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Advertisement
Indoctrination at the University of Delaware

Michael J. Lewis - 11.10.2007 - 17:34

A conspicuously embarrassed University of Delaware abandoned its residence life education program last week after details of its curriculum were made public by the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE). At issue was the training manual prepared by Shakti Butler, a diversity training specialist with a national practice, who has conducted facilitator training sessions for Shell Global and the Kellogg Foundation. Butler’s Diversity Facilitation Training manual was meant to guide the university’s resident assistants in their meetings and training sessions with students (a one-on-one meeting with the RA was mandatory).

The manual begins with a fascinating glossary, according to which all whites, without exception, are racists, while non-whites cannot be (“by definition,” it explains helpfully). To read the entire glossary is to take a nostalgic journey into the identity politics of a generation ago (in fact, it is a 1995 revision of an even older document). For example:

A RACIST: A racist is one who is both privileged and socialized on the basis of race by a white supremacist (racist) system. The term applies to all white people (i.e., people of European descent) living in the United States, regardless of class, gender, religion, culture, or sexuality. By this definition, people of color cannot be racists . . .

A NON-RACIST: A non-term. The term was created by whites to deny responsibility for systemic racism, to maintain an aura of innocence in the face of racial oppression, and to shift responsibility for that oppression from whites to people of color (called “blaming the victim”) . . .

Although the University of Delaware program was spectacularly inept, it is hardly the nation’s only residential life program that includes ideological indoctrination. Such programs have become rather common, although this will be news to most adults over thirty. In fact, the emergence of these residential life programs in the past decade is a sociological phenomenon of considerable interest, and marks a great swing of the generational
Fifty years ago, it was still understood that colleges would exert some sort of moral control over the lives of its students—through such institutions as parietal hours and compulsory chapel. Such prudery was soon swept away everywhere, and by the 1970’s, colleges no longer presumed themselves to be acting *in loco parentis*. Their scope of moral action had been reduced to that of a policeman at Woodstock: act in a life-threatening situation and otherwise look away.

But in the past generation, colleges have rediscovered their moralizing potential—at first reluctantly and then, in many cases, eagerly. In large part, this was the result of anxiety over underage drinking. With the drinking age raised to twenty-one, and with dire financial consequences for alcohol-related deaths, colleges began working diligently to reduce any legal liability they might incur. But once administrators were hired to monitor student life, they soon widened their purview—moving from what students drink to what they think. In an *ominous essay*, John Leo offers a tantalizing hypothesis as to how this happened: “highly ideological freshman orientation programs are now widespread and meet so little resistance, the temptation to extend the brainwashing to all four years of college may seem irresistible to eager ideologues.”

When the celebrated architect Louis Kahn was hired in 1960 to design a dormitory at Bryn Mawr College, he was told that the rooms were not to have locks on the doors. The women students might lock their valuables in closets, but they were not to be able to lock their doors. Today’s students no longer need worry about guarding the privacy of their rooms. As for the privacy of their minds, that is another matter.