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Identity politics: reductio ad absurdum

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Quad 136

Identity Politics: Reductio ad Absurdum

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Identity Politics: Reductio ad Absurdum



Photo: Michael Marsland
for Yale University

It seems like daily there is a story from the world of higher education that is designed to show absurd and out-of-touch students, faculty, administrators (or all of the above) are with the rest of the world. The most recent offering is from Yale. (The press loves to pick on the Ivies, even as many of them have Ivy degrees.)

Yale English students have **written a letter** to the department faculty demanding changes in one of the major requirements that focuses on English poets:

When students are made to feel so alienated that they get up and leave the room, or get up and leave the major, something is wrong. The English department loses out when talented students engaged in literary and cultural analysis are driven away from the major. Students who continue on after taking the introductory sequence are ill-prepared to take higher-level courses relating to race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, ability, or even to engage with critical theory or secondary scholarship. We ask that Major English Poets be abolished, and that the pre-1800/1900 requirements be refocused to deliberately include literatures relating to gender, race, sexuality, ableism, and ethnicity.

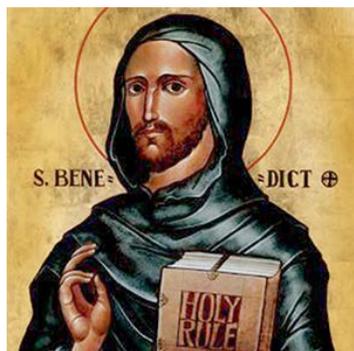
It's time for the English major to decolonize — not diversify — its course offerings. A 21st century education is a diverse education: we write to you today inspired by student activism across the university, and to make sure that you know that the English department is not immune from the collective call to action. ...

We have spoken. We are speaking. Pay attention.

The Yale letter emphasizes that reading dead, white, male poets “actively harms all students” and creates an “especially hostile environment to students of color.” How does this work in the sciences? Does studying Newton, Einstein, Mendel, Crick and Watson create the same hostile environment? The students are using absurd logic and identity politics to, in part, try to override the faculty’s control of the curriculum and control what students have to study. This certainly is not to suggest that the faculty should not consider a broadly diverse curriculum, but one reason you go to Yale (or any university) is because you trust the faculty to be expert and up-to-date in their fields. If you want to create your own curriculum, knock yourself out, but don’t expect a credential that has the imprimatur of a college faculty.

This episode is part of the bigger “safe space” and “trigger warning” movement that has become so prominent in higher education, but it goes a distressing and depressing step farther.

This argument suggests that students are unable to empathize with or even learn from someone who is not of the same race or gender or sexual orientation. This narrow mindset seems to believe that 21st century students have nothing to learn from the giants of the literary canon. The idea that reading Shakespeare creates a hostile environment and therefore one can learn nothing from The Bard unless you happen to be a straight, white, male is simply laughable. The man who wrote dozens of strong women, as well as movingly about Othello and Shylock—really? Presumably one becomes a canonical thinker because of the ability to examine the human condition in a timeless and universal fashion.



Taken to its logical end, this reasoning concludes the only person I can truly understand is myself. The possibility for understanding, empathy and even love between individuals is non-existent if understanding each other is impossible. Of course this is ridiculous and surely the students writing to their Yale professors don't believe it.

Fortunately, we don't see much of this kind of logic at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University, but that is only natural when you take the teachings of a 6th century, white, male monk as the foundation of your mission.

By [Michael Hemesath](#) | June 9th, 2016 | Categories: [Higher Education](#) | [0 Comments](#)

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