will provide special compensation and recruiting packages where appropriate; in addition, it will make available to these faculty help with the tenure and promotion processes. The university also encourages collaborative undergraduate and graduate projects with historically black colleges and universities. To stimulate international studies, exchange programs will be encouraged with foreign countries. One is already well underway with Kitakyushu University in Japan. Thus, the university's strategic plan opens the way for women, minority, and non-Western studies to become integral parts of the mainstream. Budgeting additional funds for faculty development in these areas will be particularly crucial.

From the late seventies through the early nineties, first women's studies, then third world studies, and more recently East Asian and minority studies have sponsored faculty development projects. Several key faculty as well as the dean have participated in seminars and in one or more faculty development trips to other countries. A major goal was to make the curriculum more democratic and international. Furthermore, the growing commitment to diversity on the part of the university as a whole helped to make Old Dominion University a national model for curriculum transformation.

The commitment to diversity on our campus has been strengthened by consistent support from the Director of the State Council of Higher Education, who played an influential role as one of the twelve commissioners appointed to the Virginia Commission on the University of the 21st Century. The report of this commission (*The Case for Change*, 1989) declares: "We need to prepare students for a world in which old rules and assumptions no longer apply. For

instance, in the year 2000, only 15 percent of the new workers entering the American job force will be Caucasian men." It asserts that the best response higher education can make to this situation is to offer students a global perspective in whatever they study. A global perspective "suggests an attitude, a way of looking at things, rather than merely a new reading list." Students "should be aware of and, if possible, experience for themselves the diversity and richness of human experience, a diversity rooted in culture but also in gender and race." The report emphasizes the importance of faculty development: "The transformation will have to begin with the faculty because we are suggesting that they see the world and the disciplines in which they specialize in different ways. Only when faculty begin to rethink the premises upon which their teaching and research have been based and are given the time, resources, and rewards to do so, will it be possible to transform the curricula." The report suggests that the entire undergraduate curriculum must be reviewed by asking this question about each course: "To what extent does this part of the curriculum help students to comprehend the variety of human cultures and the wide range of human experience that result from it?" It also speaks out in favor of child care facilities, aggressive hiring of women and minorities before the anticipated faculty shortage reaches a critical point, active recruiting of women and minorities into graduate programs that will prepare them for academic careers, and closer ties between elementary-secondary schooling and higher education. It advocates rewarding academic administrators for cooperation, risk-taking, or innovation and suggests the state allow growth first in those institutions that offer students new perspectives upon the arts and sciences, technology, and the professions and in those that increase the numbers of female and minority

students. The commissioners conclude that students should be "enriched by the endless variety of human culture and experience among the peoples of the world" and "able to deal effectively with conflicting ideologies and values."

Appropriately entitled *The Case for Change*, the commission report is totally consistent with and articulates well the philosophy that underlies the documents that have been written to guide decision-making in the 1990s. Moreover, by encouraging or providing faculty development for community college teachers and high school teachers (particularly those teaching advanced placement courses), Old Dominion University will seek to transform courses that will be accepted as substitutes for its own general education requirements. Unless the perspectives of women and minorities and non-Western peoples are included in such courses, they will not be accepted for transfer credit or advanced placement. When courses offered elsewhere in the region are compatible with those at Old Dominion University, the goals of the Commission on the University of the 21st Century will be met for more of Virginia's young people. The English Department, for example, received a grant from the State Council of Higher Education in the summer of 1989 to run an intensive faculty development institute for community college teachers. This summer institute presented material by women writers, African-American and Native American writers, and third world writers and considered the theoretical and philosophical contexts in which they do their work. The State Council of Higher Education has provided support from its Funds for Excellence to our institution and several others in the area for developments in women's studies, minority studies, and global studies. Because of the projects the Council has funded, there are now three new women's studies programs

in Virginia.

Our experience does suggest, however, that faculty and administrators advocating transformation of the curriculum should create workshops to help faculty handle a variety of responses from students. Although student evaluations of faculty in our introductory literature courses contained few specific references to choice of readings, some students were very conscious that the reading list was different, perhaps because their teachers had discussed the goals of general education. Many of these students were pleased and not only praised the diversity but wanted even more women and minority writers on the syllabus. For example, one student asked for the opportunity to study additional Asian-American, Hispanic-American, and African-American writers. Several felt they had broadened their knowledge of how different people think and behave. One wrote of the teacher: "You really broadened my views about life." Even some who were less enthusiastic recognized the worth of their experience: "I might have picked other examples of literature to cover. But then I never would have been exposed to others' values, one of the stated goals of this institution." There was also a young man who learned more than he had expected: "At first I was saying, 'oh no, a feminist,' but she taught us or me what a real chauvinist view I had. She did this as well as teach one of my favorite English classes." Furthermore, the English majors responded enthusiastically to the women writers classes, even though several had entered the course with some trepidation.

