

**Negotiating Knowledge: Dartmouth's Non-Western Requirement
and the Politics of Curriculum Reform**

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Introduction

What is culture? Is it a shared heritage, a set of values, a way of life? Or is it a political weapon, a shifting label, a terrain of struggle? By the end of the twentieth century in the United States, culture as an idea had become something it was not before: politicized, contested, and institutionalized. Under the broad and often slippery concept of multiculturalism, culture became a demographic fact, a policy goal, an ethical position, and a framework for understanding social interaction.¹ As multiculturalism spread through schools, universities, and public discourse, it raised foundational questions about education, citizenship, and national cohesion: What knowledge should be taught? Who belongs in the curriculum? And what happens when traditions clash?

These questions did not remain merely abstract and theoretical. They found immediate expression in public schools, museums, and universities, spaces charged with shaping national identity and transmitting cultural values. From the emergence of ethnic studies programs in the 1970s to the so-called “canon wars” of the late 1980s and early 1990s, American higher education became a central battleground for these debates. Institutions struggled to reconcile traditional Western-oriented curricula with growing demands for inclusion, equity, and cultural representation.

Dartmouth College provides a compelling case study in this national landscape. In the early 1980s, Dartmouth introduced a “non-Western” course requirement, years before similar debates peaked at other campuses. Initially framed as a response to global political realities and Cold War imperatives, the requirement would later become entangled in disputes over multiculturalism, academic standards, and Western civilization.

¹ Kurin, “Culture on the 1990s Agenda.”

This paper traces the history of those curricular reforms at Dartmouth, situating them within national debates about multiculturalism, higher education, and institutional identity. It asks: What were the original goals behind the “non-Western” requirement? How did stakeholders respond over time? What forces shaped its eventual restructuring? And what do these debates reveal about how diversity and inclusion have been negotiated within academia?

Ultimately, Dartmouth’s implementation of the “non-Western” requirement in the 1980s and its transformation into the “World Cultures” requirement in 1992 reveals how curricular policy became a contested site where Cold War imperatives, multicultural ideals, and conservative backlash converged, making the college a microcosm of the national struggle to define knowledge, identity, and educational purpose in an increasingly pluralistic society.

Canon Wars and Cultural Literacy

In 19th-century Europe, the concept of a national identity was crafted by binding race, language, and territory into coherent cultural narratives. This concept enforced monocultural traditions, shaping exclusionary definitions of what constituted a nation. In the postcolonial 20th century, however, especially after World War II, newly independent nations like India, Indonesia, and Kenya faced the challenge of building political unity from immense linguistic, religious, and regional diversity. Their experiences revealed that forging a cohesive civic culture in multicultural states is far from guaranteed.²

Even industrialized nations once considered “immune” to cultural fragmentation due to high levels of education, strong civic institutions, and traditions of liberal governance began to experience renewed cultural unrest. Rather than being relics of a pre modern past, religious, ethnic, and regional identities reasserted themselves with political urgency. Across the globe,

² Kurin.

including in the United States, immigration, postcolonial resistance, and regional cultural revivalism challenged dominant ideas of national unity.³

By the early 1990s, concerns about cultural fragmentation became particularly acute in the United States. Ministers of culture from the republics of the former Soviet Union warned that America's increasing cultural pluralism might eventually undermine national cohesion, just as it had in their own collapsing state.⁴ These anxieties found concrete expression in what became known as the "culture wars": fierce public debates over values, representation, and the purpose of national institutions, especially schools and universities.

In this volatile political and cultural climate, scholars began to voice their opinions on the future of higher education and national identity. In 1987, Allan Bloom, a political philosopher at the University of Chicago, published *The Closing of the American Mind*. Bloom argued that American universities had embraced moral relativism without recognizing its philosophical roots in Western thought or acknowledging its corrosive effects on democratic life. He saw this cultural drift as an educational crisis, one that eroded national unity and encouraged racial divisiveness and social alienation. The university, Bloom warned, had failed in its mission to cultivate critical thought and moral seriousness.⁵

That same year, E.D. Hirsch published *Cultural Literacy*, a bestselling critique of progressive education. Hirsch contended that American students were suffering not from a lack of skills, but from a lack of shared cultural knowledge: facts, names, dates, works of literature, and historical references that form the basis of civic understanding. He included in his book a list

³ Kurin.

