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The "Politically Correct" Way

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The “Politically Correct” Way

From Duke to Stanford, and from UCLA to MIT to UW-Madison, a fire storm of debate has been ignited over the “politically correct” (or “PC”) way to shape university policy on issues of racial, gender, academic and intellectual diversity.

The so-called PC agenda on women’s studies, ethnic studies, gay and lesbian issues, Eastern history, and the recruitment and retention of minority students and faculty has attracted considerable heat on many of our nation’s campuses – even though PC-ism occupies the attention of just a small minority of individuals on both sides of the issue.

But this collectively small group holds some rather intense feelings, all of which are dutifully reported by the media. News stories tell us of anti-PCers being labeled as racist, fascist, sexist and homophobic, as they criticize their counterparts as Marxist organizers, sympathizers and bellyachers.

Tolerance Needed

Gentility is the mark of a finishing school, not a university, and we must therefore expect – and embrace – a healthy dose of dissent, disagreement and discordance on our campuses. But in our fervor, we need not lose hold of every vestige of tolerance and respect for those with opposite views.

Emotions aside, both camps argue a certain legitimacy to their views and actions: One side, embracing the reality of a rapidly changing global society, is pushing for a variety of educational and employment opportunities reflective of those changes. The other side, holding fast to the tenet of excellence in traditional scholarship, is fighting any change that could be perceived as lowering that standard.

Both views are worthy of debate and consideration, and there is always value in the struggle between majority and minority voices on issues of academic and intellectual diversity. Unfortunately, and all too often, we are today witnessing a personalization of these issues to an individual’s race, gender or political viewpoint.

We can and we must vigorously debate, for example, whether Afro-American studies or feminist literature has any legitimate and valuable insights into the study and understanding of the human condition – just as we must vigorously debate whether traditional Western Civilization courses are indeed of preeminent value to today’s student.

What we must NOT do, however, is suggest that Afro-American studies has no value because it is taught by, or deals with African Americans – or that Western Civilization has no value because it isn’t. The real danger in either extreme is that it threatens to terminate genuine and much-needed debate by administrators, faculty and students of goodwill.

A Constructive Approach

Fortunately, above the present debate there remains a plateau for reasoned thought – where discussion of what’s “politically correct” gains perspective. From this vantage point, the storm clouds dissipate with a collective admission that there is indeed a thoughtful, constructive way to proceed as we deal with these and other controversial issues.

Regardless of what is today deemed politically correct behavior, however permanent or fleeting it may be, there exist several timeless and “undeniably correct” principles that will serve our universities well in this season of aggressively competing visions, viewpoints, interests and allegiances – and in seasons yet to come.

First, we must reaffirm our commitment to preserving academic freedom and fairness as we probe the legitimacy of intellectual diversity on today’s campus. Within the university community, this requires a personal daily decision to champion the cause of free

expression, tolerance and respect – regardless of one’s beliefs. We must all pledge to debate issues of diversity without personalizing our comments to the race, gender or political views of others.

Second, we must renew our pledge to provide an environment for students to develop the capacity for critical thought without the threat, real or perceived, of intellectual submission and conformity to ideas other than their own.

Third, we must embrace the reality that our graduates’ ultimate success in life depends not so much on the rhetoric and push and pull of popular ideas, but on faculty and administrators giving priority to the integrative elements in life – intuition, trust, creative thinking, intellectual inquiry, thoughtful analysis, successful problem solving and decision making.

Resisting Temptation

Fourth, we must resist the temptation to tamper with the natural “sifting and winnowing” process that through time has guaranteed balance and stability in faculty selection and retention, curriculum planning and preservation of the university’s overall mission. In other words, we must not become reactionaries to unbalanced cries from within our ranks or outside the university community.

Fifth, we must remember that the university should never count opinion, but always weigh it. Just as sound judgment is born of ethical consideration, our decision making must be the product of solid reasoning, free debate and thoughtful analysis.

A Diversity of Voices

Finally, we must also remember that the university endures today, not because it has held fast and firm to a rigid world view, but because it has sought – and welcomed – an invaluable diversity of voices that contribute to public and scholarly debate and dialogue.

This necessary diversity is the very foundation of the university itself. Indeed, even though winds of change carry new politics and passions to our campuses, the common ground we stand on is far more important than the differences that separate us.

In the heat of the current national debate, we can choose to address the struggles we face with rapid-fire rhetoric aimed pointblank at today’s definition of what is politically correct or incorrect, or with open and free debate in an environment of mutual respect.

If we choose wisely, then our legacy to the future will be that of continued excellence, constructive diversity and widespread achievement. ▲

Editor’s Note: The preceding is reprinted by permission from *MEMO: To the President*, a publication of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities.