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ABSTRACT

In 1996, New York's Bronx Community College (BCC) participated in the American Association of Community Colleges' Exploring America's Communities project, which works to strengthen the teaching and learning of American history, literature, and culture at U.S. community colleges. The BCC action plan was drafted to improve both the core curriculum and the college's teaching and learning about American pluralism and identity. The plan addressed a perceived lack in cohesion in the Liberal Arts curriculum and the need to provide more rigorous experiences in academic courses. Additionally, candidates for Liberal Arts associate's degrees are now required to take at least two "enhanced" courses, which provide additional educational experiences and stress writing and creative thinking. Communications, English Literature, and History are the disciplines that agreed to develop exercises on the common theme. Communications students read articles about nonverbal communication in various cultures and discussed their stresses resulting from their own multiple cultural memberships. English students read American poetry on the concerns of varied ethnic groups and discussed how individuals and groups interact. History students were assigned readings on assimilation and ethnic adaptation and were asked what it is that Americans do or should have in common. Because of the excellent institutional support, there have been virtually no obstacles. (HAA)

Exploring America's Communities: A Progress Report from Bronx Community College

In: National Conference on American Pluralism and Identity Program Book (New Orleans, LA, January 18-19, 1997)

Exploring America's Community: A Progress Report from Bronx Community College

Bronx Community College, founded in 1958, is the oldest of the six community colleges in the City University of New York, a multi-campus urban university complex serving the needs of 100,000 students annually. With an enrollment of approximately eight thousand students, Bronx Community offers 26 major curricula which prepare students both for advanced studies at four-year colleges and vocational training in diverse occupational careers. Because the college draws its students from a variety of minority communities, many of which are composed primarily of immigrants and children of immigrants, Bronx Community College is an ideal laboratory in which to explore the question, "What does it mean to be an American?"

Ethnically, the college is approximately 40 per cent African-American and 49 per cent Hispanic, but these numbers disguise the diversity of individuals within these categories. The college has a significant population of English speaking immigrants from the Caribbean who are generally numbered among the African-American population. There are also many students from Africa attending the college who hope to become United States citizens. The Hispanic population includes a large percentage of Puerto Ricans and Dominicans, as well as immigrants from almost every country in South and Central America. As is common with many community colleges, Bronx students tend to be older on average than traditional college freshmen and sophomores, and, as in most urban community college, females predominate. Although the college is located in an area most often cited for its urban decay and the poverty of its inhabitants, the college itself is an island of tranquillity and a haven for study. Its 56-acre campus includes landmark buildings from the turn of the last century and the original Hall of Fame of Great Americans.

In order to serve the needs of its graduates, most of whom go on to four-year schools, the college has retained a basic core of courses, common to all curricula within which English Composition and Literature, World History, Communications, Language study, and Music and Art

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appreciation are major components. Core courses such as these help ensure that all students who graduate will have the ability to discuss concepts central to the humanities. They also awaken students to complex issues, including pluralism and diversity in American society. These issues have particular relevance to the students at Bronx Community College because most of them are learning what it means to be an American as they strive to capture a piece of the "American dream."

The Bronx Community College action plan was drafted to improve both our core curriculum and the college's teaching and learning about American pluralism and identity. The plan addressed a perceived lack in cohesion in the Liberal Arts core curriculum and the need, in light of a recent curriculum revision, to provide more rigorous academic experiences in humanities courses. The perceived lack of cohesion in curricula offerings arose because, although each course in various academic departments is excellent in and of itself, there was no overriding, integrating theme or content to tie the collection of core courses into an academic whole. Additionally, candidates for Liberal Arts AA degree are now obliged to show that they have taken at least two "enhanced" courses, courses which provide additional educational experiences and stress writing and creative thinking. The AACC call for a proposal to enhance teaching and learning about pluralism seemed to provide a heaven-sent opportunity because the theme of American identity in a pluralistic society would provide a vehicle both for constructing enhanced activities and for integrating the core curriculum thematically. If a series of enhanced units, addressing American pluralism and identity, could be grafted on to existing courses in various departments, the entire core curriculum would become both more rigorous and more cohesive. This was the challenge we set ourselves through the Exploring America's Communities project. As a first step in achieving this broader goal, representatives from three academic disciplines (Communication, English Literature and History) agreed to develop exercises on this common theme. Reports from each of the disciplines follow.

a) **Communications** - In the CMS 11 (Fundamentals of Interpersonal Communication) class, it was fairly easy to integrate material on pluralism into the course content because intercultural communication is one of the units of the course. Our students certainly understand

that there are many co-cultures within our own country. To help the students understand the implications of cultural and co-cultural identity, students read articles dealing with nonverbal communication in different cultures. It was clear to them that when individuals from different cultures use different kinds of nonverbal communication, misunderstandings can arise. The increased awareness of how culture affects all types of communication allowed students to share freely examples from their own cultures and the problems that have arisen for them. They also discussed the stresses that they have undergone because of their multiple cultural memberships. They certainly understand what divides us; it is more difficult for them to deal with issues of "What do we have in common?" and "What does it mean to be an American?" Many of our students feel that what it means to be an American is defined by someone other than those in their cultural group. As one student wrote, the definition is written by individuals "who are in positions of power." On the other hand, the students recognize that they are in college because they have adopted the American belief in effort-optimism, the belief that hard work will pay off. They realize that some cultures have the attitude that individuals can do little to change their future, while in the United States individuals believe that they are able to control their fate.