⁴ Kurin.

⁵ Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*.

of 5,000 items that every American student should know.⁶ Like Bloom, Hirsch viewed curricular fragmentation as a threat to national coherence and civic responsibility.

In 1991, Dartmouth alumnus Dinesh D’Souza added to the chorus of critique with *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus*. D’Souza examined how affirmative action and multicultural policies were, in his view, undermining liberal ideals in higher education. He argued that these reforms counterintuitively fostered racial and gender-based division, weakened academic standards, and imposed political ideology on admissions, curricula, and campus life.⁷ Like Bloom and Hirsch, D’Souza positioned multiculturalism not as an expansion of education, but as a distortion of its true purpose.

These critiques did not emerge in isolation. They were direct responses to visible changes unfolding on campuses across the country. At Stanford University in 1987, for example, more than 500 students protested the required humanities program “Western Culture,” which focused almost exclusively on European male authors. The protest, which included the now-famous chant “Hey hey, ho ho, Western Culture’s got to go!”—led by figures like Jesse Jackson—sparked national media attention. By 1989, Stanford had replaced the program with “Cultures, Ideas and Values,” a more inclusive curriculum that incorporated a broader range of perspectives.⁸

Dartmouth’s “Non-Western” Requirement: Origins and Intentions

Compared to Stanford and other high-profile campuses, Dartmouth rarely appeared in national accounts of the canon wars and multicultural curriculum debates. Even in Dinesh D’Souza’s *Illiberal Education*, the College received only a passing mention. In a survey of curricular changes across U.S. universities, D’Souza wrote:

⁶ Jr, *Cultural Literacy*.

⁷ D’Souza, *Illiberal Education : The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus*.

⁸ “1980s | Stanford Stories From the Archives - Spotlight Exhibits.”

At the University of Wisconsin, students must enroll in ethnic studies although they need not study Western civilization or even American history. At Berkeley, the faculty recently adopted an ethnic course requirement, making it the only undergraduate course that all students must take. Dartmouth College has a non-Western but no Western prerequisite for graduation. The University of Cincinnati has a new 'American Diversity and World Cultures' requirement. Penn State mandates a course relating to 'Ethnic Diversity,' effective in fall 1991. Some colleges, such as Ohio State University, are going beyond a single requirement: they are overhauling the entire curriculum to reflect what they call 'issues of race, ethnicity and gender.'⁹

To D'Souza, Dartmouth served as just one more data point in a broader pattern of colleges mandating multicultural coursework while neglecting the Western tradition. Yet this omission masks a more complex story.

In June 1978, Dartmouth formed the Committee on Curriculum and Year-Round Education (CCYRE) to conduct a full review of its academic program. One of its proposals introduced a requirement that "students must elect, as one of their twelve courses, one course that takes as its subject the study of a culture or cultures other than those of Western Europe and North America." The rationale was clear: students needed intellectual exposure to global cultures in order to function in an increasingly interconnected world. As the report stated, "This recommendation is an acknowledgement that our students should engage intellectually in the broader world where they will function." Before the proposal was approved, the Board of Trustees amended the language to clarify that "North America" referred specifically to "European-based cultures of the United States and Canada."¹⁰

This was not Dartmouth's first curricular engagement with non-Western cultures. In 1947, President John Sloan Dickey introduced a senior capstone course titled Great Issues, which included a section on non-Western studies. Though discontinued in 1966 due to student unpopularity, the course reflected early efforts to globalize the liberal arts curriculum.

⁹ D'Souza, *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus*.

¹⁰ "Dartmouth College, Board of Trustees Records."

To understand why non-Western studies reemerged at Dartmouth in the late 1970s, it is necessary to situate the change within the broader postwar development of area studies in U.S. higher education. The growth of area studies relied heavily on both foundation and federal support. In the early twentieth century, institutions such as the Carnegie Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Ford Foundation began funding research and education on foreign regions, often aligning with the foundations' own global engagements. The Rockefeller Foundation, for example, co-funded an East Asian studies program with the Carnegie Foundation and the American Council of Learned Societies. These efforts paralleled rising public and strategic interest in China and Japan, culminating in the establishment of the Far Eastern Association (now the Association for Asian Studies) in 1943.¹¹

