

Transformation Theme: Changing to Multicultural Content

Summary of Significant Findings

by

Elizabeth F. Barkley

When I first began to puzzle over enrollment problems in the “Baseline Course,” I hypothesized that a strong contributing factor to enrollment decline was the course content. I believed that student demographic changes had resulted in a large percentage of students who were not interested nor who felt emotionally engaged with western-European “classical music.” My first intervention, then, was to transform the content of the course. Working with UC Berkeley’s Center for the Study of American Cultures, I changed the course from “Music History” to “Musics of Multicultural America.”

In terms of content, this new course was a comparative and integrative study of the multicultural music styles of the United States. It included examples of the musics of Native Americans, European Americans, African Americans, Chicano/Latino Americans, and Asian Americans, tracing the development of that music from its historical roots to its influence on contemporary American music. Special attention was given to each group’s unique history and experience in American culture and society along with analysis of each group’s musical traditions from a technical and a cultural perspective.

By the time I began this Carnegie Scholar project and decided to analyze that transformation, yearly academic enrollment had grown from 45 (1995-96) to 782 (1999-00). Therefore one of the first questions I wanted to answer as I began my analysis of this course transformation was, “Has there been a change in the demographic profile of my students in terms of race and ethnicity?” I retrieved and analyzed data for course enrollment beginning with the baseline course for Fall, 1994 (Music History) and the “Phase 1” transformed course

(transformed only in terms of content) offered Fall, 1995. I then retrieved and analyzed trend data continuing through the current academic year.

With just the content intervention, enrollment remained static from 1994-95 to 1995-96 (45 total students in each year). Unfortunately, it is difficult to determine what role content played in this lack of enrollment change. First, because course approval by the curriculum committee did not occur until Fall, 1995, the course was not “published” in the 1995-96 college catalogue or in the Fall or Winter schedule of classes. Furthermore, counselors were not yet aware of the course and there was no “word of mouth” from former students to recommend the course. For these first two quarters, students “heard” about the course either directly from me or from a few fliers I posted on campus. Additionally, the course had not been approved to meet any college general education requirements. Therefore any students enrolled in the course were enrolling only for continuing education out of personal interest. I think that given these powerfully negative influences, it is actually surprising that there was not a decline in enrollment between 1994-95 and 1995-96! By academic year 1996-97, the course was printed in the schedule and catalogue, there were students who were recommending the course to friends, and the course was approved to meet general education requirements. Enrollment increased from 45 to 106, and the course has continued to increase significantly each year to this year’s enrollment of 782.

Returning to the question of race and ethnicity demographics during this 5-year trend, one of the most interesting pieces of information was the increasingly large percentage of students of color in comparison with white students. In fact in Fall, 1995, white students comprised 66% of the class while students of color comprised 33%. By Fall, 1999 the ratio had inverted and students of color constituted 67% and white students comprised 32%. To put these statistics into a larger institutional context, overall college enrollment for students of color grew from 42% to 55%. It appears as though my initial efforts to create a course that engaged ethnically diverse students has been successful and that the course now *attracts* students of color.

More disturbing is the downward trend in Black students, decreasing from 8.06% in Fall 1996 to 6.54% by Fall 1999. This is not a statistically significant decrease, but in looking at student success rates (students who stayed in class from the 3rd week to the end and earned a grade of “C” or better), I also discovered that Black students were also at highest risk (only 46% success compared with 76% college-wide for black students, and 86% for white students). Although institutionally, the percentage of Black students enrolled and Black students who are “successful” has also declined, I felt that my course should be doing better to attract and retain Black students.

My intuitive sense is that a contributing factor was the discomfort and resentment Black students may feel hearing a white woman discuss Black history, music, and social experience. As a solution, beginning Spring Quarter, 2000 I have “partnered” with a Black professor who specializes in African and African American history and music who co-taught the three modules on African American music. I have also had a campus-influential African American student who “graduated” from the course to come as a guest presenter to the current students. I will be able to see if this starts affecting the trend for Black student enrollment, retention, and success beginning Fall, 2000.

It was also disturbing to see the pronounced downward trend in white students. Although the total number of white students has continued to increase, the percentage has decreased. What still needs to be determined is whether or not this percentage is significant enough to be interpreted as white students being repelled from the course. I have decided to test a hypothesis that I am discouraging them by emphasizing too strongly the negative impact of whites in the United States. My proposed solution is to identify and stress “positive white role models” both in lectures and as topics for research projects.

For example, the important urban folk musician Pete Seeger is white, has been a partner in an over 50-year mixed race and culture marriage, and has been personally involved in fighting for racial and ethnic equality his entire life. Other positive role models would be white leaders in

the abolitionist and civil rights movements. It is my hope that this may soften the impact of the negativity as well as give white students (as I do the students of color) reasons to be proud of their role in shaping American history and music. I will track enrollment demographics and continue to study white student enrollment through the 2000-01 academic year.

An aspect of the demographic profile that contributes to the diversity but is not visible in the data is the significant percentage of white students from other countries and for whom English is not their primary language. In the controlled random selection of “Student Investigators,” 40% of the students were “white” but of this 40%, 33% were International Students. This is significant because these international students (predominantly from non-English speaking countries) tend to have the same kinds of language challenges as the immigrant students (predominantly from Asian countries).

Qualitative data indicate that students of color, immigrant students, and international students generally find the content extremely interesting. For students of color, the content provides the historical background to music genres that, even if they don’t listen to these genres, they recognize as being associated with their race and ethnicity. For example one Black student commented (after the class had covered modules in gospel, spirituals, blues, jazz, and the ethnic and racial roots of rock ‘n’ roll) “I had no idea my people were so important to American music.” Immigrant students and international students like the music (e.g., “When I was in Japan, blues was the only music I was interested in) but they also find the blend of music and historical/social context an intriguing way to learn about American history. As one student said, “I’ve learned more about United States history in this class than in any of my *real* history classes!”

Using the “Student Investigator Representatives” as a focus group, I asked students to identify the kind of music they listened to on a regular basis as well as to identify any particular kind of music that they really didn’t like. Students expressed a wide range of tastes, including hip-hop, R & B, country, blues, etc. Some students did not identify music by genre, but rather by

function (“dance music”) or emotional quality. For example, one student said, “When I listen to some music, it’s important for me to pay attention (to) “sound.”...if I’m tired, I want to listen to slow and clear music.” Surprisingly, 26% listened to “classical music” on a regular basis, and an additional 26% listened to it occasionally. Only one student said, “One thing that did not change and maybe never will is my dislike of opera and classical music. I find it just bores me.”

To summarize, the first intervention to reversing the enrollment decline had been to make changes in content from a western-European “classical” music history course to a multicultural, American-based course that traces the developments of music such as blues, jazz, Cajun, Zydeco, salsa, Tejano, and various Asian-fusions from their roots in immigrant music to their hybridization into uniquely new musics. Quantitative data indicate that enrollment has increased significantly (1,638%) and that the percentage of “students of color” has also increased significantly (from 33% to 67%). Qualitative data appear to indicate that content has played a significant role in attracting and retaining students. The data has also led to new questions and those questions, along with a continued trend analysis, will be pursued during the 2000-01 academic year.