

Antiracist, Just, and Equitable Futures

An Educational Requirement for Students

Working Group S
Final Report to the Faculty Senate
April 5, 2021

The goal of the requirement is for our students to become critical thinkers and lifelong learners in all matters that concern race, indigeneity, ethnicity, and bias, and who thrive and lead across diverse groups and communities in a multiracial democracy.

1 The Working Group

President Pollack’s [statement](#) to the community on July 16, 2020 prompted the creation of the Faculty Senate’s [antiracism initiative](#). As part of that, [Working Group S](#) (WG-S) was charged to design a for-credit, educational requirement on racism, bias, and equity for all Cornell students.

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2 Background

The demand for having such an educational requirement for students was articulated by Black Students United in [2015](#), again in [2017](#), and yet again in [2020](#) (via DoBetterCornell). Faculty concern that we are failing to properly educate our students in these directions has been periodically expressed through a number of reports (1975, 1987, 2003, etc.) that were reviewed. For example, the idea of having a team-taught interdisciplinary course on race and indigeneity was actively studied at the “task-force level” in the early 2000s and a course on “Race in America at Cornell” was part of a Provost-supported initiative around the same time.

More recently, recommendation D.3 in the [2018 Task Force Report](#) argues for a university-wide diversity course requirement based on the menu-of-courses idea. The [CALs Diversity Requirement](#) and the [Arts and Sciences Social Difference Requirement](#) are college-level versions of this. The 2018 report also triggered adoption of a “skill acquisition” approach to address diversity and climate issues during orientation. The Intergroup Dialog Project ([IDP](#)) currently administers such a program called [Community at Cornell](#) through a two-and-a-half hour session that all incoming undergraduate students are required to take during orientation.

President Pollack’s July statement also asked the Colleges to review their curriculum, taking steps to eliminate instances of implicit bias that can negatively affect the design of a syllabus and its delivery by the instructor. Since then, departments and Colleges have made several changes and significantly expanded curricular offerings related to diversity and inclusion. This brief [overview of college-level activity](#) reflects the different approaches that are being taken to address educational shortfalls.

3 Outcomes and the Notion of a Requirement Framework

To realize the goal of the requirement we envision a framework with two parts. The first part would be rooted in the expertise of Cornell faculty whose scholarship is in the areas of race, ethnicity, and indigeneity. The second part involves a broader group of faculty across the disciplines who will work with their colleagues and students to explore these issues in their departments and fields of study, and bring the first part back into their disciplines and professions. The framework is designed to meet the following learning outcomes:

The Literacy Outcome. The student understands that structural racism, colonialism, and injustice, and their current manifestations have a historical and relational basis. This requires engagement with scholarly content in the tradition of liberal arts education.

The Skillset Outcome. The student learns how to communicate and advocate across the differences that they will encounter throughout their lives and careers. This requires practice in the disciplines through discussion and writing.

The literacy and skill components are interconnected and equally important. Structural and systemic racism is most effectively challenged by individuals who understand its historical origins **and** are able to effectively engage with others who may have very different life experiences and perspectives. A requirement framework thus needs to “move the needle” in the direction of **both** outcomes.

The [University Bylaws](#) (Article XIV) leave graduation requirements to the units that grant the degree in question. Thus, for a university-wide requirement to be adopted at the undergraduate level, College level Academic Policy Committees would need to approve a requirement in AAP, CALS, CAS, CHE, COE, ILR, and SHA. [Professional degree programs](#) are typically administered by a college, that too is a matter for colleges to decide. Finally, at the PhD and research masters level, decisions on requirements are left to the graduate fields. The point is that a university requirement is not something that can be declared by the Central Administration.

However, there is agreement in WG-S around a **centrally supported requirement framework** that promotes the two learning outcomes that must be provided to the colleges and graduate fields so that they can successfully develop their own requirement implementations. **Hereafter in this report “the requirement” means “the collection of requirements that are implemented across all degree programs.”**

4 Three Realities to Keep in Mind during Implementation of the Requirement

How do we identify, produce, and deliver the literacy content? How can the literacy content be integrated into the disciplines where other related developments are perhaps already taking place? And how might all of these activities be incentivized? Before proceeding, we identify some issues to keep in mind.

