



Diversity as a Course Requirement

Professor says his course proposal on conservative political thought was rejected because it doesn't advance diversity as it's widely understood. He thinks that's wrong.

By [Colleen Flaherty](#)

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[Bruce Gilley](#)

Bruce Gilley, a professor of political science at [Portland State University](#), said an international [“hate mob” tried to silence him](#) following the 2017 publication of a controversial essay in which he defended aspects of colonialism.

Now Gilley says his own institution won't grant permanent status to a course he designed on conservative political thought because it doesn't meet a new diversity standard.

Such a standard is a kind of “political litmus test,” Gilley said recently, recalling that colleagues advised him to play the game in seeking permanent course

approval: keep his head down, explain how the class advances diversity, equity and inclusion, and then teach as he saw fit.

“I’m at a stage in my career, however, where I don’t want to play these games anymore,” Gilley said. “It’s wrong.”

So in his application for permanent status, Gilley wrote that the combined advanced undergraduate and graduate-level course would contribute to the diversity of ideas on campus.

More specifically, Gilley wrote in the diversity section of his application that the course “contends that fixed group-based identities are both logically and empirically problematic for political communities.” His course would “pay particular attention to the diversity of ideas in a pluralistic society and the variety of voices and learning perspectives that come with this.”

As to how the class would promote “culturally responsive” teaching, Gilley wrote that it would be about “the diversity of intellectual, personal, individual and character-based (rather than group-based) characteristics” of students. Ideological diversity is of course a goal on college and university campuses. And it’s an increasingly popular response to what Gilley and others call the diversity “agenda.” But some say it’s offensive when offered up as an alternative to diversity, equity and inclusion efforts in that it erases the lived experience of historically marginalized people and minimizes the effects of structural racism.

Asked about that, Gilley said diversity is a “reasonable” ideal. But diversity of ideas is “logically much more important than diversity of skin pigmentation or genitalia because it speaks to the human condition and what shapes how we think,” he said.

Gilley further said it's "cultural Marxism" to attribute "goodness" or "badness" to people based on their ideology, and that doing so "threatens the very idea of the university."

The course description for Conservative Political Thought 485-585 says that conservatism is an "approach to political life that emphasizes prudence, tradition and incremental change." For that reason, reads the syllabus, "it is sometimes described as a practice of politics without a theory. Yet there is a large body of normative and analytical political theory in the conservative tradition."

The purpose of the course is to "consider the main theories of conservatism and how they have been applied to political practice," it says. "An emphasis will be placed on understanding the internal logic and the different strands of conservative political thought and the ways that it has responded to contemporary challenges."

Gilley's syllabus includes various introductory readings, several weeks of Edmund Burke, and one week each on European, British, American and black conservatism. It ends with readings on conservatism and public policy. Many colleges offer similar courses.

Portland State's response to Gilley's application disappointed him.

"At this time there are concerns about the diversity questions as they have been answered," read the minutes of an April meeting at which it was discussed by faculty members from across the university who review course proposals.

Gilley said he was asked to try again but that he didn't change the course or application in any substantive way.

Last month, he heard from a curriculum coordinator that the proposal was denied by the faculty Graduate Council "because the responses to the diversity perspectives and engagement sections did not support the university commitment to access and inclusion, particularly in regards to providing accommodations to students to the standard set by the Disability Resource Center." There were additional concerns about a missing librarian's statement on resources for the course, which Gilley described as a kind of technicality, easily remedied. He attributes the rejection to his take on diversity.

Gilley has already taught the class twice. The university says he needs permanent status to teach it more than three times. Gilley says he will still teach the class with a temporary course number, and that he's already scheduled to do so in 2020.

But the denial of a permanent number means that the course can't be included in formal tracks of study, he said. By extension, fewer students will probably end up taking it. And it keeps the department from offering the most well-rounded political philosophy education possible, he added. Students might still learn about conservative political thought, but they'll do so through a liberal lens.

Portland State says that its faculty curricular councils have approved some 340 courses since diversity perspective and engagement guidelines were made part of the course review process in 2016-17. Gilley's is the only one not approved under the criteria.

Many colleges and universities have in recent years mandated that students take a course or two with a diversity focus. Many colleges also have made diversity, equity and inclusion formal parts of their faculty hiring, review and promotion policies. But far fewer institutions have moved to require that all permanent courses consider diversity, equity and inclusion.

Chris Broderick, university spokesperson, said via email that both the undergraduate and graduate curriculum councils are subcommittees of the Faculty Senate, "which has the authority to approve courses under the shared governance model at Portland State."

The university enrolls 28,000 students from diverse backgrounds, ethnicities and ages, with many first-generation college students, international students, LGBTQ students, veterans and those with disabilities, Broderick said. "That is one of the reasons the faculty graduate and undergraduate councils consider how diversity and inclusion are relevant to course approval. Does the curriculum reflect diversity? Is the instruction plan inclusive?"

In a humanities course, both questions apply, he said. "If it is a science or technical course, the second question is the relevant one."

Broderick said that Gilley disagreed with the very premise of addressing diversity in his course proposal, but that he can still resubmit it.

Jon Shields, associate professor of government at Claremont McKenna College and co-author of *Passing on the Right: Conservative Professors in the Progressive University*, said Gilley's syllabus "assigns a nice sample of some of most prominent and thoughtful conservative intellectuals."

It also brings out the “intellectual breadth of the tradition by highlighting its many currents, Burkean and libertarian, British and European, American and African American,” he said.

Shields added, “There are places where one can take such a course, but they are depressingly few. The conservative intellectual tradition is one that few students are exposed to in college.”

Andrew Latham, a professor of political science at Macalester College, teaches a course on conservative and liberal political thought every other semester. Latham said what while Macalester is a “very progressive,” liberal college, he believes liberal students take the course because they’re interested in how “the other side” thinks. And the few conservative students who enroll “understand their political philosophy a bit better” as a result.

Latham said he enjoys administrative support for his course within the context of a liberal arts education, and that he tries hard to make it inclusive. His syllabus includes some of the same readings as Gilley’s. “The focus of our inquiries will be upon topics such as ‘how should I lead my life?’ (ethics), and ‘how should we lead our lives together?’ (politics),” Latham’s syllabus reads. Secondary course goals include “familiarizing students with the various ‘languages’ or ‘idioms’ of conservative and liberal political thought” and “helping students understand the great political debates between conservative and liberals.” The course ends with a paper on “why I am/am not a conservative,” which Latham said was his favorite to read.

Gilley said departments are the ultimate experts in what constitutes a strong course. Asking an outside committee to judge it against standards such as diversity is a dangerously “open door.”

“Where does it end?” he said.

Read more by [Colleen Flaherty](#)

https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/06/18/professor-says-his-course-proposal-conservative-thought-was-rejected-because?utm_source=Inside+Higher+Ed&utm_campaign=54e64bbcf9-WNU_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1fcbc04421-54e64bbcf9-199133009&mc_cid=54e64bbcf9&mc_eid=6f67a838c9