

Correspondence

To the Editor:

It is surely a remarkable oversight that the retrospective issue of *Thought & Action* (Fall 2000) showcased one female author. I am almost speechless and need hardly pause to consider my own pun. I do not believe in a lack of brilliant female authors. When NEA puts out a retrospective issue of *Thought & Action*, let's see some action.

Eugenie Harvey
University of Massachusetts
University Staff Association

To the Editor:

There is something horrible going on in academia, but it is politically incorrect to talk about it. But, talk about it we must. Silence is a friend of evil.

I have been on university search committees where whites and males are allowed to apply, but the job is only going to be given to a woman or a minority. And, in those instances that I was personally involved in, the person chosen—the woman or minority—was clearly not as good, based on credentials and our usual standards of hiring, as some whites and males who were rejected.

Thus, discrimination is employed, in the name of fighting discrimination against protected groups. There are other minorities

that are not considered “protected groups,” such as Jews, often Asians, and others. These nonprotected minorities often achieve well, so they are not the subject of government attempts to help them.

Or, they do not achieve notably well as Jews and Asians do, but they are just not protected groups—Italians, Irish, Greeks, and other ethnic groups that receive no special government recognition. Thus, they, like the whites and the males, are discriminated against.

In “The New Campus Racism: What’s Going On,” (Fall 2000) originally published in 1996, Noel Jacob Kent discusses the causes of what he calls “the new campus racism.” But Kent misses one of, if not the, most important causes.

Students see preferences given to women and minorities and are angry about others getting favoritism. Should they not be angry if their teacher could have been much better, but is not because the best person was not hired, due to gender or race?

Should they not be angry if minority students demand and often get separate things, like separate dorms or separate yearbooks?

Should they not be angry if they had to work to a certain standard to get in or to get scholarships, but others are let in a lower standards or get scholarships because of their race? Of course, none of this anger

should become racist behavior, but at least we have to understand where the new racism is coming from.

My dad worked for rights of African-Americans in our home town of Savannah, Georgia in the 1950s and 1960s. He was almost alone in his idealism there, fighting the tide of local, popular opinion. He was often hated for what he did, and a cross was burned on our lawn. He also received death threats. I have followed in his tradition, working for the rights of women and minorities. When I worked at another university years ago, I led the fight to have women or minorities hired for faculty positions.

My idea, though, was to open up the pipeline and get good candidates, not hire people who were not the best candidates, but simply had the right skin pigmentation or sex. I do not see how overt discrimination against whites and males is justified. Something else needs to be done to help women and minorities.

The tide is changing. Although

people will still probably be called racist for taking the stand I take here, more and more faculty and others are seeing that the way affirmative action is typically carried out—with discrimination against whites and males—is morally wrong.

Two wrongs do not make a right. It was wrong that discrimination was employed against women and minorities in the past. It is wrong to try to help them now by discriminating against whites and males.

Sometimes it is said that race or sex was only one consideration, but some have found—as I did in my university hiring committee experiences—that their school uses race or sex as the only standard. Hopefully, we can find a fair way to be unprejudiced against women and minorities without discriminating against whites and males.

Russell Eisenman
University of Texas-
Pan American

Noel Jacob Kent replies:

Professor Russell Eisenman tells us that his own experiences validate the claims of many whites and males in the academy that they are being victimized by a system designed to advantage women and minorities. As someone who values diversity, he is frustrated.

While Eisenman's good faith is quite clear, his assumptions and explanations are flawed. For one thing, "merit," rather than being unproblematic, is a notoriously messy—and subjective—criterion

... especially when evaluating competing candidates.

So, when he complains about "the usual standards of hiring" being ignored and "the best person" being rejected for academic positions, one wonders about the academic and historic context in which those "usual standards" were created, exactly who designed them, and for whom do they work.

How many times, for instance, are academic jobs/promotion/tenure awarded through "old boy networks, and merit" defined as

cultural or physical compatibility?

Eisenman views the “preference given to minorities” as a driving force behind the upsurge in student racism. But isn’t this upside down?

The power of racism in a nation with a racial history and traditions like ours lies in its free-floating ability to attach itself to any and every grievance or personal misfortune.

Eighteen- or 20-year olds often bring powerful racial/ethnic stereotypes, attitudes, and categories to the campus, and—programs for minorities or not—they too often will locate “others” as scapegoats for their insecurities and losses.

To paraphrase Voltaire: If “reverse racism” did not exist, we would have to invent it.

Likewise, Eisenman regards white students’ resentments of scholarships for minorities as a given. But we do not see white students at Duke castigating basketball All-Americans Shane Battier and Jayson Williams for enjoying athletic scholarships.

Of course, Battier and Williams are sports heroes filling expected minority roles. And unlike other minority students, future NBA pros Battier and Williams pose no competitive challenge to Duke students in the classroom or post-college world.

This suggests that student resentments are highly strategic—geared to denying the existence of both present and future white male advantages and the validity of compensatory action for a past marked by land grabs, slavery, and harshly discriminatory labor markets.

Eisenman, I know, values diversity in the academic community. And, yes, affirmative action and special minority programs are indirect and crude instruments to forge a degree of equal opportunity in the academy—or anywhere else.

We should always be trying to formulate creative new programs for equality and inclusion. But what happens when minority programs are abolished? Witness the steep decline of Native American, Latino, and Black enrollments between 1997 and 1999, in the wake of a University of California policy banning affirmative action processes.

In fact, a simple comparison of the numbers of minority students and faculty today against a few years ago will quickly diminish your fears.

The real danger is that these fears will be used by political forces whose agenda is to sustain an unequal and polarized America.

The National Education
Association congratulates
the winners of the
NEA Excellence in the
Academy Awards:



Henry Abramson, Florida International University, winner of the National Education Association Art of Teaching Prize, for his article "Studying the Talmud: 400 Repetitions and the Divine Voice."



Randy Schwartz, Schoolcraft College, winner of the National Education Association Democracy in Higher Education Prize, for his article "Unity in Multiplicity: Lessons from the Alhambra."



Luz Claudio, Mount Sinai School of Medicine, winner of the National Education Association New Scholar Prize, for her article "Changing the Face of Science."

The National Education Association Excellence in the Academy awards are intended to advance the Association's commitment in higher education. The deadline for submission for the 2001 awards is September 30, 2001. The competition is open to the entire academic community. For submission guidelines or further information, visit the National Education Association higher education Web site: www.nea.org/he or send E-mail to: pintern3@nea.org.