

A cult of fragility on college campuses



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Columnist

WASHINGTON – The beginning of another academic year brings the certainty of campus episodes illustrating what Daniel Patrick Moynihan, distinguished professor and venerated politician, called “the leakage of reality from American life.” Colleges and universities are increasingly susceptible to intellectual fads and political hysteria, partly because the institutions employ so many people whose talents, such as they are, are extraneous to the institutions’ core mission: scholarship.

Writing last April in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Lyell Asher, professor of English at Lewis & Clark College, noted that “the kudzu-like growth of the administrative bureaucracy in higher education” is partly a response to two principles now widely accepted on campuses: Anything that can be construed as bigotry and hatred should be so construed, and anything construed as such should be considered evidence of an epidemic. Often, Asher noted, a majority of the academic bureaucrats directly involved with

students, from dorms to “bias response teams” to freshman “orientation” (which often means political indoctrination), have graduate degrees not in academic disciplines but from education schools with “two mutually reinforcing characteristics”: ideological orthodoxy and low academic standards for degrees in vaporous subjects like “educational leadership” or “higher-education management.”

The problem is not anti-intellectualism but the “un-intellectualism” of a growing cohort of persons who, lacking talents for or training in scholarship, find vocations in micromanaging student behavior in order to combat imagined threats to “social justice.” Can *anyone* on a campus say *anything* sensible about how the adjective modifies the noun? Never mind. As Asher said, groupthink and political intimidation inevitably result from this ever-thickening layer of people with status anxieties because they are parasitic off institutions with scholarly purposes.

The Manhattan Institute’s Heather Mac Donald says that between the 1997-1998 academic year and the Great Recession year of 2008-2009, while the University of California student population grew 33 percent and ten-

ure-track faculty grew 25 percent, senior administrators grew 125 percent. “The ratio of senior managers to professors climbed from 1 to 2.1 to near-parity of 1 to 1.1.”

In her just-published book “The Diversity Delusion: How Race and Gender Pandering Corrupt the University and Undermine Our Culture,” Mac Donald writes that many students have become what tort law practitioners call “eggshell plaintiffs,” people who make a cult of fragility – being “triggered” (i.e., traumatized) by this or that idea of speech. Asher correctly noted that the language of triggering “converts students into objects for the sake of rendering their reactions ‘objective,’ and by extension valid: A student’s triggered response is no more to be questioned than an apple’s falling downward or a spark’s flying upward.” So the number of things not to be questioned on campuses multiplies.

Students encouraged to feel fragile will learn to recoil from “microaggressions” so micro that few can discern them. A University of California guide gave these examples of insensitive speech: “I believe the most qualified person should get the job” and “Everyone can succeed in this society if they

work hard enough.” Fragile students are encouraged in “narcissistic victimhood” by administrators whose vocation is to tend to the injured. These administrators are, Mac Donald argues, “determined to preserve in many of their students the thin skin and solipsism of adolescence.”

A multibillion-dollar industry for consultants (and corporate diversity officers, academic deans, etc.) has developed around testing to detect “implicit bias.” It is assumed to be ubiquitous until proven otherwise, so detecting it is steady work: Undetectable without arcane tests and expensive experts, you never know when it has been expunged, and government supervision of *everything* must be minute and unending.

And always there is a trickle of peculiar language. The associate vice chancellor and dean of students at the University of California, Berkeley – where the Division of Equity and Inclusion has a staff of 150 – urges students to “listen with integrity.” If you do not understand the peculiar patois spoken by the academy’s administrators, try listening with more integrity.

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