We also discussed attitudes that diminish understanding and make intercultural contacts so frustrating. Because culture affects so many aspects of our lives, it can be a barrier to effective communication. This is especially likely if we hold negative attitudes about cultural differences. The class discussed how stereotypes and prejudices have been a barrier in other people's understanding of them and in their understanding of others. From this discussion, students did point out that unless we admit that differences do not always mean deficiencies, and that our own culture is not necessarily superior in all things, we will never be able to establish the trust and respect that are necessary counterparts of intercultural interaction.

b) **English** - An enhanced unit, "Poetry of a Diverse People," used in ENG 16 (Written Composition and Poetry), had mixed results. The class read American poets voicing the concerns of many and varied ethnic groups, then discussed how individuals and groups interact with one another. This did not prompt a clear and readily accepted "least common denominator" definition

for "American" in phrases such as African-American, Hispanic-American, Chinese-American, and Native-American. For the students, the typical "American" remained a white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant. They remarked on the persuasiveness of the image formed by the media. Although the exercise was successful in that it broadened the cannon of American poetry and involved the class directly in poetry itself, it did not evoke a clear idea of what unites us as Americans. Rather it seems to have sharpened perceived ethnic differences. The students could articulate how each cultural group fits in the spectrum of ethnicities within American society, but not how individuals in those groups could better relate to the mythic image of the WASP American.

If anything, the materials and activities made the class more aware of gaps which continue to exist between members of all the ethnic, racial, and cultural groups represented in the classroom. Even discussions of the universal themes and concerns of poetry failed to ignite a common flame which would make the students more comfortable with the concept of "an American." Participants in class discussion took away a heightened aesthetic and philosophical understanding of poetry, and came to see it is a vehicle by which Americans might find commonalties despite their varied ethnic backgrounds. Nevertheless, the students recognized the great chasms that separate us all and the folly of labeling people because of their race, ethnic group, appearance, or culture. The class also saw reasons for doing so and the difficulties faced in trying to erect bridges between different cultural groups.

c) **History** - Students in HIS 20 (The American Experience), a one semester survey of United States History, were given two additional reading assignments, one on assimilation, the other on ethnic adaptation. The former, drawn from Alan M. Krant's, The Huddled Masses: The Immigrant in American Society, 1880-1921 (1982), dealt with problems confronting new comers in the period 1880-1910 and their various stratagems for becoming American. In general, those immigrants and their children turned their backs on their roots and uncritically adopted most of what passed for American behavior. The latter article, drawn from Elliott R. Barkan's, And Still They Come: Immigrant and American Society, 1920 to the 1990's (1996), dealt with the reaction of the grandchildren of immigrants, during the 1960s and 70s, their affirmations of self worth

through ethnic identity, and their rejection of the "melting pot" theory of Americanization. After analyzing these readings, students were asked "What is it that Americans do or should have in common?" Bronx Community College's immigrants and children of immigrants were reminded that "even if they visit the country their parents come from, they are treated by law, and usually in fact as different because they are American citizens." They were asked, "What, in your estimation, does it means to be an American?"

The answers were varied but interesting. The least common denominator for all these students was that to be an American means to be free from cultural constraints and long-established customs associated with the cultures from which they or their parents had emigrated. Pressed to concretize their perceptions, most ended up articulating statements of freedom which mirror the Bill of Rights. The more carefully they developed their ideas, the more closely their concepts resembled classical liberalism. Equality of opportunity, careers open to talent, the freedom to enjoy what they have won by the fruits of their labor; these are still powerful ideas, and, for our immigrant population, an important part of what it means to be an American.

Because we have enjoyed excellent institutional support there have been virtually no obstacles to implementing our action plan. The catalyst provided by the mentor's visit and the staff development activities of various departments have already generated considerable interest in our project. Each of the project members will continue to use and refine the enhanced modules, incorporating questions concerning identity and pluralism into his or her courses. A great deal needs to be done, however. Additional faculty have to be brought into the process and additional courses have to be brought on stream. Through in-house faculty development this can be done, but it will be a long and slow process. Funds are being sought to allow expanded faculty development so that we can accelerate integration of units on pluralism and diversity across the curriculum.

As a final word, the students who participated in the initial phase of the project have arrived at a fuller understanding of what defines us and unites us as Americans. By looking at

other cultures, they have developed a better concept of their own sense of place in this country. In addition, the faculty involved have each benefited because they too have asked and tried to answer the same questions. Nevertheless, the question, "What makes us an American?" remains very difficult to resolve, even in a situation such as ours, in which we witness the struggle of new Americans actively engaged in trying to find meaningful personal solutions to this conundrum.

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