During World War II, the U.S. government began directly supporting area studies for strategic and intelligence-gathering purposes. The rise of communism made cultural knowledge of non-Western regions imperative. Area studies centers at Columbia and Harvard were founded with a mix of foundation and government funding, including covert CIA support. Between 1951 and 1966, the Ford Foundation alone provided \$270 million to U.S. universities for research and training in area studies. Additional funding was routed through organizations like the Social Science Research Council and the American Council of Learned Societies.¹²

The launch of the Soviet satellite Sputnik in 1957 marked a turning point in public and governmental support for international education. The following year, Congress passed the National Defense Education Act (NDEA). Under Title VI, the government funded instruction in “modern foreign languages” and supported the creation of National Resource Centers focused on specific regions. By 1999, there were 119 Title VI centers covering 11 global areas.¹³ These

¹¹ Lee, “Area and International Studies: Cultural Studies.”

¹² Lee.

¹³ Lee.

programs formed the institutional backbone for American area studies throughout the Cold War. Dartmouth's own Great Issues course, notably, had received support from the Carnegie Foundation.

Although Great Issues ended in 1966, global affairs continued to shape American political life and educational priorities. The Vietnam War and the Iranian Revolution both exposed failures in U.S. cultural understanding. Policymakers often approached these conflicts through a Cold War ideological lens, overlooking the local histories, cultural dynamics, and nationalist motivations that shaped them. In fact, the 1979 Iranian hostage crisis was the immediate catalyst for Dartmouth's new "non-Western" requirement. As Professor C. Dwight Lahr, a member of the curriculum committee, explained to *The Dartmouth*, a student newspaper: "We felt the students had to be prepared for the 1980s. The Iranian crisis crystallized our feelings that students should be nudged to learn a culture other than our own."¹⁴

¹⁴ Miller, "Faculty in Support of Non-Western Requirement."

A faculty committee appointed to study means to enhance "the quality of the Dartmouth educational experience" has recommended several changes, some of which are listed below. Please check one box for each recommendation to indicate your response: (percentages shown)

1. Initiate a trimester calendar with 14-week fall and spring semesters and a 12-week summer semester. Each term would include a reading period followed by an examination period. Students would normally enroll in four courses each semester and register for eight semesters, including one summer term.	17—Strongly Favor 28—Favor 9—No Opinion 22—Disfavor 25—Strongly Disfavor
2. "Reduce the discontinuity of our current calendar" by establishing a limited number of enrollment patterns. All students would be in residence both fall and spring of their freshman and senior year. (One Dartmouth off-campus program could be substituted for a residence semester senior year).	12—Strongly Favor 24—Favor 11—No Opinion 27—Disfavor 25—Strongly Disfavor
3. Require all students to declare a major in April of their freshman year.	1—Strongly Favor 6—Favor 7—No Opinion 28—Disfavor 58—Strongly Disfavor
4. Include as a distributive requirement for graduation a course dealing with non-Western culture (Third World Development, Islamic or Hindu culture, etc.).	12—Strongly Favor 28—Favor 20—No Opinion 22—Disfavor 17—Strongly Disfavor
5. Include on student transcripts a median course section grade for all courses — making students "less reluctant to elect courses with lower-grade policies" and less drawn to courses with "generous grading practices."	13—Strongly Favor 33—Favor 31—No Opinion 14—Disfavor 9—Strongly Disfavor

Number responding from the Class of:

374—'83	215—'82	154—'81	176—'80	23—Other
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A poll taken by The Dartmouth of 932 undergraduates at registration recorded student reaction to recent College Committee on Year Round Education recommendations. Student opinion was divided on all questions but that of requiring students to declare a major by the end of their freshman year. Story on page 5.

Figure 1. Poll taken by *The Dartmouth* regarding CCYRE recommendations.¹⁵

Student support for the new requirement was mixed. A campus poll conducted by *The Dartmouth* found that 40% supported the new requirement (12% strongly, 28% somewhat), while 39% opposed it (22% somewhat, 17% strongly) (Fig. 1). These numbers suggest that the reform was primarily driven by faculty and administrative priorities, rather than broad student demand.

Once the requirement was approved, defining which courses qualified as "non-Western" became a critical and contested issue. The Committee on Instruction, tasked with compiling the list, wrote to all department heads:

¹⁵ Miller.

