What’s Wrong with Higher Education in the United States

An assessment of the impact of "diversity and inclusion" on higher education.

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In The Assault on American Excellence, Anthony Kronman, the former dean of Yale Law School and author of Education’s End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up On The Meaning of Life, addresses three “waves of democratic negation,” motivated by legitimate concerns with social injustice, that, in his judgment, are doing substantial damage to academic culture.

Some colleges and universities, Kronman notes, have in effect redefined speech as a mechanism of inclusion rather than a medium to pursue truth, insisting it be discouraged or forbidden if it offends members of the campus community, especially those belonging to historically oppressed or marginalized groups.
Endorsed by the Supreme Court in *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, the claim that group-based diversity enhances the intellectual and personal development of all college students, Kronman (who supports affirmative action in admissions) asserts, has “pushed education back toward self-absorption and self-congratulation,” victims and villains, and away from a more complex world, “with its mix of hope, fear, tragedy and splendor.”

Campaigns to rewrite history by, for example, renaming John C. Calhoun College at Yale and Princeton’s Woodrow Wilson Center, eviscerate distinctions between the past and the present and encourage self-righteous convictions “that confer moral authority” on the opinions of the group to which one belongs or defers.

Kronman knows he is stepping on the third rail of academic culture and politics. Although he is not all that effective a messenger, his book makes a not inconsiderable contribution to our understanding of higher education in the United States.

Kronman grounds his thesis in an unpersuasive assertion that a “feverish egalitarianism,” bolstered by an ideology of “diversity and inclusion,” has discredited a “natural” (i.e. meritocratic) aristocracy, distinguished by hierarchical judgments about character, wisdom, morality, taste, and excellence (other than in technical or vocational skills) that can serve as a counterweight to groupthink and political correctness.

Kronman does not adequately explain how this “aristocratic ideal” – the affirmation that some are better than others “in the comprehensive work of living well and fully” – might function. He maintains that there is a form of education that can increase the likelihood students “will become excellent human beings,” but provides no details. Should character, wisdom, and taste, one wonders, be criteria for hiring professors and granting tenure? Even if it is clear, as it should be, that there is no necessary connection between knowledge and virtue?

Nor does Kronman demonstrate that diversity and inclusion egalitarians bear substantial responsibility for defining excellence “as a matter of choice,” thereby “eliminating it as a meaningful topic of debate.” He acknowledges, grudgingly, that relativism and subjectivity pre-
date identity politics. And he fails to note that minority students’ conclusions about discrimination, affirmative action, reparations, Confederate monuments, and Donald J. Trump turn on what they regard as objective moral and aesthetic judgments about what it takes to live well and fully.

Finally, Kronman does not justify his surprising recommendation (given his opposition to “cleansing campuses of racially offensive memorials”) that minority students be granted “special standing to make the call” on plaques and prose that will set an appropriate context for them.

Although Kronman aims to link the decline of aristocratic values with the rise of group-identity academic politics, his critique of the latter can stand on its own. Some of his arguments, to be sure, are tendentious. He characterizes the decision of the “master” of Pierson residential college at Yale to relinquish his title as “mindless,” a “ridiculous” exaggeration of “wounded feelings… and inflated moral concerns.” His claim that removing the name of Calhoun, the South’s principal champion of slavery, from a building weakens students’ capacity “to live with ambiguity” does not adequately engage the dangers of what lawyers call “dead hand control” over the bestowing of an honor or the Faulknerian premise that “the past is never dead. It isn’t even past.”

All that said, Kronman does raise important – and troubling – questions about the impact of group-based diversity on higher education. Although he exaggerates the decline of the pursuit of excellence and truth-telling in contemporary colleges and universities, for example, his concern that the resources devoted to diversity and inclusion (150 full-time staff at Yale) reduce funds available for the recruitment and retention of faculty, research, and teaching, is warranted.

Defenders of restrictions on free speech “in the name of a community of respect and inclusion,” Kronman writes, want to confer a self-validating authority on feelings, “immunized from criticism or even inspection.” Going far beyond norms of civility and provisions of “safe” spaces for expressions of feelings, this approach “legitimates conversation killing statements.” It “should not be allowed to stand” in classrooms, where ideas “must be probed and proven” and tensions “between the commonality of reason and the separateness of personality” reduced or eliminated.

Kronman also believes that “the transmutation of the legal and political ideal of racial justice into the academic value of diversity promotes a form of solidarity that corrupts the spirit of individualism.” It invites “on all sides” a conformity (via suppression of searches by students for their own centers of gravity) that is “more dangerous than the perennial kind because it has a moral warrant.”

*The Assault on American Excellence* is by no means the last word on its subject. It’s best understood as a plea for a conversation that, by and large, is not taking place in colleges and universities, which should, after all, be bastions of free speech.