Nevertheless, other comments on faculty evaluations revealed that a few students remained upset by or even hostile to any focus upon women or blacks. One student comment revealed the extent to which the traditional educational system had marginalized minorities and women:

Because every curriculum is political, changes in the status quo mark a shift in power. Such shifts may provoke ideological tensions.

"I was under the impression that this course would cover American writers, not minority and women writers." Another student wrote: "It is obvious that the teacher is a feminist. Her discussions and choices of literature reflect her feminist belief system. I am not a feminist and at times some comments were a little too radical." Yet the same student added: "Mrs. X is a very good teacher and I always enjoy her love of her work and literature. She tolerates opposing views very well." Yet another said: "The instructor of this course seems to have a particularly acute persecution complex concerning her being a female of our species. She allows and even actively inserts these views in her interpretations of literature, which even by the broadest leap of thought must still be considered only art." Still other students objected to the language and depressing situations in works by black writers:

The reading material she chose to present was, by and large, profane and vulgar. Personally I am offended when I *have to* read profanity in order to get a degree. I am a Christian and I would be ashamed to read aloud to my church (or anyone) the words and explicit descriptions of sexual acts (in *The Bluest Eye*) and bodily functions. *Please* do something to bring decency back to the *requirements*.

In another class that read Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, a black student wrote: "All works done by black authors were degrading to blacks. Made me, as a black, feel uncomfortable. One novel we were required to

read was offensive. A lot of profane language I did not feel necessary to enhance my culture." In short, although most students now accept writing by women, minority, and non-Western writers as a legitimate part of an English course, a number of the younger students, in particular, still expressed uneasiness. Challenging racism and sexism when it appeared in literary texts was new for almost all of them.

Because student resistance to dealing with sexism and racism was obvious to the dean when he read the faculty evaluations, he addressed the problem at the department chairs' meeting. He suggested that the student comments were a positive sign that the perspectives were being discussed to a significant extent in some classrooms and that, therefore, he did not want chairs to criticize (for a few rebellious remarks) those faculty who were challenging student attitudes.

Nevertheless, negative reactions to analyses of the sexism and racism faced by characters should be taken seriously. Administrators and faculty should acknowledge, as our dean did, the problems that accompany the transformation of the curriculum. Teachers have to learn how to deal with the emotions aroused in their students by this new material and these new perspectives. The possibility of still more vocal opposition from conservative students could, in turn, unleash a rebellion by conservative faculty who have so far gone along with these developments silently but reluctantly. Beyond that,

there could be difficulties with conservative forces in the community. Because every curriculum is political, changes in the status quo mark a shift in power. Such shifts may provoke ideological tensions.

Even so, enormous progress has been made in establishing the goal of diversity in what is taught, who does the teaching, and who is being taught at Old Dominion University. Theoretically, the transformation has occurred from the mission statement to the introductory course. The breadth of focus—women, minorities, non-western cultures—is appropriate and challenging. The change is extraordinary. But committed administrators, faculty, and students must remain vigilant. The philosophical debate is not yet over.

¹Here and elsewhere in the article there is an overlap among categories: women are also minorities and citizens of third world or Asian countries; Asian countries may be either industrialized or developing nations. When the overlap has been difficult verbally to avoid, it has remained. Suggestions for addressing this problem in future discussions are welcome.

Nancy Topping Bazin is Professor of English at Old Dominion University. She was formerly Director of Women's Studies and Chair of the English Department. The author of *Virginia Woolf and the Androgynous Vision*, Dr. Bazin has also written articles on women's studies, curriculum transformation, and writers such as Doris Lessing, Buchi Emecheta, Bessie Head, Edith Wharton, and Margaret Atwood. She coedited *Conversations with Nadine Gordimer*, published in 1990 by the University Press of Mississippi.

References

Bazin, N. T. (1980). Expanding the concept of affirmative action to include the curriculum. *Women's Studies Newsletter*, 8(4), 9-11.

Commonwealth of Virginia Commission on the University of the 21st Century. (1989). *The case for change*.

Old Dominion University. (1990). Academic affairs strategic plan.

Old Dominion University. (1989). Strategic plan, College of Arts and Sciences.

Old Dominion University. *University catalog*, 1990-92.