We would like to solicit your aid in constructing this list. Would you please convey to us a list of those courses offered by your Department or Program which you feel qualify for inclusion on this list; please include, for each course on your list, a brief explanation of why you feel it meets the new requirement.¹⁶

The responses revealed how departments operationalized the term “non-Western.” The Department of Spanish and Portuguese, for example, justified its Latin American literature courses by citing United Nations statistics: “All these courses deal with texts produced in Spanish American countries, considered, by statistics gathered by the United Nations, part of the underdeveloped world. These countries are also considered part of the Third World.” The History Department submitted its proposed offerings under the heading “List of Third World courses.”¹⁷

Notably, the College’s formal guidelines made no mention of “underdeveloped” or “Third World”; they simply referenced “non-Western.” That departments instinctively reached for these Cold War terms suggests how deeply embedded such frameworks were in American academic culture. The concept of the “non-Western” was never just about geography; it was also shaped by ideological and developmental hierarchies.

From 1945 to 1989, the Cold War divided the world into three broad zones: a capitalist “First World” led by the United States, a communist “Second World” led by the Soviet Union, and a “Third World” of recently decolonized or unaligned nations. Although these categories originated in geopolitics, they quickly acquired moral and developmental connotations. As many scholars have noted, Cold War models of modernization—especially capitalism—deeply influenced how Americans understood the so-called Third World.¹⁸ These logics seeped into curricula and course designations, often unconsciously.

¹⁶ “Dartmouth College, Dean of the Faculty Records,” n.d.

¹⁷ “Dartmouth College, Dean of the Faculty Records.”

¹⁸ Owusu, “Third World.”

The Rise of Ethnic Studies and Multicultural Education

To understand why Dartmouth's "non-Western" requirement eventually became a target of criticism, it is important to situate it within the rise of ethnic studies and multicultural education in the United States. These two academic movements emerged in the wake of the 1960s, a decade defined by confrontation, protest, and efforts to restructure social institutions, including the university.

Ethnic studies grew out of the broader social struggles of the era, particularly the Civil Rights Movement, the Free Speech Movement, the Anti-Vietnam War Movement, and the Black Power Movement. Activists and students came to view the university as a central site in the reproduction of social inequality. Campuses were seen not as neutral spaces of knowledge production, but as complicit in reinforcing hierarchies of race, gender, and class.¹⁹

In this context, student activists began demanding not only increased representation, but curricular reform. These efforts culminated in the 1968–69 strike at San Francisco State College (SFSC), where students demanded the creation of a School of Ethnic Studies that would offer courses and conduct research from the perspective of marginalized communities. They also insisted that faculty members be directly connected to the ethnic minority communities being studied. SFSC established the first college of ethnic studies in 1969. Though initially seen as radical and temporary, ethnic studies programs spread rapidly across the country.²⁰

Parallel developments unfolded with the rise of women's studies. Emerging from the feminist movements of the 1960s and early 1970s, women's studies challenged the marginalization of women in academic disciplines and called for a rethinking of knowledge production. The first women's studies course was offered in 1969, and by 1970, San Diego State

¹⁹ Brown, "Ethnic Studies and Women's Studies: From the Past to the Present, Providing a Space in the Academy for Scholarship Focused on the Histories and Experiences of Marginalized People."

²⁰ Brown.

University had founded the first formal women's studies program. By the end of that year, the Modern Language Association listed 110 courses related to women. These programs focused on exploring gender as an axis of identity that intersected with race, class, sexuality, ability, nationality, and age.²¹

Dartmouth followed these national trends, establishing its African and African American Studies program in 1969, Native American Studies in 1972, and Women's Studies (now Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies) in 1978, the first such program in the Ivy League. These developments reflected broader institutional efforts to respond to demands for inclusion and diversity.

As these fields matured, they began influencing general education requirements. Ethnic studies was the first focus of what would later be called multicultural education: an educational reform movement aimed at creating equal learning opportunities for students from diverse racial, cultural, linguistic, and ability backgrounds.²² Multicultural education expanded over time to include LGBTQ+ issues, disability studies, and global diversity. Unlike ethnic studies, which often had departmental status and focused on disciplinary development, multicultural education was usually interdisciplinary and more dispersed across college curricula. Its primary goal was to integrate diverse perspectives into general education, rather than to create distinct majors or departments.²³

However, not all scholars and commentators viewed these changes positively. While ethnic and multicultural education were experienced as intellectually and politically liberating by marginalized groups, growing numbers of critics framed the increasing plurality of the curriculum as a threat to national unity. Within this increasingly polarized climate, Dartmouth's

²¹ Brown.

