

New state law imposing “cultural competency” training on professors will drive up tuition, undermine educational goals, stifle debate

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A new state law that forces Oregon universities and colleges to impose “cultural competency” training on faculty will drive up tuition costs, undermine educational goals, and stifle debate on campus, the Oregon Association of Scholars said today. House Bill 2864 requires universities and colleges to implement the training, at a cost of hundreds of thousands of dollars per year, by the end of 2019.

“The cultural competency bill is the latest evidence of the deeply illiberal turn in public education in Oregon,” said OAS president Bruce Gilley, a professor of political science at Portland State University. “Our elected representatives are saying that faculty must support a narrow set of ideological propositions concerning American pluralism, rather than be leading lights in their disciplines, in order to be fit for duty.”

The senate rejected a proposed amendment by Senator Dennis Linthicum, vice chair of the Senate Committee on Education, protecting faculty from being “forced or coerced into violating the individual’s freedom of conscience or freedom of speech.”

“It speaks volumes about the sponsors of this bill that they were not willing to entertain Senator Linthicum’s modest amendment,” Gilley added. “The supporters of this bill are part of a growing grievance elite in higher education in Oregon that pursues entitlements and patronage for client groups – a wholesale corruption of democracy.”

The OAS has reported that there is no evidence that cultural competency training improves educational outcomes. Instead, it marginalizes and demeans the supposed beneficiaries by treating them as dependents with inferior capabilities who must be managed by liberal elites.

“This bill will harm education and limit free speech on campus, turning college into nothing more than an expensive training camp for left-wing activism,” Gilley said. “The real tragedy is that students will foot the bill and then graduate with sub-standard educations.”

The OAS calls for the bill’s implementation to be suspended, for faculty to resist the bill’s state-mandated indoctrination, and for faculty to report abuses to the OAS and to their representatives.

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Background on HB 2864

House Bill 2864 mandates that public higher education institutions pursue “implementation of cultural competency standards” including “institution-wide goals that seek to improve the cultural inclusion climate.” The bill is the first piece of formal legislation to grow out of an earlier bill, House Bill 3308 of 2015, that insisted that Oregon universities and colleges root out so-called “micro-aggressions” and “inappropriate cultural stereotypes” on campus.

The OAS believes that the bill will undermine the education of Oregon college students. There is no evidence that so-called “cultural competency” training has any positive effect on teaching effectiveness and many reasons to believe that it degrades it. Rather than being challenged with the latest knowledge in a field, students are given only censored information designed to comport with their biases and assumptions. Two studies¹ in the medical literature cited by a 2016 meta-study² for the rigor of their research designs both found there was no impact on patient satisfaction of “cultural competence” training in medical education. The OAS believes that despite its pretensions to inclusivity, such training is de facto discriminatory and has grave negative consequences for students from disadvantaged backgrounds who can benefit the most from a rigorous education.

A report submitted under HB 3308 envisaged a future college classroom in Oregon in which instead of introducing students to the latest research, instructors instead spend class time talking about “how power and privilege impact the college social and learning environment.”³ Textbooks would be censored based on their “cultural appropriateness”, and offending faculty would be sent for “multi-cultural and anti-bias instruction.” Students unable to pass tests or submit acceptable essays would be offered “multiple forms of assessment.” All Oregon college students majoring in STEM fields would be “required to take an additional course in ethnic studies, women’s, gender & queer studies, or any other courses that provide an introduction to intersectional feminist and antiracist science and technology studies.”

