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**DIVERSITY, INCLUSION, AND COMMON VALUES: A
COMMENTARY ON PROFESSOR SIEGEL'S
*MULTICULTURALISM AND OTHER MISTAKES***

To illustrate the harm of multiculturalism in education, Professor Siegel tells the story of a conversation he had with a fifth grader who attended a school with a "multicultural" or "Afrocentric" curriculum. Professor Siegel states that he asked the boy what he thought of George Washington. The boy replied, "Oh you mean George Washington Carver."¹ The boy had never heard of George Washington. Supposedly, the boy had never heard of our first president in his school. Finding this story fascinating, I told it to a couple of my fellow law students who happen to be caucasian. By the expression on their faces, it was evident that they did not fully understand the significance of Professor Siegel's encounter. Ironically, my friends had never heard of George Washington Carver. Without going as far as suggesting that George Washington Carver should be as prominent in the curricula of elementary schools as George Washington, the incident presents a strong argument in favor of multiculturalism in education.

Before one can have any meaningful discussion of multiculturalism and Afrocentrism, the terms must be defined. I equate *multiculturalism* with diversity and not separatism. A multicultural curriculum should be one that gives the proper weight to the role of African-Americans, American-Indians, Hispanic-Americans, Europeans, and other ethnic groups in American history. A multicultural curriculum should also incorporate non-Western texts and ideas that accurately portray the world we live in.

Professor Siegel's definition of *multiculturalism* is much broader than mine. Professor Siegel's definition is broad enough to encompass Afrocentrism, or separatism and not pluralism."² Such an expansive definition of multiculturalism would seem to be negated by the term itself. The very term suggests inclusion and not separatism. *Afrocentrism*, on the other hand, does suggest separatism. An

1. Fred Siegel, *Multiculturalism and Other Mistakes*, 41 DePaul L. Rev. 1191, 1196 (1992).
2. *Id.* at 1193.

Afrocentric curriculum does more than merely put Africa and the role of African-Americans in their proper perspective. An Afrocentric curriculum is a curriculum with Africa at the center of everything. Some proponents of such programs advocate the teaching of every subject from the humanities to the sciences with Africa as the core of study.

I think that I would be more inclined to agree with many of Professor Siegel's criticisms of multiculturalism if they were stated as being criticisms of Afrocentric educational programs. While the goals of some proponents of Afrocentric curricula are laudable, the programs are too narrow. Afrocentrism is an extreme response to Eurocentrism, which fails by committing the same errors it purports to correct. Proponents of Afrocentrism claim that it builds self-esteem, teaches the achievements of African civilizations, and provides an environment in which African-American students can better learn basic skills. Even assuming that Afrocentric programs accomplish all of this, the gains are achieved at too high a cost.

Afrocentrism, as opposed to multiculturalism, threatens to isolate African-American students from learning skills necessary to succeed in America. As Professor Siegel notes, there is no such thing as black gravity. In all fairness to proponents of Afrocentrism, the response would probably be that gravity, though race-neutral, can be taught with examples based on Africa or African-American culture. The problem with Afrocentric education is that it may jeopardize the learning of necessary skills in reading, writing, mathematics, and science for the sake of providing a program with Africa at its core.

Though misguided, in my opinion, the Afrocentric movement in education is understandable. It represents a desperate attempt to cure a serious problem: Afrocentrism is a predictable strike back at Eurocentrism. Unfortunately, many proponents have gone beyond the reasonable goal of correcting the historical record. And here is an area where I disagree strongly with Professor Siegel. I truly believe that Afrocentrism is more than just a way for middle-level educators to make a name for themselves, or the product of a conspiracy to skew history in favor of African-Americans. Afrocentrism, absent some extremists, is an understandable attempt to educate African Americans.

Much of the debate over Afrocentrism and multiculturalism is further obscured by semantics. Professor Siegel would have us be-

lieve that we are being duped if we believe that multiculturalism is anything but a less offensive way of referring to Afrocentrism. To Professor Siegel, multiculturalism means much more than "inclusion" or "pluralistic integration." I find it hard to understand how someone could fail to distinguish between a legitimate multicultural program and Afrocentrism. The terms themselves suggest their profound differences. Part of the problem may be that some Afrocentric programs place themselves under the rubric of multiculturalism. The term *multiculturalism* should be reserved for programs that stress diversity and inclusion, and not separatism. Throwing Afrocentric programs into the classification of multiculturalism makes it much too easy for opponents of multiculturalism to point to Afrocentric programs as an illustration of the evils of multiculturalism.

Professor Siegel also distinguishes between multiculturalism and pluralistic integration. Pluralistic integration is the integration of diverse viewpoints or a plurality of viewpoints. Professor Siegel suggests that pluralistic integration is a legitimate goal and multiculturalism illegitimate. The problem that I have with pluralistic integration is that it sounds too much like the status quo. When I was in grammar school, once a year or so we would recite Martin Luther King's famous "I Have a Dream" speech and act out the Rosa Parks bus incident. I suppose that this might qualify as pluralistic integration.

As an alternative to multiculturalism, Professor Siegel prefers the time-honored American mixture of assimilation and traditional allegiance. This might be a suitable alternative if assimilation was a viable alternative. It is not that I oppose assimilation, it is just that life as an African-American has taught me that no matter how educated I become, how hard I work, how proper I speak, society will always remind me that I am different. Assimilation of European ethnics may have been difficult, but it was not impossible. If society did not work to prohibit the assimilation of African-Americans, I would be content to focus on our similarities and downplay the differences.

Multiculturalism does not have to mean separatism. Multiculturalism is often criticized because it stresses the differences among cultures rather than our similarities. Why is it that a better understanding of our differences must necessarily lead to fractionalization? The answer is that it need not. Multiculturalism suggests a

give-and-take of culture. A multicultural educational program has the unique ability to teach students the differences between us as well as the common values and traditions that unite us all as Americans.

Michael S. Burns