²² Banks, "Multicultural Education."

²³ La Belle and Ward, *Ethnic Studies and Multiculturalism*.

non-Western requirement attracted scrutiny, not for what it included or intended, but for what it omitted: a required course in Western civilization.

Reactions and Critiques

Page 8 The Dartmouth Review February 10, 1988

Poll Reveals Academic Deficiencies,

- Q. According to legend, who cut the Gordian knot?
A. Alexander the Great
% Correct, 10.32 % Incorrect, 89.68
- Q. What is the capital of West Germany?
A. Bonn
% Correct, 67.82 % Incorrect, 32.18
- Q. What play by Arthur Miller is set during the Salem witch trials?
A. *The Crucible*
% Correct, 62.18 % Incorrect, 37.82
- Q. During the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, who was turned into a pillar of salt?
A. Lot's Wife
% Correct, 25.21 % Incorrect, 74.79
- Q. Name three of the freedoms guaranteed in the 1st Amendment to the Constitution.
A. Freedom of the press, speech, assembly, religion, and petition
% Correct, 52.15 % Incorrect, 47.85

Dartmouth students should spend more time reading in Baker Library.

Incorrect Answers to the First Amendment Rights (#5)

Thought, bear arms, vote, not to testify against oneself, liberty, justice, equality, life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, movement, opinion, expression, property, choice, trial by jury.

- Q. Who wrote *The Prince*?
A. Machiavelli
% Correct, 75.64 % Incorrect, 24.36
- Q. Who was Andromache?
A. The wife of Hector in the *Iliad*
% Correct, 11.17 % Incorrect, 88.83
- Q. Which of the following has the least mass: proton, neutron, electron?
A. Electron
% Correct, 88.25 % Incorrect, 11.75
- Q. Who was the leader of the Free French during WWII?
A. Charles de Gaulle
% Correct, 48.71 % Incorrect, 51.29
- Q. Which President initiated U.S. involvement in the Korean War?
A. Harry Truman
% Correct, 42.69 % Incorrect, 57.31
- Q. Who wrote "Sailing to Byzantium"?
A. William Butler Yeats
% Correct, 8.88 % Incorrect, 91.12
- Q. According to Freud, what are the three major elements of a person's psychological makeup?
A. Id, ego, and superego
% Correct, 69.05 % Incorrect, 30.95
- Q. Which Islamic sect is in power in Iran?
A. Shiite
% Correct, 37.82 % Incorrect, 62.18
- Q. Who is currently the head of the federal reserve board?
A. Alan Greenspan
% Correct, 28.65 % Incorrect, 71.35

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Shows Need For Core Curriculum

- Q. Who was the Soviet premier following Stalin?
A. Malenkov
% Correct, 3.15 % Incorrect, 96.85
- Q. What book by Upton Sinclair led to the creation of the Food and Drug Administration?
A. *The Jungle*
% Correct, 63.90 % Incorrect, 36.10
- Q. Who wrote "A Modest Proposal"?
A. Jonathan Swift
% Correct, 28.08 % Incorrect, 71.92
- Q. What is another name for the "aurora borealis"?
A. Northern lights
% Correct, 65.90 % Incorrect, 34.10
- Q. Who wrote *Twelfth Night*?
A. William Shakespeare
% Correct, 62.18 % Incorrect, 37.82
- Q. What does *quod erat demonstrandum* (Q.E.D.) mean?
A. Thus it is proved or therefore
% Correct, 36.68 % Incorrect, 63.32
- Q. Who wrote the novel *The Brothers Karamazov*?
A. Dostoevsky
% Correct, 43.27 % Incorrect, 56.73
- Q. Which element is the "basic building block" of all organic compounds?
A. Carbon
% Correct, 81.38 % Incorrect, 18.62
- Q. Which President's pet project was building the Panama Canal?
A. Theodore Roosevelt (the cool one)
% Correct, 47.56 % Incorrect, 52.44
- Q. What is the *Torah*?
A. The Jewish scripture, first five books of the Old Testament
% Correct, 71.92 % Incorrect, 28.08
- Q. Who wrote *Don Quixote*?
A. Cervantes
% Correct, 51.29 % Incorrect, 48.71
- Q. Who wrote *The Republic*?
A. Plato
% Correct, 68.77 % Incorrect, 31.23
- Q. What Class are you at the College?
% Correct, 91, 49% % Incorrect, 90, 22% 89, 11% 88, 18%

Let's wife, "Francis," was turned into a salt lick.

