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To: Ethnic Studies
Subject: General comments I hope you will keep in mind

A window into what diversity and ethnic study programs like the ones being proposed in California are doing to higher education. This commentary paraphrases and uses direct quotes from an article about Diversity by Anthony Kronman, a Sterling Professor of Law at Yale University and former dean of Yale Law School

The new concept of diversity (and now the proposed ethnic studies in secondary schools) encourages minority students, and eventually all students, to think that a departure from beliefs and sentiments associated with their particular group is a violation of the terms on which they were admitted to college. If students contribute to the good of diversity by expressing the racially, ethnically or sexually defined views that members of their group are expected to share, then the refutation or critical scrutiny of these views threatens to upset the school's entire educational program. Essentially, students remain in their own corners. It is not enough to acknowledge that the members of each group contribute some distinctive dimension to the school's diversity. To reassure those whose groups have been the victims of social prejudice and discrimination, extra deference must be given to their life experience. Meanwhile, the members of more "privileged groups" must be taught to "check their privilege" and the identity of minority students must be treated as a possession that no one else may "appropriate", in however well-meaning a way. In this way students are praised for the beliefs and feelings they bring to their school due to their separate identities, rather than being reminded of what they stand to gain by being there--namely joining into rational inquiry that subjects their beliefs to explanation and justification.

The politically motivated and group-based form of diversity that dominates campus life today discourages students from breaking away, in thought or action, from groups to which they belong. They become representatives first and inquiring students second. They neglect pursuing their own individual temperament and expression that sets each of us apart from everyone else. They become heroes of a group cause which is admirable in politics but not in seeking a good education. In this way campus life has become politicized and helps explain the culture of grievance that is so prominent. In politics, it is normal for one group to highlight its suffering and demand reparations and a greater share of power. Academic disagreements are different and inflamed passions are counterproductive. Persuasion with better facts and arguments is the goal, not steamrolling others into submission with complaints of abuse or injustice to increase their power. Grievance supplants the common search for truth and a sense of hurt and blame compels guilt.

Life in the classroom is transformed, complaints of disrespectful historical texts are voiced, certain students' comments are attacked as reflecting a privileged world view. Some of this is not new but what is discouraging is the unprecedented weight these grievances are given by faculty, administrators and students alike. Such grievances are put on higher moral ground requiring other considerations to be put aside until an appropriate apology or reform comes forth. It brings discussions to a halt. It converts the classroom with a free exchange of ideas into a political battleground. And through all this, truth itself is lost.

Truth is not democratic. We don't decide what is true in math or history or philosophy by a show of hands. There is a distinction between what people believe it is and the truth itself. The truth is part of intellectual inquiry. I am not entitled to call something true merely because I believe or feel it is true. My beliefs do not eclipse all others in a debate. The search for truth is stifled when someone says, "I see

things from a point of view to which others have no access and that my perspective is authoritative because I have been the victim of hatred and mistreatment.” Strongly held beliefs can certainly be a source of information but by themselves cannot validate the position.

For college students, the search for truth is important not because there is a guarantee of finding it, but as a discipline of character. It instills habits of self-criticism, modesty and objectivity. It is a process of subjecting one’s own opinions and feelings to more durable measures of worth. It increases self-reliance and respect for values and ideas of those far removed in time and circumstances. The search for truth promotes the habit of independent-mindedness as a defense against the “tyranny of the majority”.

The relentless campaign for diversity and inclusion on campus pulls in opposite directions. Motivated by politics but forced to disguise itself as an academic value, the demand for diversity has steadily weakened the norms of objectivity and truth and substituted for them a culture of grievance and allegiance to a group. Rather than bringing faculty and students together on the common ground of reason, it has pushed them farther apart into separate silos of guilt and complaint. It also does even greater damage to our democratic way of life which needs independent thinkers. A democracy is sensitive to pathologies, one being the instinct to believe what others do in order to avoid the labor and risk of thinking for oneself.

Today our colleges and universities are doing a poor job facilitating independent thinking and the idea of diversity is partly to blame. It has become the basis of an illiberal and antirational academic cult that undermines the spirit of self-reliance and the commitment to the truth on which not only higher education, but the whole of our democracy depends.

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