“Roll Out” Will Take Time and the Requirement Will Keep Evolving, and That is Good

Having the requirement in place for AY2021-22 is unrealistic. Nevertheless, we suggest that next year should be the first of several years of exciting requirement-related projects supported by seed money. There is enthusiasm for experimental collaborations within departments and colleges, and out-of-the-box teaching experiments should be encouraged and assessed for efficacy in meeting both learning outcomes and goals. Content takes time to develop, and Version 1.0 of the framework should be encouraged to continue to evolve.

Unfair Burdens Placed on BIPOC Faculty and Students

The delivery of the requirement is not the responsibility of our BIPOC colleagues; it is a responsibility that must be equitably shared across the entire faculty. Likewise, in discussion venues that are designed to teach students how to “talk across differences”, an unfair pressure is sometimes placed on BIPOC students to explain issues to their white classmates or on BIPOC TAs to help facilitate discussions. The importance of making sure that this burden is spread across all instructional staff, and making sure that they are adequately trained is critical.

Menus Are Both Attractive and Unattractive

Diversity-type course requirements often make use of menus. The [CALs Diversity Requirement](#) and the [Arts and Sciences Social Difference Requirement](#) are examples at Cornell. Review of comparable requirements at [peer schools](#) also reveals a propensity for the menu approach. Their appeal is obvious; they spread the instruction workload, they can accommodate one-time-only offerings, and they give the student choice. On the other hand, they require criteria for getting on the menu, a filtering mechanism that enforces the criteria, and a governance mechanism to maintain both aspects. This is not easy and explains why menus tend to grow in ways that undermine the requirement they serve. To guard against this, we suggest that any use of menus in the requirement be reviewed by a university-wide panel of knowledgeable faculty under the auspices of the proposed Center for Antiracist, Just, and Equitable Futures.

5 The Literacy Component

A significant number of faculty across campus have research expertise in areas that are critical to understand if we are to be successful in our goal. The majority of these faculty are affiliated with one or more of these graduate fields, departments, and programs:

- Africana Studies and Research Center
- American Indian and Indigenous Studies Program
- American Studies
- Asian American Studies
- Feminist, Gender and Sexuality Studies
- Latino/a Studies

Colleagues in these units represent a variety of disciplines and are located in over twenty departments across multiple colleges. Resources must be made available so that they can collaborate and develop courses and course modules that support the requirement which, to repeat, is to impart a historical understanding of

structural racism, colonialism, and injustice. There must be a negotiation to ensure that support continues beyond the curriculum development stage to regularly update and keep materials and associated discussion guides current.

We recommend that 2021-22 be used to clarify with some precision the historical content that ensures the delivery of the literacy outcome. One way to proceed might be to develop a team-taught modular course. Each of the above fields offers a [minor](#) which means that they have already worked out what a limited snapshot into their field should look like. These introductory courses provide a good place to extract content that is relevant to the team-taught course mentioned above.

While much of the relevant scholarship sits within the humanities, there must be a concerted effort to draw upon expertise from across the university. Possible collaborators might include a civil engineer who understands the sociology of the Flint water system, an immunologist who understands the connections between race and vaccination programs, a political scientist who understands the rooting of the filibuster in voter suppression, a business historian who traces accounting systems to practices adopted to track enslaved labor, and more.

6 The Role of Technology

Technology will be critical for the infusion of the literacy half of the educational requirement into the disciplines. In a recent [article](#), the Interim Director of the [Society for the Humanities](#), Professor Annette Richards, speaks to the importance of a new podcast, the [Humanities Pod](#):

Bringing visibility to the humanities at Cornell is important because the humanities are crucial to what Cornell is and does ... That's not always obvious, especially at a time when the humanities are in many ways less visible than scientific research and sometimes seem to be undervalued.

Happily, there is a developing tradition at Cornell of video-based content from areas relevant to the literacy requirement. Some examples include [Fictive Witness: Accounting for Integration](#) (Noliwe Rooks), [Reparations, Knowledge, and the Decolonial University](#) (Carole Boyce Davies), [Taking a Hard Look: Is Cornell a Land-Grab University](#) (Kurt Jordan, Jon Parmenter), and [He Said, She Listened: Mansplaining, Gaslighting, and Epistemic Entitlement](#) (Kate Manne). A particularly salient example produced by a group of faculty are the teach-in video resources for a recent [Toni Morrison Event](#), which includes seven clips that could each be the basis for interesting faculty-student dialog in the classroom. The Library's [Chats in the Stacks](#) program as well as various webinar series sponsored by some of these [centers and programs](#) as well as the podcasts [Dark Laboratory](#), [What Makes us Human?](#) and other Cornell-based podcasts listed [here](#) offer additional examples.