Average Scores

1991	45.91%
1990	50.46%
1989	45.96%
1988	53.04%
Total	48.17%

"Worst" 5 Questions

#15	3.15%
#11	8.88%
#1	10.32%
#7	11.17%
#4	25.21%

349 Dartmouth students were polled at random in their dorm rooms. The raw data was tabulated and analyzed by microcomputer. While not meant to be scientific in the strict sense of the word, the results clearly reflect a disturbing trend the knowledge base of the Dartmouth Community. Completed polls and data are upon request.

Figure 2. *The Dartmouth Review* Cultural Literacy Quiz.²⁴

One of the most visible critics of Dartmouth's "non-Western" requirement was *The Dartmouth Review*, a conservative student publication that emerged in the 1980s as a vocal opponent of multicultural reforms. In 1988, the Review administered a "Cultural Literacy Quiz" to 349 Dartmouth students, inspired by E.D. Hirsch's book *Cultural Literacy*. The quiz sought to

²⁴ "Poll Reveals Academic Deficiencies, Shows Need For Core Curriculum."

measure students' familiarity with core elements of Western civilization: names, dates, literature, and cultural references (Fig. 2).

Interestingly, students performed significantly better on scientific questions than on those related to the Western canon. The two highest-scoring questions were scientific: "Which of the following has the least mass: proton, neutron, electron?" (88.25% correct) and "Which element is the basic building block of all organic compounds?" (81.38%). By contrast, questions asking about key figures or texts from Western history—such as the meaning of "Sailing to Byzantium" or the legend of Alexander the Great and the Gordian knot—received the most incorrect responses. For the editors of the Review, this confirmed what they saw as a crisis: Dartmouth students were graduating without even basic knowledge of Western civilization. The Review concluded that Dartmouth needed a mandatory Great Books curriculum.

In the same issue, the Review published an interview with then-Secretary of Education William Bennett, asking him:

Dartmouth, as of yet, has no required course in English literature, philosophy, or any of the humanities. At the same time, Dartmouth requires students to take a course in a non-Western culture. Do you feel that it is responsible of Dartmouth to demand this of students without requiring a basic course in Western culture?²⁵

The framing of the question is revealing. The Review was less concerned with the actual content or purpose of the non-Western requirement than with what it symbolized: a departure from the Western tradition. The non-Western requirement served as a foil, used to highlight what critics saw as the absence of a coherent, shared intellectual foundation grounded in the Western canon.

The Review also targeted specific courses it viewed as academically deficient. One example was Professor Bill Cole's course American Music in Oral Tradition, which focused on

²⁵ Baldwin, "Bennett Defends Western Culture."

underrepresented musical traditions. The Review mocked Cole's teaching style and course content, claiming that "Students are supposed to learn about Alanis Obomsawin, Sarah Cleveland, Jayne Cortez and the Firespitters. But Bill Cole, the music department's scruffy savant, would rather spend his class preaching what he thinks—or more accurately, what he feels." They accused him of spending class time on "Very Important Issues—race, poverty, his personal philosophy and nuclear war," rather than on music history or theory.²⁶ A later classroom confrontation led to the suspension of four students for what the College described as "vexatious oral exchange."²⁷ The incident, publicly framed in racial terms, further polarized campus opinion.

Beyond the student press, conservative alumni also mobilized against Dartmouth's curricular direction. The Ernest Martin Hopkins Institute for Education and Policy—founded by alumni dissatisfied with what they saw as declining academic standards—became an active advocate for reinstating a Western core curriculum. The Institute sponsored guest speakers, published critical newsletters, and lobbied the College on curricular issues. In one such newsletter, the Institute lamented the proliferation of "intellectually faddish" and "special interest" courses, singling out Women's Studies, Native American Studies, and African and Afro-American Studies as symptomatic of what they viewed as ideological overreach.²⁸

To bolster their critique, the Institute commissioned journalist Charles J. Sykes to conduct a study of Dartmouth's curriculum. Sykes, already known for his 1988 book *ProfScam: Professors and the Demise of Higher Education*, argued that American higher education was being corrupted by self-serving faculty and politicized course offerings. With the Hopkins

²⁶ Baldwin, "Bill Cole In His Own Words — Sound And Fury, Signifying Nothing."

