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# Schools can take diversity too far

By Andrew J. Levay, 10/29/2001

**D**IVERSITY IS CERTAINLY the buzzword of the day, especially in academia, where the educational benefits flowing from a racially and ethnically diverse student body justify numerous programs and policies. However, while colleges and universities hail the benefits of diversity on the one hand, on the other, they implement programs such as segregated summer orientations that frustrate the realization of these benefits.

At Brown University, for example, entering minority students attended a four-day Third World Transition Program. Similarly, minority students at Boston College Law School took part in the first school-sponsored Students of Color 1L Retreat. This phenomenon is mirrored throughout the country. As Williams College held Windows to Williams, Yalies were busy with Cultural Connections, and minority law students at the University of Arizona were completing a two-week preschool program.

Although well intentioned, such programs wrongfully classify students by race and ethnicity. Self-identification is a complex, lifelong process, and although many students initially may choose to socialize along racial lines, it is not the proper role of colleges or universities to pressure students into this choice. In so doing, administrators marginalize students, minority or otherwise, who do not think of themselves primarily as members of a particular racial group.

Furthermore, because segregated orientations facilitate the forming of core bonds and friendships exclusively along racial lines, when the entire class eventually comes together, minority students will lack the similar incentive to meet others.

In addition to physically segregating students, race-specific orientations commonly instruct on the realities of race relations on campus. Brown's program, for example, was designed to increase "students' awareness of issues they will encounter at Brown as minorities in a predominantly white institution." This is hardly the initiation students should receive prior to their first encounter with other students.

Segregated summer programs are further objectionable because they both create and further the notion that minority students need special assistance to survive their years at school. According to the student proponents of BC Law's retreat, for example, minority students are not reaching their academic potential because law school is vastly different from minority students' experience and they have little knowledge of what to do during the three-year process. Additionally, many are just out of their undergraduate institutions and are not prepared for the drastic and immediate shift in maturity and responsibility that is required.

There are many non-minority students who are similarly straight out of undergraduate and for whom law school is a shock. (Is the shock greater for a black Harvard undergrad

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who comes from a family of doctors or a white student who is first in his family to attend college or graduate school or who majored in art?) Although there is a disproportionate relationship between minority status and lack of educational opportunity and achievement, the underlying cause may well be more socio-economic than racial, and the overlap, no matter how great, does not justify using race as a proxy for underachievement and special need. It is not only insulting to minority students but a cop-out by administrators. Indeed, there is something deficient about a school that cannot impart these extremely important skills to its students in a race-neutral manner.

Unfortunately, the roadblocks to meaningful student interaction do not lessen as students continue through their years of higher education. At many schools, diversity training teaches that students are not individuals but instances of blood and history neatly separable into oppressors and oppressed. Those who speak out against these views run the risk of violating the school's restrictive speech code, which is intended to shield minority students from offensive language. From cultural centers to the delivery of basic, racially irrelevant services, colleges and universities continue to classify students by race. This obsession with and insistence upon group identity Balkanizes students and impedes meaningful interaction, which, again, is the true benefit of diversity.

It is undeniable that some minority students will face unique and substantial challenges and that some students, because of their experience or upbringing, will refuse to enjoy the benefits of a diverse student body. The proper response to these realities, however, is not the imposition of group identities or official ways of thinking. It is both condescending and wrong to assume that students need the beneficent hand of college and university administrators to navigate through the development of their identities and interactions with fellow students.

**Andrew J. LeVay** is a 2001 graduate of Boston College Law School and a member of the Legal Network of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education.

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