In addition to degrading teaching effectiveness, cultural competency is a grave threat to academic freedom. Whole research agendas may fall afoul of the cultural competency police on campus. In the field of mathematic education, for instance, cultural competency training involves claims that mathematics is a “de-humanized, deductive representation” of the world that falsely pretends to be “an apolitical and universally potential endeavor.” Among the supposedly baleful results of culturally-insensitive mathematics is the tendency to “colonize and rearrange the reality of basket-weaving”.⁴ To remedy such allegedly incorrect thinking, leading mathematics professors will be sent for re-education in “ethnomathematics”⁵ so that they will teach the subject in ways that accord with the cultural “world view” of the students. For instance, the “claim” that the opposite angles of two-intersecting lines are congruent (or equal) is to be abandoned. The movement also refers to itself as “Good-Bye Pythagoras.”⁶ Cultural competence consultants insist that mathematics is a Eurocentric “regime of truth” that is “intrinsically oppressive” and designed to subjugate marginalized groups.⁷ Critics note that this will in fact create an apartheid system of math education, allowing white, male students to master mathematics while others are consigned to degraded, anti-scientific material.⁸

To take another example, in the fields of history and political science there is a vibrant debate about the various dimensions of colonialism and the effects it had –good, bad, and indifferent – on the societies where it was found.⁹ However, cultural competency training requires that this scientific question be foreclosed and simplified. Faculty must teach that all colonialism in all forms at all times had negative effects and was always and everywhere unjust. To claim otherwise is to exhibit “insensitivity” to the fragile psyches of “students of color”, as well as to indigenous students. Indeed, for some radical scholars, it is not enough to press-gang faculty into mandatory anti-colonial indoctrination. They must also undertake continual self-criticism so that they “prioritize self-knowledge” of their inner imperialists over helping students with “mastering and applying knowledge.”¹⁰

Cultural competency is in, effect a template for further left-wing makeover of college campuses, which in Oregon are already grossly biased politically. In May 2017, for instance, Portland State University bureaucrats hosted a one-day conference on “culturally responsible” training for faculty and staff.¹¹ The presentations included “The Trump Presidency and the Ethics of Resistance”, a keynote address on how to prevent “continued wealth concentrated in white communities”, and a presentation on how to revise curricula to weed out “cultural imperialism”. Another presentation insisted that faculty should “minimize dominant discourses” in each field of knowledge so that “all students of nondominant backgrounds can access and feel included in the material.”

A submission to a working group created by HB 3308 from Linn-Benton Community College expressed concern that the initiative would force universities into “becoming the PC police.” The issue has also faced dissent for more than a decade at the University of Oregon, where a 2005 open letter from 24 faculty, decried “the Orwellian insertion of the undefined political notion ‘cultural competency’” into faculty promotion and hiring guidelines as “dramatic interference” with academic freedom that would “create an atmosphere of fear, hostility, and political intimidation throughout every aspect of the University.”¹² One University of Oregon faculty member who emigrated from Russia likened the mandate to Soviet re-education camps. Despite such criticisms, university bureaucrats continue to buckle under pressure from radical student and faculty groups. For instance, on May 26 the president of Evergreen State College in Washington caved in to radical students protestors by imposing annual cultural competency training on all faculty.

More broadly, mandatory cultural competency training is part of a larger attempt to reconfigure higher education based on the partisan ideology of “diversity and inclusion”, a concern outlined in a widely-reported OAS report in March “The Imposition of Diversity Statements on Faculty Hiring and Promotion at Oregon Universities.” The report of the working group¹³ created by HB 3308 included recommendations to “add cultural fluency and competency measures” in faculty performance appraisals as well as new faculty hiring decisions.

Finally, HB 2864 will cost students and taxpayers millions of dollars. The state’s fiscal impact conservatively predicted that the bill will cost each public university at least \$100,000 per year in new staff and administrative costs.¹⁴ This is likely an underestimation of the costs of training faculty and staff, creating and managing oversight committees, and filing biennial reports to the legislature. The legislative analysis contained no cost-benefit ratios, no guidelines on cost

effectiveness, and no estimates of the bottom-line costs to students. This gleeful abandon in spending taxpayer and student money is of concern given that the HB 3308 report also recommended “increased funding allocation to student groups and departments that are geared to programming events on diversity, social justice education, and inclusion towards underrepresented populations on campus” as well as “the formation of a Diversity and Inclusivity coordinator or director in all colleges and departments.” A separate amendment by Senator Linthicum that would require that the activities be funded out of existing resources was rejected.

