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## Campus Life

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## Massachusetts

## Should a Writing Class Teach Social Diversity?



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AMHERST; Mass. — Responding to criticism over their.

decision to include issues of racial and social diversity in freshman writing classes, English professors at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst say they are teaching students how to write, not how to be "politically correct."

Critics have said that incorporating such issues in freshman writing courses is tantamount to political indoctrination and that the professors and teaching assistants who lead the classes are acting as missionaries, not teachers.

"I don't think that's legitimate to do with freshmen," said Maxine C. Hairston, an English professor at the University of Texas at Austin, where a class on racial issues was postponed amid opposition last fall. "I know students well enough to know that, they are going to be too intimidated to write freely."

The issue prompted national debate when English professors at the University of Texas at Austin tried last fall to start a writing course concerning issues of race. The course has been postponed by the department.

"I don't think the issue is multiculturalism," Professor Hairston said.

"It's a matter of academic integrity. Those people are trying to impose their own views on the people by saying this is the required subject for the course."

But the Massachusetts professors, finding themselves suddenly swept into national debate two years after adopting their own program, said they tried to choose writers from various backgrounds who write about their experiences and not necessarily about politically charged issues.

"We're not forcing kids to confront the issues. What we do is teach writing," said Marcia S. Curtis, who coordinates the Basic Writing Program. "What's reported in the media is so far from what's happening in the classroom."

A recent column by Jonathan Yardley in The Washington Post criticized the program and similar efforts, and Ms. Curtis was one of the people cited.

'Consciousness Shocked'

Anne J. Herrington, an associate English professor and director of the English writing program since 1988, said the idea for the program came after a racially motivated brawl broke out on campus between white and black students after the 1986 World Series.

The university was "consciousness shocked" after the incident, in which

one black student was seriously injured, Ms. Herrington said. "We thought, my God, could we be contributing to this?" by excluding a variety of writers and perspectives from their curriculum.

The majority of the 18,500 Massachusetts undergraduates are required to take a writing class, except for about 5 percent who score exceptionally high on a written placement test.

Students who do not pass the test, usually an average of 10 percent, are placed in basic writing, where they must read two books and write essays. The rest take college writing, a more loosely structured class where students write and discuss their work and publish a packet of their writings at the end.

"We've tried very hard to include writers from various cultures so that students could see themselves as writers," Ms. Curtis said. "I don't want the kids to think that black writers can only write about racism or that Jewish writers can only write about anti-Semitism or the Holocaust.

Ms. Herrington, who also teaches college writing, requires the 80 teaching assistants and the 10 faculty members who teach the courses to participate in a three-day sensitivitytraining workshop held by a campus staff development trainer.

Acad alla astanatanana (s. . <u>Man</u>us tersis <u>Capatan</u> (s. . . In her classes, she said she uses "prompts" to encourage students to write about diversity. For example, she asked students to write about a time in their lives when they felt like outcasts.

Student evaluations have been positive, she said, with more than 60 percent of the students ranking college writing as one of their best courses, she said.

A former college writing student, Ali Woolwich, a junior from Long Branch, N.J., said social issues were "touched upon" in her class through guest speakers and class discussions but were not the main focus.

"What is done with the college writing program is very good," Ms. Woolwich said. "People were encouraged to talk about issues. No one was ever told they were wrong for not coming out with some completely left slogan."

But Dawn Pierce, former black affairs editor at the daily student newspaper, The Collegian, said she doubted that the class would significantly affect the campus climate. "I think if there's going to be any change it's going to be subtle," Ms. Pierce said. "A lot of people, when they take diversity courses, they take them because they want to. When it's shoved in your face, you kind of get on the defensive."

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