

The Backlash

A Column for the Politically Incorrect

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IS THE CURRICULUM BIASED?

-A Statement of the National Association of Scholars
American higher education is facing widespread demands to eliminate the allegedly "Eurocentric" and "patriarchal" bias of the curriculum. While the details vary from campus to campus, these demands tend to focus on four objectives:

- (1) that the "canon" be revised to include more works by blacks, other ethnic minorities, and women;
- (2) that "the issues of race, gender, and class" be introduced into a greater variety of courses;
- (3) that more courses in women's studies and minority studies be developed;
- (4) that courses in women's studies and/or minority studies be required of all undergraduates.

Various justifications are commonly proffered for making these changes. It is alleged that:

- (1) works by minorities, women, and Third World authors have been excluded from the curriculum;
- (2) minority and female students feel alienated and their educational progress is retarded by being asked to study works primarily by white males;
- (3) in order to overcome their own prejudices, white males must become acquainted with the cultures and problems of minorities and with the perspectives and problems of women;
- (4) the traditional curriculum represents the hegemony of Western culture, covertly supports a status quo inherently oppressive of women and minorities, and is unfairly imposed on students from different cultures;
- (5) the traditional desiderata of truth, objectivity, and critical intelligence can be met only by adding the perspectives of women and minorities and by facing up to new questions they raise;
- (6) an increasingly diverse society and interdependent world require that our citizens gain greater understanding of different cultures.

The National Association of Scholars disputes the first five of these arguments and believes that the last entails something other than the changes being pro-

posed.

First, any work, whether formerly neglected or widely known, should be added, retained, or removed from the curriculum on the basis of its conformance to generally applicable intellectual and aesthetic standards. A sound curriculum cannot be built by replacing those standards with the principle of proportional representation of authors, classified ethnically, biologically, or geographically.

Second, the idea that students will be discouraged by not encountering more works by members of their own race, sex, or ethnic group, even were it substantiated, would not justify adding inferior works. Such paternalism conveys a message opposite to the one desired.

Third, other cultures, minority subcultures, and social problems have long been studied in the liberal arts curriculum in such established disciplines as history, literature, comparative religion, economics, political science, anthropology, and sociology. But more important, mere acquaintance with differences does not guarantee tolerance, an ideal Western in origin and fostered by knowledge of what is common to us all.

Fourth, the idea that the traditional curriculum "excludes" the contributions of all but males of European descent is patently false. From their beginnings, Western art and science have drawn upon the achievements of non-Western societies and since have been absorbed and further enriched by peoples around the globe. That the liberal arts oppress minorities and women is yet more ludicrous. Even if the curriculum were confined to thought strictly European in origin, it would still present a rich variety of conflicting ideas, including the very concepts of equality and freedom from oppression invoked by those who would reorient the curriculum.

Fifth, while diversity of background is valuable to the discussion of issues to which those differences are germane, objectivity is in general not enhanced but subverted by the idea that people of different sexes, races, or ethnic backgrounds necessarily see things differently. The assertion that cognition is determined by group membership is itself an example of stereotypic thinking which undermines the possibility of a true community of discourse.