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OPINION | COMMENTARY

A Mole Hunt for Diversity 'Bias' at Villanova

An atmosphere of fear-imposed silence makes it impossible to achieve a real liberal-arts education.

By Colleen A. Sheehan and James Matthew Wilson

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Villanova University in Radnor Township, Pa. PHOTO: LIGHTROCKET/GETTY IMAGES

Villanova, Pa.

Like many colleges in the U.S., Villanova University has launched an effort to monitor its faculty for signs of “bias” in the classroom. As Villanova professors, we believe this mole hunt for bias undercuts our ability to provide students with a liberal education.

Last fall we were notified by the Villanova administration that new “diversity and inclusion” questions would be added to the course and teaching evaluations that students fill out each semester. In addition to the standard questions about the intellectual worth of the course and the quality of instruction, students are now being asked heavily politicized questions such as whether the instructor has demonstrated “cultural awareness” or created an “environment free of bias based on individual differences or social identities.”

In short, students are being asked to rate professors according to their perceived agreement with progressive political opinion on bias and identity. Students are also invited to “comment on the instructor’s sensitivity to the diversity of the students in the class.” Professors are rated on their “sensitivity” to a student’s “biological sex, disability, gender identity, national origin, political viewpoint, race/ethnicity, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, etc.” The “etc.” in particular seems like an ominous catchall, as if the sole principle of sound teaching has become “that no student shall be offended.”

However well-intentioned, the new assessment of faculty “sensitivity” and “bias” will harm Villanova’s mission to provide a liberal education. Professors will now have a powerful incentive to avoid discussion of anything that might be deemed offensive or insensitive to the various social identities and political viewpoints listed (or not listed, by grace of that “etc.”).

A biology professor may avoid teaching about sexual dimorphism for fear of being labeled “insensitive” to “gender identity.” Professors of political philosophy, history or literature may avoid introducing the texts of John C. Calhoun, Abraham Lincoln, Mark Twain, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Frederick Douglass or Flannery O’Connor, for fear their sometimes racially charged language may be interpreted as “insensitivity.” Catholic teaching prizes philosophical reasoning, but one cannot reason with others if the mere posing of an argument could be deemed an act of “bias.”

And what about sensitivity to social identities, given Villanova’s Catholic character? Those who teach courses about Catholic doctrine on marriage and the family may now live in fear that their own university will treat such views, and those who teach about them, as insensitive or worse. In fact, the “sensitivity” questions appear almost perfectly designed to stifle Catholic moral teaching in the classroom.

The larger implications are even more disturbing. The new evaluations will allow a professor’s professional performance to be recast as a human resources or even a legal problem. Think about it: You can’t fire a professor for being conservative, but you certainly can fire him for creating a “hostile work environment.” At a minimum, all charges of insensitivity, injustice and bigotry will become part of the faculty’s permanent record. How long will it be before professors cease to challenge their students for fear of losing their careers and livelihoods?

For many decades, Villanova's mission as a Catholic university has been to initiate students into the life of the mind, encouraging them to seek the good, the true and the beautiful even as they are challenged beyond our walls to pursue justice and the common good in the service of "charity in truth." The adoption of the new dogma of mandatory "diversity and inclusion" places that entire undertaking in danger. As professors dedicated to liberal education, we consider it essential to challenge our students to subject their ideas as well as the predominant opinions of our time to critical examination—however difficult and uncomfortable this may be. We urge our own university as well as other liberal-arts institutions to reject such ideological policing and recommit themselves to the principles of liberal education.

This cannot be achieved in an atmosphere of fear-imposed silence. We professors—and our students—must be free to think and question and debate. Surely respecting diversity must also allow for diversity of thought.

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