These considerations all warrant deep concern about the legislative quality of HB 2864. Since its introduction in February 2017, the bill has been hurried through committees with an unrepresentative and biased set of testimonials from student, union, and faculty supporters. Neither house nor senate committees sought out even a single group that might have expressed reservations about the bill. Like the institutional monoculture it seeks to promote, the process by which the bill was passed reflects an alarming lack of attention to the ideological pluralism of Oregon and to the various viewpoints of its college students and faculty. The OAS believes that mobilizing members of the grievance elite to hurry slipshod legislation into law does not reflect well on the future of higher education in our great state.

ENDS

¹ Thom, D. H., Tirado, M. D., Woon, T. L., & McBride, M. R. (2006). Development and evaluation of a cultural competency training curriculum. *BMC Medical Education*, 6(1), 6–38. Majumdar, B., Browne, G., Roberts, J., & Carpio, B. (2004). Effects of cultural sensitivity training on health care provider attitudes and patient outcomes. *Journal of Nursing Scholarship*, 36(2), 161–166.

² Govere, Linda and Govere, Ephraim M., “How Effective is Cultural Competence Training of Healthcare Providers on Improving Patient Satisfaction of Minority Groups? A Systematic Review of Literature”, *Worldviews on Evidence-Based Nursing*, 13:6, 1741-6787 (2016)

³ Higher Education Coordinating Committee, “Disparities In Higher Education Workgroup: Report And Recommendations”, June 2016, <https://www.oregon.gov/HigherEd/Documents/HECC/Reports-and-Presentations/LegReports/HB3308-Final-Report-Jun-16.pdf>

⁴ Renuka Vithal and Ole Skovsmose, “The End of Innocence: A Critique of ‘Ethnomathematics’”, *Educational Studies in Mathematics*. Nov97, Vol. 34 Issue 2, p131-157, p. 144; Paulus Gerdes, 2009. *Geometry and basketry of the Bora in the Peruvian Amazon*. Morrisville, NC: Centre for Mozambican Studies and Ethnoscience.

⁵ Arthur B. Powell and Marilyn Frankenstein, *Ethnomathematics: Challenging Eurocentrism in Mathematics Education*

⁶ Stuart Rowlands and Robert Carson, “Where would formal, academic mathematics stand in a curriculum informed by ethnomathematics? A critical review of ethnomathematics.”, *Educational Studies in Mathematics*. 2002, Vol. 50 Issue 1, p79-102

⁷ David Kollosche, “Criticising with Foucault: towards a guiding framework for socio-political studies in mathematics education”, *Educational Studies in Mathematics*, Jan2016, Vol. 91 Issue 1, p73-86.

⁸ Ortiz de Montellano, Bernard R. (17 Dec 2006). "Afrocentric Pseudoscience: The Miseducation of African Americans". *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*. 775: 561-572

⁹ For instance Cooper, Frederick. 2005. *Colonialism in question : theory, knowledge, history*. Berkeley: University of California Press; Abernethy, David B. 2000. *The dynamics of global dominance : European overseas empires, 1415-1980*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

¹⁰ Pon, Gordon. 2009. "Cultural Competency as New Racism: An Ontology of Forgetting." *Journal of Progressive Human Services* 20 (1):59-71. P 69

¹¹ <https://www.pdx.edu/diversity/the-psu-culturally-responsive-workshop-series>

¹² “Open Letter to President Frohnmayr”, <http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~ncp/Temp/Letter.html>

¹³ <https://olis.leg.state.or.us/liz/2017R1/Downloads/CommitteeMeetingDocument/112758>

¹⁴ <https://olis.leg.state.or.us/liz/2017R1/Downloads/MeasureAnalysisDocument/36520>