Politics and Diversity

The recent denunciation of Professor Edward Miller of UNO for his views on race and intelligence is a fascinating example of the treatment of those who break the taboos of the day. I write as a law professor trained in anthropology whose professional writing has dealt with both the topics of biological influences on behavior and the constitutional protection of free speech.

Although I have never met Dr. Miller, I am familiar with his work, which has appeared in respected journals. Whether or not he is correct in his views, they find substantial support in the scientific literature. Mark Snyderman and Stanley Rothman reported in “The IQ Controversy: The Media and Public Policy” that a survey of over 1,000 knowledgeable scholars revealed that 45 percent believed that IQ differences between the races are a product of both genetic and environmental causes, while only 15 percent believed that such differences are caused exclusively by environmental factors. Thus, Dr. Miller’s views are in the mainstream of scientific, if not political, thought.

Dr. Miller’s statement that genetic factors have contributed to the observed IQ difference between the races is objectively either true or false. His critics have not explained why he should not say it if it is true, and if they believe it to be false, the appropriate response is to attempt to prove it so.

Rather than disagreeing with Dr. Miller on the merits, however, his critics have attempted to silence him and others who might have similar views. For example, UNO’s Chancellor O’Brien stated that Dr. Miller’s views are “reprehensible” and not reflective of UNO’s commitment “to equality and diversity.” Although the purpose of a university is the pursuit of truth, Chancellor O’Brien seems to be declaring that only truths consistent with his own views are acceptable.

Most universities today encourage interdisciplinary studies out of the belief that the traditional divisions between disciplines can sometimes be an impediment to learning. Nonetheless, Chancellor O’Brien announced that research in anthropology, biology, and physiology is not part of Dr. Miller’s “assigned responsibilities.” This is a breathtaking statement coming from an official of a respected university.
Dr. Miller’s interest in the sources of the obvious and widely deplored economic differences between racial groups apparently led him to his interest in biological differences. Because the field of economics is the study of certain kinds of human behavior, quite often the answers to economic questions will lie outside the traditional economics literature. If Dr. Miller had relied upon sociologic studies of discrimination to explain economic disparities, would he have been told that sociology was not in his area of “assigned responsibilities”? It seems unlikely. It was not the choice of disciplines that got him into trouble, but rather the answers that he drew from those disciplines.

Catering to political pressure may be the most expedient course for university officials to take. However, administrators of public universities who face pressure to censor their faculty must always remember that they owe a higher obligation to the First Amendment than they do to their political constituency.

Chancellor O’Brien refers to the University’s dedication to diversity. Unfortunately, he seems to have forgotten that the primary diversity that a university should nurture is a diversity of thought and ideas.

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