

Essays on Teaching Excellence

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Diversity Begins at Home: Multiculturalism in State and Regional Studies

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“O brave new world, that has such people in it,” Miranda exclaims at the close of Shakespeare’s *Tempest*. As we begin our brave new millennium, few question the need for multicultural education. Instead, college faculty and administrators are seeking diversity experiences most appropriate for their institutions and missions. One answer lies right in our own backyards. State and regional studies can offer faculty, staff, and students experiences with all kinds of diversity (racial, ethnic, religious, cultural, sexual)--even in locales that think of themselves as “homogenous.”

Our Project Recently, two of my faculty colleagues (Kamyar Enshayan from Physics and Kenneth Lyftogt from History) joined me, an English professor, in an interdisciplinary project that took as its premise the hypothesis that state and regional studies *currently going on* at our midwestern public university of 14,000 were an untapped natural resource for multicultural education. We followed the steps below and offer the results of our work as possible useful information for others.

Our first step was to inventory the 2,413 courses listed in our university’s catalogue that make up our institution’s formal curriculum.

Inventory Findings

--Nearly 8% (184 courses) are devoted *directly* to state or regional studies. Examples: "Studies in Midwestern Literature," "History of Iowa," and "Iowa Natural History."

--Another 18% (436 courses) may offer units or assignments on state or regional *ramifications of the course topic*. Examples: "Urban and Regional Economics," "Prairie Ecology," and "Rural Education: Field Study."

--Together, more than 25% of our current courses (620 of 2,413) offer opportunities for state and regional exploration.

Conversations with Colleagues

Our next step was to send a mailing to all department heads, program heads, and external services directors, asking them to identify faculty and staff members teaching or engaged in research on Iowa or midwestern topics, as well as to highlight specific courses and other learning experiences available in their units.

We then followed up with personal interviews with these colleagues to learn more about their work--and to obtain materials from them for our Iowa and Midwestern Studies Resource Collection, begun at our university library. (Most were delighted to find there were colleagues in other departments and colleges who were interested in their work!) To facilitate information sharing, we are currently creating an electronic list-serv connecting faculty, staff, students, and community members engaged (or just interested) in state and regional studies.

Curriculum Development Drawing on this wealth of information, we drafted curriculum proposals for: (1) a 20-22 hour Certificate Program titled "Iowa and Midwestern Culture and Community"; (2) a 23-25 hour minor (or "emphasis" for teaching majors) in state and regional studies; and (3) a 36-37 hour major in state and regional studies. Our motives in all these endeavors are double: state and regional studies have merit in their own right; however, they simultaneously involve "real world" diversity experiences.

An essential concept we have learned from POD Conference sessions on diversity is that colleagues and students (young and old) who feel *uncomfortable* talking about racial, ethnic, religious, or

sexual matters are more comfortable talking about their own (or their family's) ethnic or religious or sexual histories (and intricacies and challenges!). That often is the place to begin. The same holds true of community, state, and regional studies. They are natural and familiar--not to mention, easily accessible--starting points.

Yet a paradox tends to prevail: we are like fish in water. We take our environment for granted, viewing the world through it, but failing to recognize its own composition. Those on our campus who have bought into the myth that Iowa is white, homogeneous, and bland are surprised to make Cornell University historian Carol Kammen's discovery (1988) that nationalities settling in Iowa retained much ethnic coherence across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Thus, Iowa has its Dutch communities, its Scandinavian communities; its Czech communities; its German communities; its Meskwaki Indian settlement in Central Iowa; its African-American communities and enclaves throughout the state; its new Bosnian, Vietnamese, and Hispanic settlements; its (now famous) arrival of Hassidic Jews in Postville; and its gay communities.

The same surprising experience greets those exploring "Iowa Geology" (not as flat as they had thought), "Prairie Ecology," or "Midwestern Literature" (Louise Erdrich, Ray Young Bear, Gwendolyn Brooks, Willa Cather, Saul Bellow--as well as Twain, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and T. S. Eliot).

Natural Starting Place for Global Studies We claim, therefore, that state and regional studies can be an important complement to international studies. In truth, those striving for global awareness often seek to "ground" their understanding of *other* cultures through a strong sense of their own "place." One might argue, in fact, that a rich sense of one's own landscape and culture is necessary for proper appreciation of another. For some students and colleagues, state and regional studies can be a stepping-stone to international studies, while for others, such studies can provide a rich experience of racial, ethnic, religious, cultural, and sexual diversity *in itself*--should they be unable to pursue international studies.

State and regional studies are only one gateway to multiculturalism. However, we believe that drawing on (and even providing faculty,

instructional, and organizational support for) the diverse state and regional studies already going on (usually in isolation) on college campuses can:

- Enhance faculty development (as colleagues in diverse disciplines share their work with each other).
- Improve the curriculum (as state and regional learning experiences are linked in synergistic ways).
- Create productive new organizational structures (such as our listserv of faculty, staff, students, and community members across the state and region engaged--or just interested--in state and regional studies).
- Create unique relationships among faculty, staff members, students, and area citizens engaged in fascinating on-site work.
- Contribute to the institution's mission.
- Help our students--and ourselves--move beyond old or stereotypical images of our states, regions, and world.
- Better prepare students, faculty, and staff members to live in and contribute to the state and region.
- And, at the same time provide a first (or alternative) experience in multicultural education.

Some colleagues believe multiculturalism must be taught *directly*, that is, as multiculturalism, or else colleagues and students will miss the point. We strongly support such practice. We are not suggesting that state and regional studies replace multicultural courses and workshops but that they can serve as an important complement, even reinforcement, for multicultural initiatives. Education in diversity is an almost inescapable by-product of immersion in state and regional studies--whether one is studying the state's or region's history, geology, art, vegetation, music, economy, or religion.

We believe state and regional studies do not have to be "provincial" in the negative sense of the world. Properly pursued, state and regional studies can help colleagues and students appreciate the rich (and diverse) texture of their environment--and recognize that this is, in fact, the way of the world. As Fred S. Matter (2000) has written of the growing architectural movement called Critical Regionalism, such studies can help us address essential human longings: the yearning to reconcile the specific and the universal, tradition and

innovation, the transitory and the enduring.

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