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# Ethics, Education, and 'Political Correctness

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## Ethics, Education, and Political Correctness

By **Marilyn Edelstein, Ph.D.**

The term "political correctness" is itself a misnomer, a straw man (straw person?). Political correctness, at least on our campuses, has been defined by those opposed to and fearful of viewpoints they lump together under this loaded term. No one of good sense or good will would favor something called "political correctness" as the term is used today. But there are persons of good sense and good will who favor views sarcastically dismissed as "politically correct" by their opponents.

Critics of political correctness combine and often distort three different but related issues. First, political correctness is used to describe the goals of those advocating a more pluralistic, multicultural, race-, gender-, and class-sensitive curriculum. Second, certain academicians are branded politically correct for insisting that intellectual inquiry reflects, to some degree, the values and interests of the inquirer and that aesthetic judgments are always intertwined with moral and political ones. Third, and most harshly, people are labeled politically correct for advocating university policies designed to minimize sexual and racial harassment on campuses. Fuller understanding of these three issues is critical if the widening public debate over political correctness is to become fruitful and illuminating rather than bitter and confused.

First, critics of traditional curricula do not want to throw out Western culture. Rather, we suggest reexamining its history and acknowledging that some important texts and experiences have been relegated to the margins. No one claims that new contenders for inclusion in the curriculum should be admitted solely to make it culturally or politically representative. Instead educators and scholars should consider whether some seemingly universal criteria might have excluded differently worthy, differently excellent works.

Anyone familiar with the history of literary criticism should realize that lists of the books "everyone" considers excellent change over time, as do styles, subject matter, and criteria. Are the experiences and texts of Rousseau timeless, universal, and central to Western culture while those of Frederick Douglass or Maxine Hong Kingston are not? Must the latter be consigned to specialized courses on the curriculum's fringe? Western culture, like Western literature, has, at its core, been shaped by other cultures and by many voices outside it as well as within.

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Questions about quality and comprehensiveness in the curriculum are increasingly urgent in the face of indisputably changing demographics in the United States and in U.S. higher education. When we talk about transmitting "our" culture — who is "we"? Does Western culture include the experiences of Native Americans or even women of European heritage? Shouldn't Asian-American or African-American students also learn from texts that reflect those cultures' distinct historical experiences and that reveal those cultures' roles in shaping Western culture?

To answer "yes" to these questions is not to reject Western culture nor to claim that it is only a record of oppression and privilege. Rather, it is to embrace a richer, more dynamic and complex vision of Western culture and its relations to other societies. To answer "yes" and ask others to consider these questions is not to ask for a ghettoization of academic inquiry nor for conformity of answers to the questions. Rather than being questions about political correctness, these are questions that must be asked about what should be taught and learned in higher education and about how and why.

The asking of questions and the questioning of assumptions are central also to the second issue introduced above. Some contemporary thinkers suggest that foundational assumptions, like truth or reason, have a history and should be scrutinized. Yet, even Jacques Derrida, the French philosopher often scapegoated in criticisms of political correctness, said, "I didn't say that there was no center [read "truth"], that we could get along without the center. I believe that the center is a function, not a being - a reality, but a function. And this function is absolutely indispensable."

Some thinkers today question the centrality of Western culture itself as the culture of reference, just as feminists have questioned the traditional view of male experience as normative and universal. But theorists who critique hierarchy and domination certainly do not seek merely to invert hierarchies or to establish their own hegemony in reality or in academic debate. Even within the theoretical perspectives that opponents of political correctness indiscriminately lump together there are wide-ranging debates about the relations between theory and the quest for a more just society.

The third, and perhaps most pressing, concern in campus debates is the charge that those advocating university policies against sexual and discriminatory harassment are "tyrants" of political correctness. That here as elsewhere the act of naming itself exerts a kind of power is clear when one considers that we would more accurately be called advocates of human decency and respect. Nonetheless, it is understandable why those afraid of losing power and legitimacy might overwhelm the media with cries of "political correctness" or "the tyranny of the left." But no one I know wants to inhibit genuine free speech or an open exchange of ideas. We want anti-harassment policies to be carefully and narrowly drawn to avoid infringing on free speech or academic freedom.

Still, when offense becomes harm, when gender-based or racial epithets intimidate and silence and drive their victims from the arena of academic freedom, then this discourse cannot be defended as free speech. Name-calling does not resemble or produce an open marketplace of ideas. Free play of ideas is not the same as a free-for-all of insults.

Many of us encourage greater sensitivity to the needs and fears of all members of a changing university community and hope this will be accomplished by means other than codes, largely by education itself. Is having to think, before speaking, about the effects of one's speech on others an unreasonable price to pay for a more hospitable and educational campus environment?

To encourage more conscious, self-reflective, sensitive language and behavior is not to tyrannize. To advocate conscientiously constructed codes that address rare and egregious infractions of common decency and civility is not to call for a thought police. Universities already regulate behavior and speech (e.g., plagiarism, residency, alcohol use). In the wider community, zoning laws acknowledge that some locales are inappropriate for some forms of speech and conduct. Defamation and obscenity among other forms of speech are already regulated. Societies perennially weigh the rights of individuals against the needs of the community.

If we are entering a period when conservatives fear the tyranny of the left, does that mean that the left is taking power or that the right is afraid of losing power? I am more certain of the latter. The debate over political correctness is obviously political as well as academic. But it is important for self-professed advocates of free speech who decry political correctness not to inhibit that right by calling speech they detest "tyrannical." Labeling speech "politically correct" may be an attempt to silence that speech through ridicule. It is important to recast these important educational and cultural debates in less-loaded terms. We can begin by agreeing that concern for diversity, justice, and open inquiry is not merely politically correct but humanly decent.

*This article is based on a presentation Professor Edelstein delivered at the Center in 1992.*

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