College class of 2019 is a more activist one

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Letters from Academia

In last week's column I reported on studies by researchers at the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) at the University of California, Los Angeles, showing the need for more efforts in diversifying colleges and universities, especially when it came to issues of inclusion.

Another study by the same group looked at the activism of the first-year entering class of 2015, the one that is expected to graduate in 2019. And you will see why this particular topic required its own column.

The study, titled "The American Freshman: National Norms Fall 2015," predicts a much more activist group of college students in the years to come. The implications of this change can be enormous, not only for college administrators but also for politicians and the general public.

After surveying 141,189 first-time, full-time students who entered 199 four-year U.S. colleges and universities of all types, these researchers found that "the entering freshman class of 2015 ranks among the most ambitious in these areas compared to their counterparts." And the jump of these intentions was dramatic when compared with the previous year.

For example, in 2014 only 5.6 percent of all freshmen indicated a "very good chance" that they would participate in student protests while in college. For the 2015 entering group that figure increased to 8.5 percent of students, the highest level recorded for this item since the inception of the survey in 1967. And these intentions crossed racial lines. For example, roughly 5.8 percent of Native American and 6 percent of Asian American/Pacific Islander students have strong expectations of participating in student protests in college. Yet the highest proportion if for black students, with 16 percent indicating that there was a "very good chance" of participating in student protests while in college. That is a 5.5 percent jump from the previous year.

This big jump in activist intentions may well be related to the numerous racial incidents that have taken place on many campuses in the last year, such as the one at the University of Missouri where the perception was that these problems were affecting disproportionally African-Americans. Latino students reported the second highest level of intention, with 10.2 percent reporting a "very good chance" of participating in student protests while in college. "These figures for both black and Latino students represent the highest recorded in the history of this item," according to the report.

Another increase has been seen in their intentions to commit to engage with their communities, with almost 75 percent of them considering helping others in difficulty to be a "very important" or "essential" personal objective. Another important increase has been in the number of students (nearly 60 percent) expressing strong commitment toward improving their understanding of other countries and cultures.

Further, the entering freshman class of 2015 showed a substantial increase over previous years in placing greater emphasis on wanting to help promote racial understanding (41.2 percent rating it "very important" or "essential") and wanting to influence social values (43.9 percent rating "very important" or "essential"). The study also indicates "students also seem to be substantially more committed to political engagement, as 22.3 percent report influencing the political structure as a 'very important' or 'essential' life objective."

One matter of concern is that the interest in promoting racial understanding varies greatly according to race. Although that is a top priority for African-American students (more than 68 percent) and Latino students (more than 52 percent), only one third of white students think that is important. Based on these numbers, there is little question that the entering college class of 2015 "expects to be more involved with and committed to these issues than those who came before them," concludes this study.

What does it mean for colleges and universities? As indicated in this column last week, not only do we need to diversify our campuses by increasing minority representation at all levels (students, faculty, administrators) but also to create opportunities for those students to be more engaged in positive interactions on campus. To that end, colleges and universities should be offering more chances for community engagement that will serve to channel some of their concerns and enable more discussions about social and political issues.

Long-standing obstacles to these goals have included the lack of predisposition and the lack of skills in discussing racial issues face-to-face. This only reflects in part the American psyche of not wanting to discuss issues that many consider uncomfortable to talk about, as well as the fear of saying something that might offend others.

This is a curious circumstance because higher education has always maintained that in order to preserve academic freedom contrarian views must be not only tolerated but also openly discussed. Yet, the shadow of extreme political correctness has been cast on campuses as shown by the growing number of campus speakers or recipients of honorary degrees being banned or facing loud protests because they may say (or have said) something that may offend someone.

Of course words matter. They oftentimes reveal our deepest biases and intentions, and we need to be capable of distinguishing between ideas that are uncomfortable and true hate speech. And we should not let divergent opinions prevent us from being respectful towards others. A good example of such behavior was recently given by a large crowd at Liberty University, a Christian and very conservative institution that last September hosted presidential candidate Bernie Sanders, a Jew with very liberal ideas about politics and the economy. Yet, he received a warm welcome and even an ovation when he expressed some of his ideas.

If Liberty University can do that, why not other colleges and universities that proclaim themselves to be bastions of secular and liberal ideals?

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