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Who Is Competent to Decide What Offends?

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As the ranks of college administrators have swelled in higher education, one task they've undertaken is more aggressively training students—and at times, faculty members—in what is variously called “cultural competence” or “diversity and inclusion.”

The aims of these efforts are laudable.

College ought to be as welcoming to students from historically marginalized groups as it is to anyone else; and it ought to prepare all students for civic life in a hugely diverse society.

But when training faculty members or educating students so that they are “culturally competent,” a process that should involve telling them pertinent facts, is instead used as a pretext to indoctrinate them into a contested ideology, the laudable becomes objectionable.

A sound approach to teaching “cultural competence” might inform by exploring the history of blackface; or why Sikhs carry a small knife; or common challenges that orthodox Christian students experience on secular campuses; or the historical experience of a Native tribe with many members enrolled; or differences in classroom culture that Chinese exchange students might exhibit; or the hijab's meaning. Such particulars would best be shaped by the composition of the student body at a given institution.

But a flawed approach leaves students *less* culturally competent than when they began. Consider a widely circulated educational sheet, derived from an academic text, that seems to have originated in the UC system before being circulated at UC Santa Cruz, the University of Minnesota, the University of Wisconsin, the court system of Philadelphia, and beyond. It lists what it calls examples of “racial microaggressions” that “communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons.”

The following statements are included:

- “You speak good English.”
- “When I look at you I don't see color.”
- “America is a melting pot.”
- “America is the land of opportunity.”
- “Everyone can succeed in this society if they work hard enough.”

The UCLA professor Eugene Volokh once criticized this microaggressions sheet for going beyond “evenhandedly trying to prevent insult” to actively stigmatizing contested viewpoints, an inappropriate measure for administrators at a public university. I shared that objection at the time, but recently came upon another as powerful.

The Cato/YouGov survey on free speech and tolerance that I reported on last week included questions about whether folks find the same sentiments expressed above offensive.

Among the results?

Telling a recent immigrant, “you speak good English” was deemed “not offensive” by 77 percent of Latinos; saying “I don’t notice people’s race” was deemed “not offensive” by 71 percent of African Americans and 80 percent of Latinos; saying “America is a melting pot” was deemed not offensive by 77 percent of African Americans and 70 percent of Latinos; saying “America is the land of opportunity” was deemed “not offensive” by 93 percent of African Americans and 89 percent of Latinos; and saying “everyone can succeed in this society if they work hard enough” was deemed “not offensive” by 89 percent of Latinos and 77 percent of African Americans.

Public-opinion data cannot tell us whether a given statement is wrongheaded; and if campus progressives want to marshal substantive reasons for why any of the above statements *should* be eschewed, they ought to be free to articulate those arguments, and should receive a fair hearing by people who engage them on the merits. At times, I’m sure I’d agree with their analysis rather than the culture at large. I’m persuaded, for example, that “unauthorized immigrant” is the best locution.

But the literature was not circulated as the perspective of campus progressives on what should not be said; it was circulated as if it represented what offends and demeans people of color, even though huge majorities of African Americans and Latinos say, when actually consulted, that those very same statements are “not offensive.” (I have not yet found comparable survey data on the opinions of Asian Americans.)

The effect was to misinform any young people who accepted its assertions in two ways: they would have left college falsely confident that they understand what others find offensive and demeaning; and falsely perceiving folks who use the aforementioned phrases as offending others—willfully or through discreditable ignorance of widely held norms—even as those alleged “micro-aggressors,” who perhaps belong to a socioeconomic class less likely to attend college, saw themselves as being affirmatively friendly and inoffensive, and turn out to have a better grasp on what others think.

It’s easy to understand why administrators are tempted to simply tell people how to be culturally competent, rather than ensuring that pertinent facts are taught and urging individuals to apply reason to them; if I were on a college campus where a clueless white undergraduate from a deeply out-of-touch family non-hatefully donned blackface, my first impulse would be to say, “That’s hugely offensive, don’t ever wear it again!” rather than undertaking the more demanding task of educating the individual in question.

The censure might even have the same effect.

But even if almost everyone is on the same page when it comes to blackface, Holocaust denial, or racial slurs, it appears some powerful college administrators are incompetent at formulating a broader picture of what it is to be culturally competent, and are sometimes the ones who'd most benefit from remedial education.