²⁷ Ernest Martin Hopkins Institute., "The Hopkins Bulletin."

²⁸ Ernest Martin Hopkins Institute.

Institute's support, Sykes published *The Hollow Men: Politics and Corruption in Higher Education* in 1990. In the book, Sykes used Dartmouth as a case study of curricular decline.

He focused especially on the inconsistencies in the implementation of the non-Western requirement. Because Dartmouth's guidelines excluded "European-based cultures of the United States and Canada," courses like Black Theater, U.S.A., Early Black American Literature, and Modern Black American Literature were categorized as "non-Western," despite being deeply rooted in ethnic studies. According to Sykes:

By 1989, a course such as Black Theater, USA was counted toward the non-Western requirement. So too was Early Black American Literature and Modern Black American Literature. Some courses, such as American Music in Oral Tradition, appear to have been included only because they were taught by a Black faculty member.²⁹

Sykes argued that the rationale for course inclusion was often vague or politically motivated. As with the Review, he concluded that Dartmouth needed a return to academic rigor, coherence, and a Western core curriculum.

Together, these critiques—whether from students, alumni, or national commentators—framed Dartmouth's non-Western requirement not as an educational innovation but as a symbol of institutional drift. While the College had introduced the requirement in the name of global competence, its meaning had shifted. In the eyes of conservative critics, the non-Western requirement came to represent the politicization of the curriculum, the erosion of shared cultural knowledge, and the failure of colleges to uphold intellectual standards rooted in the Western tradition.

From "Non-Western" to "World Cultures": Institutional Reframing

²⁹ Sykes, "The Hollow Men : Politics and Corruption in Higher Education /."

How did Dartmouth's administration respond to the growing internal and external criticism surrounding its "non-Western" requirement? On April 8, 1992, *The Boston Globe* ran a headline declaring: "At Dartmouth, 'Educated Person' Redefined." The article announced the College's first comprehensive curriculum overhaul in 70 years, stating that Dartmouth would replace traditional divisional requirements and "formalize a multicultural requirement."³⁰ But what exactly did "formalizing a multicultural requirement" entail?

The proposal, developed by the Ad Hoc Curriculum Review Committee, introduced a new "World Cultures" framework. Under the revised system, students would be required to take one course each in European cultures, U.S. and Canadian cultures, and Non-Western cultures.³¹ At first glance, this revision appeared to embrace broader inclusivity. However, a closer reading of the language used by administrators and internal documents reveals a more strategic recalibration—one that sought to re-center the Western tradition under the guise of global awareness.

President James Freedman justified the change to *The Boston Globe* by stating, "We're trying to preserve an emphasis on Western culture as we respond to concerns about multiculturalism."³² Dean James Wright echoed this sentiment in an interview with *The Valley News*, describing the shift as "the next stage in Dartmouth's step to increase multiculturalism in the curriculum."³³ However, when questioned further by students from *The Dartmouth Review*, Wright offered a more revealing rationale: "When we implemented the non-Western requirement, there was greater confidence that students were critically studying subjects related to the Western tradition."³⁴

³⁰ Anthony Flint GLOBE STAFF, "At Dartmouth, 'educated Person' Redefined."

³¹ "Dartmouth College, Dean of the Faculty Records," n.d.

³² Anthony Flint GLOBE STAFF.

³³ "Curriculum Changes Endorsed."

³⁴ "Curriculum Changes Endorsed."

In other words, Dartmouth's leadership had become increasingly uncertain that students were engaging deeply with the Western canon. The new framework—by formally requiring coursework in both European and U.S. cultures—was designed not only to address calls for multicultural representation but also to restore the College's curricular foundation in the Western tradition.

Internal planning documents reinforced this intent. The curriculum report explicitly stated that Dartmouth was “situated in the Western cultural tradition,” and emphasized the necessity of a European requirement to maintain academic identity. The U.S. and Canadian requirement, meanwhile, served to reclassify courses in African American, Native American, Hispanic, and Asian American studies as “domestic” rather than “non-Western.”³⁵ In doing so, the revision repositioned multicultural content within a national frame and restructured how cultural diversity was categorized.

Despite this strategic reframing, the new requirement did little to quell critics. In the same 1992 issue of *The Fortnightly* by *The Dartmouth* that covered the reforms, English professor Jeffrey Hart warned in *The Fortnightly* that “an undue stress on the study of non-Western cultures unavoidably leads to an undue de-emphasis of Western cultures.”³⁶ He also dismissed multiculturalism as a “passing fad.” Another article, titled “Significant Anglo Exhibits Lost to Multiculturalism,” extended this concern to museums, lamenting that “with our quest for racial equality and recognition of others' cultures, the past, as we and the previous generations know it, is facing destruction.”³⁷ These critiques revealed a broader anxiety: that increasing representation of marginalized cultures would come at the cost of Anglo-American heritage.

³⁵ “Dartmouth College, Dean of the Faculty Records,” n.d.

³⁶ Larson, “English Professor Jeffrey Hart, History Professor Douglas Haynes.”

³⁷ Hellman, “Significant Anglo Exhibits Lost to Multiculturalism.”

	1981	1986	1991
African and Afro-American Studies			
courses	8	11	12
associated courses	34	25	28
Asian Studies			
courses	22	21	44
associated courses	43	53	55
Comparative Literature			
courses	40	50	48
Native American Studies			
courses	11	11	12
Women's Studies			
courses	7	9	10
associated courses		20	29

Figure 3. Table by *The Dartmouth* of the number of courses (1981-1991).³⁸

But were these fears grounded in actual curricular change? One article analyzed course offerings listed in Dartmouth's Organizations, Regulations, and Courses (ORC) catalog over the previous decade. Contrary to the narrative of a "multicultural surge," the number of courses in African and Afro-American Studies had barely increased. Only four courses had been added since 1981, while six courses had been cut in related fields (Fig. 3). "What we can learn from the statistics," the article concluded, "is that the number of courses offered to Dartmouth students has remained relatively unchanged." Yet the author also acknowledged that numerical data alone could not fully capture shifts in student interest, classroom discourse, or broader intellectual climate.³⁹

Ultimately, the implementation of the "World Cultures" requirement did not represent a radical restructuring of Dartmouth's curriculum. Rather, it marked a rhetorical and institutional adjustment: a rebranding of the existing framework that sought to respond to both multicultural demands and conservative critiques. For many students and faculty, it was clear that the reform

³⁸ Adelman, "Do the Numbers Reveal a Multicultural College Curriculum?"

³⁹ Adelman.

was less about expanding content than about recentering and rebalancing the narrative. The deeper debates about whose knowledge mattered—and how education should reflect a pluralistic society—remained unresolved.

Conclusion

Dartmouth's current general education requirements—covering Western Cultures, Non-Western Cultures, and Culture and Identity—echo the institution's curricular journey from the early 1980s to the present. Yet the core questions that animated those earlier reforms remain unresolved: What knowledge is considered essential? Who gets to define it? And what values shape those decisions?

The history of Dartmouth's "non-Western" and "World Cultures" requirements illustrates that curriculum is never neutral. These reforms were not merely academic adjustments; they were responses to national controversies, student activism, institutional anxieties, and evolving concepts of diversity and identity. Each shift reflected competing pressures, between global awareness and Western tradition, between inclusion and coherence, and between rhetorical change and structural continuity.

Yet, for all the debates, relatively little has changed. The very terminology—such as "non-Western"—continues to position entire cultures in relation to the West, reinforcing hierarchical frameworks. The effort to diversify the curriculum, while well-intentioned, often stopped short of dismantling the binaries.

In 1966, President John Sloan Dickey offered a reflection that still resonates:

The future of liberal learning in the American college will increasingly rest more with the individual teacher and student than with the committee on curriculum... And if it is

education we are talking about, as it is, we come back to the one who sits in final judgment on what the student wants to be: the student himself.⁴⁰

Ultimately, the curriculum is not just a list of courses. It is a mirror, reflecting how an institution sees its past, interprets its present, and imagines its future. And in that reflection, the student remains at the center, not only as a recipient of knowledge, but as a participant in shaping what knowledge counts.

⁴⁰ “Dartmouth College, Board of Trustees Records.”

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