Administration Moving Forward on Anti-Racism Class Proposal

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Metropolitan State University is moving forward on a proposed new graduation requirement. If passed, students will be required to take at least one course with a significant focus on issues of race and racism in order to graduate. The proposal for this requirement was submitted by Metro’s Anti-Racism Leadership Team (ARLT). If passed, the requirement will be enforced only for students who are new to the university starting Fall 2016.

Work on the proposal began at ARLT’s 2014 Anti-Racism Summit, an annual event. It was developed in response to ARLT’s 2011 campus climate survey, where 60% of students of color and 30% of white students said they thought racism is still an issue.

“With the events this past year and the uproar around the country around issues of race, we thought the timing was right to push ahead and we believe we have an administration that will continue to be supportive” said Dr. Paul Spies, a professor in the School of Urban Education and current co-chair of the ARLT.

The proposal went through a faculty process where it passed with strong support from six out of the seven academic units of faculty. The college of Management was the only unit to reject it. Going forward into the Fall of 2015, a faculty committee will look at course proposals to fulfil the new graduation requirement. By February of 2016, those courses will have been identified for registration beginning in March 2016 for Fall 2016 courses.

**Student Support**

Spies said that “in 2011 students agreed that such a requirement should exist at Metro State, including 64% of students of color and 51% of white students”.

Furthermore, he said students should understand that the new graduation requirement will not increase the number of courses/graduation requirements a student must complete. Rather, the classes will fit among general education, liberal studies, major requirements or electives. In other words, it will not increase the number of credits needed to graduate but will have overlap with existing requirements and require that of those existing requirements, one must have a racial issues designation.

**Other Proposals**

ARLT’s 2014 Anti-Racism summit led to a focus on five categories for improving race relations at Metro. The new graduation requirement was half of a two part education focus. The other half focused on the development of faculty, staff, and administrators around issues of antiracist theory and how to incorporating antiracist practice into their respective areas of responsibility. The remaining three focus’ include: diversity, which consists of developing plans for recruiting and retaining students and employees of color; climate & accountability; Community, which includes being intentional about having collaborative experiences with communities of color; and policy.

Ginny Arthur is Provost at Metro, as well as Co-Chair of the university’s Diversity Council and liaison of the ARLT group with a policy focus. And while this particular working group is still in formation and not as far along in their proposal as that of the education focus (graduation requirement), Arthur said they have carved out their mission and gotten the ball rolling.

Arthur said the ARLT policy group is developing a proposal to revise Metro State policy 1000. This policy provides the guidelines for the structure of newly proposed policies. The proposed revision to policy 1000 would include the formation of a policy review committee. This committee will include a group of diverse stakeholders including students, faculty, and administration. They would review and approve policies after analyzing their impact on persons from historically marginalized communities. The committee would also review and recommend changes to existing university polices. At present, Arthur said the proposal has not received much resistance.

**Why it’s Needed**

“We live in a country that has always struggled to understand what it means to be an American,” said Nantawan Lewis, professor and co-founder in the Department of Ethnic and Religious. Lewis is also a member or ARLT. “Most immigrants are drawn to this country because of its ideological principle, i.e. freedom, liberty, rights and justice for all. Sadly, once they arrived in this land, many have experienced otherwise.”

Lewis said white perspectives of “American-ness” often leave non-white members of society on the margins. “Non-whites found themselves at the periphery of the society, excluded and treated as ‘others’ in all spheres of life.”

“It is worse when you also belong to [a] class, gender, religion, and ability ‘other,’” said Lewis. “As a higher education institution, Metropolitan State has a responsibility to educate students to live out the principles of freedom, liberty, rights and justice for all.”

**How Did ARLT Start?**

In 2002, former University president Wilson Bradshaw created the Anti-Racism Leadership Team (ARLT). Comprised of students, faculty, and administrators, its mission is to help Metro State fulfill its vision of addressing institutional racism and building an anti-racist learning community. Vested with this duty, one of the team’s first initiatives was to check the pulse of the university and find out how students and faculty members perceived race relations within the university. They did so by conducting Metro’s first campus climate survey in the Fall of 2005. As described within the Campus Climate Report, “The purpose of this initial survey [was] to stimulate awareness, discussion, further study, and action about racism at Metro State”.

The 2005 survey found that “racism does exist in various forms at the university.” Its accompanying report, prepared by associate professor Dr. Paul Spies and assistant professor Dr. Robert O’Connor, made twenty-one recommendations for the university to reduce racism. One of these recommendations is to hold an annual (or semi-annual) summit for strategic planning around anti-racism.

Photo credit: Jill Wilkie

Caption: Faculty and staff converse at the 2014 Anti-Racism Summit.