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The Boston Globe

Thought reform in disguise

May 29, 2005

THE DEVIL may be in the details of the reports of The Task Force on Women Faculty and The Task Force on Women in Science and Engineering, issued earlier this month at Harvard. Though generally greeted with hosannas, the reports contain recommendations for a form of attitudinal indoctrination that is disturbing.

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A panicked and compliant atmosphere has settled over Cambridge since mid-January, when Harvard President Lawrence H. Summers got sent to the woodshed for merely suggesting that research be done into whether biological factors might be partially responsible for the dearth of women in the hard sciences and engineering. Predictably, there has been strikingly little debate on the merits of the reports, since critics likely fear being dubbed "sexists."

Change, especially in a hide-bound institution like Harvard, is often salutary. And the reports recommend some commonsense and eminently fair reforms that should have been implemented decades ago: More affordable and expanded daycare programs and automatic extension of the tenure clock for maternity leaves, which, along with other initiatives, provide overdue structural modifications for fairness. Moreover, recommendations to improve freshman science advising and develop a summer science research program for undergraduates will strengthen both male and female students' education.

But it appears that one provision poses a danger to academic freedom and basic human dignity. The dark side creeps into the reports when they get to the perceived need for mandatory sensitivity training.

The report on women in the sciences and engineering recommends that doctoral students in those fields (and eventually grad students in all departments) be required to complete a training course with a component on gender bias. The report also recommends that search committee members undergo mandatory training in implicit bias. Implicit bias (a concept pioneered by Harvard psychologist Mahzarin Banaji, among others) refers to supposed unconscious or hidden prejudices that don't manifest themselves overtly. While such research may (or may not) be scientifically credible, it can function as a convenient scientific justification for interpreting *any* behavior as proof of sexism (or racism). In practice, such training can discourage dissent from campus orthodoxies and discussion of uncomfortable ideas.

The task force on women faculty also recommends that faculty and staff undergo mandatory sexual harassment training. It is revealing that Harvard refers to these programs as "training" rather than dress them up as "education" as some universities do (and as the report does elsewhere). Orwellian language games can't conceal the true nature of these programs, which attempt to coerce participants into identifying themselves as either victims or oppressors. Like "implicit bias training," sexual

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harassment training is a species of thought-reform intended to amplify hostility towards ideas or attitudes deemed offensive. And as President Summers is doubtless acutely aware, even the most innocuous comment can be interpreted as offensive when everyone on both left and right seems on hair-trigger alert for offense.

If Summers has any fight left in him, he isn't showing it. He has cautiously given the Harvard community a 30-day period to comment on some of the reports' findings, but he immediately approved several of the most troubling recommendations, including a compulsory diversity workshop for the president, provost, and deans to be given at the deans' summer retreat. The program would focus on "educating the top university administrators about the current state of research on bias and actions that have proved useful for broadening the representation of women and underrepresented minorities in university settings." And it surely won't be long before the university implements the reports' other recommendation that diversity programs be compulsory for all department heads in the sciences.

Justice Robert Jackson, in his 1943 Supreme Court opinion in *West Virginia Board of Education v. Barnette*, a mandatory student flag-salute case, explained the fundamental antipathy to all forms of indoctrination among free peoples: "If there is any fixed star in our constitutional constellation, it is that no official, high or petty, can prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion or force citizens to confess by word or act their faith therein."

Just as the government, even in wartime, may not force citizens to express devotion to patriotic symbols, so our universities should avoid forcibly indoctrinating minds and attitudes along social and political lines. Enforce rules against biased treatment, but leave thoughts and words free, especially at our universities.

Harvey A. Silverglate, a Boston civil liberties lawyer, is co-author of "The Shadow University" and co-founder of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education.

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