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Universities trying to deal with diversity in populations

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◆ Pluralism

Universities trying to deal with diversity in populations

By Kurt Thiede
Volunteer Writer

African-Americans, women, and Native Americans all living together in an inclusive society, contributing to each other's knowledge of their individual cultures and diversity. This is pluralism, just one way of dealing with the diversity which is present in virtually every campus across the nation.

Throughout the country, universities have to deal with diverse ethnic populations as they become more evident in the world today.

According to a recent study done by the Population Reference Bureau, by the late 21st Century, whites will make up less than half of the American population.

What this means to college campuses is an increase in the enrollment of people with diverse ethnic backgrounds into an already rich multicultural setting.

The problems which need to be solved manifest themselves as more than just common racism, such as name calling and taunting. They include crimes against homosexuals and out right discrimination against women.

Some campuses choose to ignore this surge in diversity on campus and make no changes in their curriculum to aid their diverse cultures. This can breed contempt as different groups are denied recognition and forced in along with the mainstream.

"By denying the problem, we don't make

it disappear," said Suzanne Estler, director of Equal Opportunity and the vice president of the Council on Pluralism at the UMaine.

"We must deal with the topic of diversity in the open. This is the only way to relieve the tension created between ethnic groups," she said.

Estler also said other universities have decided they cannot afford to ignore the problem, such as the University of Wisconsin and Rutgers. These institutions then act as role models for other universities like those in California and Maine.

A Council on Pluralism was set up at UMaine after it was recommended a comprehensive plan be developed for the campus by a system wide commission on pluralism.

"The council was envisioned well over a year ago in response to clear discrepancies which exist on the UMaine campus with relation to discrimination and racism," Estler said.

The 32-member council is made of a diverse group of individuals which includes faculty, students, and professionals. Only in its second year, the program is still fairly new and only in the planning stages.

Julia M. Watkins, the dean of the College of Behavioral Sciences and the chairperson of the Pluralism Council at UMaine sees education as the strategy for obtaining a truly pluralistic institution.

"Curricula which speaks to the issues of a diverse and changing world, and an equally diverse faculty to act as role models for the

students are keys to the pluralistic image," Watkins said.

This issue can hardly be addressed without talking about Pluribus and Unum. Pluribus has to do with such values as freedom, individuality, and diversity. Unum includes authority, conformity and commonality.

In the issue of pluralism, these two values are at constant odds with one another. Some educators believe you must find a balance between the two ideals in order for pluralism to work.

One such person is Carlos E. Cortes, professor of History at the University of California-Riverside and renowned Humanist.

"The challenge for college campuses is to create a climate in which temporary Pluribus isolationism and continuous Unum integration operate in a mutually constructive fashion," Cortes said.

There are those who question the idea of separating the masses.

"Will the melting pot give way to the Tower of Babel?" asked Arthur Schlesinger in his study on the disuniting of America.

Schlesinger said he fears the melting pot that once welcomed every nationality will suddenly become the brew from which turmoil will spread. Instead of being one people united under the common name American, we will retain all nationalistic ties and form out own ethnic groups.

On the topic of curriculum, changes in the subject of history he writes:

"Our schools and colleges have a responsibility to teach history for its own sake — as part of the intellectual equipment of civilized persons — and not to degrade history to be dictated by pressure groups, whether political, economic, religious or ethnic. The past may sometimes give offense to one or another minority: that is no reason for rewriting history."

This was in response to the claims of some African-American professors to change the history books for the sake of self esteem.

Estler said she believes rendering a race invisible is damaging to one's self esteem and our current books are guilty of such a charge

Estler said much of the resistance towards pluralism stems from the safety we have come to know as white Americans. Changes mean someone giving up something to make way for new ideals. An aspiring young professor may not get a certain position because there must be more women higher up in the university.

Those who have become comfortable in certain positions will have to make way for minorities and women. This, Estler said, may cause feelings of uneasiness for some.

No matter how you view the topic, it is definitely one that is here to stay. In a world where business is conducted daily with members of various ethnic backgrounds, it is important to learn how to deal with diverse cultures.

"The gain of pluralism is that we'll be better prepared to interact with a diverse world," Watkins said.