To be clear, our vision is not technology-assisted dissemination of expertise or “video by experts” but “video by experts with discussion guides for nonexperts in the disciplines.” We envisage a flipped instructional model where we use Cornell faculty expertise to produce a literacy component that can be used widely across the university.

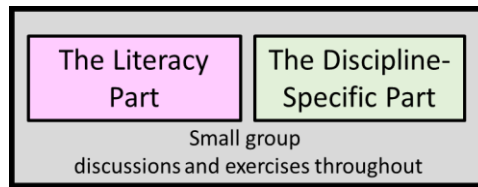
The pandemic has shown us how to use technology and digital learning to effectively adapt our pedagogies and work collaboratively to meet urgent needs in classrooms that span the world. We have done this successfully across disciplines and professional fields. That experience and the speed with which we responded inspire confidence that technology can play an important role in helping deliver the student educational requirement.

Resources must be provided to entice and support faculty who are interested in sharing their expertise using video along with guides to facilitate discussion. Obviously, this will involve partnerships with eCornell, and other central units like CTI and IDP.

7 The Discipline-Specific and Skillset Components

Embedding literacy content into the disciplines is key, and there must be adequate support provided for this in colleges and graduate fields. We suggest inviting interested colleges, departments and graduate fields to create courses to demonstrate how the requirement framework could be adapted across their disciplines and professional fields for undergraduate, professional masters, and research graduate students. Smaller colleges like College of Human Ecology (CHE) and College of Architecture, Art and Planning (AAP) with their wide range of disciplines, professions, and fields are willing to engage in a conversation to take this idea forward and would provide fertile ground for experimentation.

We offer some examples of course adaptations here as suggestions. The first example is to strive for a single integrated course that can be visualized as follows:



Here the literacy part content would be provided by colleagues across the humanities as described in §5 and the faculty member leading the course would make effective use of online materials as described in §6 while adding discipline specific materials. This novel approach should be prototyped during 2021-22. Details about credit hours and audience would need to be developed by individual programs. Incentives, in the form of course release for development of material or summer salary can facilitate the engagement of instructional faculty in their home departments. These faculty will also be involved with the in-person delivery of the literacy component, i.e., video + faculty-led discussion. The associated benefit to doing this work broadly across the university is that faculty often speak to how their teaching and research inform each other, and to how teaching becomes one way to learn new materials. This is a venue where that could play out. The courses that get produced could include a proseminar at a graduate level, an introductory course for a major at an undergraduate level, or a half semester long course focused on diversity and inclusion in a professional masters program.

Another approach is to have courses that have developed their own modules take the literacy component as part of their larger syllabus. One example of discipline specific course development is provided by Professor Corrie Moreau’s Fall 2020 offering of [Entomology 4040](#) (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in STEM: The Science Behind Bias Seminar.) This is a new one-credit offering co-developed with graduate students who have some training provided by the Intergroup Dialog Project. Here is the line-up of weekly topics:

Historical racism in STEM – Origins of the concept of race
Historical racism in STEM – Experimentation on groups
Historical racism in STEM – Eugenics
Data and bias against Women In STEM
Data and bias against LGBTQIA+ in STEM

Data and bias against people of color in STEM
Data and bias against people with disabilities in STEM
Data and bias against first generation and low-income people in STEM
Systemic racism, bias and exclusion in STEM
Progress on reducing racism, bias, and exclusion in STEM
Identify actionable steps to achieve equity and inclusion in STEM

Another example is [CRP 5190](#) (Urban Theory), a graduate level core course where urban topics that relate to gender, race, and ethnicity occupy the middle third of the course. Finally, [CS 1340/ INFO 1260](#) (Choices and Consequences in Computing) is a new freshman-level course that includes a unit on the ways in which “algorithmic evaluations may incorporate biases that are present in the human decisions they're trained on, and what mechanisms might be available to counteract these forms of bias.”

There are many other examples across campus. Efforts like these need to be incentivized and supported as they evolve. The units must continually monitor course content and learning outcomes and consider carefully distributing the student’s engagement with the material over their stay on campus.

8 Conclusion

The educational requirement for students is proposed as a framework with two components, which gets built out taking Cornell’s decentralized structure and deep culture of academic freedom into account. As imagined, it will be unique in its ability to educate our students to understand that structural racism, colonialism, and injustice as well as its current manifestations have a historical and relational basis, even as they learn how to communicate across the differences that they will encounter throughout their lives and careers.