

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Diversity in Academe

October 28, 2013

Adding Diversity to Curricula, Starting in the Classrooms

By Ben Gose

Lafayette College wants to make diversity an integral part of its curriculum—without a top-down mandate. Rather than requiring professors to sit through diversity seminars or help out with a mandatory diversity course, Lafayette is infusing diversity into the curriculum by building a "social movement," says Hannah W. Stewart-Gambino, dean of the college.

In the fall of 2011, using a grant from the Teagle Foundation, Lafayette provided small stipends to 10 faculty members whom it considered "change agents" because they were already adept at integrating diversity into their scholarship and teaching.

The professors met for a semester to develop a common strategy, and in the spring of 2012 began gathering in small groups with another 10 faculty members who hadn't done much to integrate diversity into their courses but were eager to do so.

"If you infuse diversity across enough courses, it's impossible for any student to steer through an undergraduate degree and avoid it," Ms. Stewart-Gambino says.

The push to diversify the curriculum is part of a broader strategic goal, set in 2007, to make diversity central to everything the college does.

"Lafayette has always tried to create an inclusive atmosphere, but it's something that we're doing in a much more intentional way now," says Wendy L. Hill, Lafayette's provost.

Brett Hendrickson, an assistant professor of religious studies, joined the faculty group in 2011 to learn how to add more diversity to his courses. Until then, he says, he had moved quickly from one topic to the next in his "Contemporary Religious Issues" course, devoting equal time to subjects

like stem-cell research and abortion.

But his meetings with other professors in the group convinced him that his course needed to go beyond imparting content and teaching critical-thinking skills. So he cut some topics and devoted more time to others. Students now spend three weeks on homosexuality and religion, and read John Corvino's *What's Wrong With Homosexuality?* (A gay professor of philosophy at Wayne State University, Mr. Corvino has a witty touch in arguing the case for same-sex marriage.) Mr. Hendrickson has also expanded a section about the authority of scripture in some religions, to give students a greater understanding of why religious conservatives oppose same-sex marriage.

"I've been able to slow down a little bit and make sure that students really care about the issue," he says. "I've become more serious about my responsibility to shape citizens in this class."

An additional 17 professors joined the project during the 2012-13 academic year. The Teagle grant has expired, but the provost's office continues to provide funds for experimentation and meetings over breakfast or lunch.

Mary A. Armstrong, who heads Lafayette's program in women's and gender studies and was the project's faculty leader, says about 30 newly designed courses have resulted from the effort. "Student learning will be improved because of this," she says.

Chawne Kimber, a math professor at Lafayette who is African-American, has been working on a new unit about Social Security, in which students make calculations to see how the program's coffers may well be drained someday if it isn't overhauled. The unit also includes a discussion of Social Security's history, including the fact that many job categories filled largely by women and minority workers were excluded in the beginning.

For professors who don't see much opportunity to work diversity content into their courses, those in the Teagle-supported faculty group emphasize changes in teaching style, to make sure that women and minority students feel comfortable in class. A recent campus-climate survey found that male undergraduates feel more comfortable than female undergraduates, and white students more so than minority students.

"How do we as faculty members change that?" asks Ms. Hill, the provost.
"You want to have challenging discussions, but you also want to appreciate how those conversations feel to different students in the room."

Some professors say their participation in the project has helped them learn how to make the most of unexpected opportunities to explore diversity.

Ms. Kimber recently shared with her students the exercise in logic known as the barber paradox, which is used to teach set theory: A barber shaves every man in town who does not shave himself. The paradox: Who shaves the barber? (He cannot shave himself, because he doesn't shave men who shave themselves; but he shaves every man who doesn't shave himself.)

Students came up with an unconventional answer, imagining the barber as a transgendered female who had no need to shave.

"Right away," Ms. Kimber says, "I thought about how I could capitalize on this, and have students think even more deeply about this creative measure that they took."

0 comments

★ 0



Leave a message...

Oldest ▾

Community

Share ↗ * -

No one has commented yet.

✉ [Subscribe](#) [Add Disqus to your site](#)