Half Baked: UC Berkeley's Diversity Machine Loses Its Mind over Cupcakes

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Tuesday's now infamous affirmative-action bake sale at the University of California at Berkeley is unlikely to dissuade Governor Jerry Brown from signing a bill that would reintroduce race and gender preferences into the state's public universities. It has nevertheless served one useful function: it has clarified just what Berkeley's vice chancellor for equity and diversity does for his whopping $194,000 annual salary.

Berkeley's College Republicans wanted their "Increase Diversity Bake Sale" to serve as a counterweight to a phone bank erected on the campus's main thoroughfare, where students could call Brown and urge him to sign the preference-reinstating legislation, Senate Bill 185. Like other anti-affirmative-action bake sales on college campuses over the last decade, the College Republicans' sale priced items according to the race and gender of the customer: whites paid $2 for a pastry, with Latinos paying $1 and blacks 75 cents, while women got a 25-cent discount on all items.

And like all such previous bake sales, it triggered a storm of ludicrously clueless outrage. Student Devonte Jackson told the San Francisco Chronicle that the sale was inappropriate and hurtful, "attacking underrepresented communities by reducing their communities to a cheaply priced good." The president of Berkeley's student government, which sponsored the pro-SB 185 phone bank, explained to CNN that the bake sale "humorized and mocked the struggles of people of color on this campus." Another student government officer professed dismay at such a shocking insult to students of color. "We were really taken aback and, frankly, disgusted," Joey Freeman informed the Los Angeles Times. Capping off this outpouring of what one can only hope is willful misreading, the student senate passed an emergency resolution on Sunday...
condemning "the use of discrimination whether it is in satire or in seriousness by any student group."

Gibor Basri, Berkeley’s vice chancellor for equity and diversity, could have served a valuable role here by pointing out that the bake sale was obviously a parody of racial and gender preferences, not a criticism of students themselves. Whatever one thinks about the issue of preferences, he might have said, such political theater belongs to Berkeley’s once-revered tradition of free speech. Instead, Basri chose to stoke the melodramatic self-pity of today’s college students. “A lot of students, especially students of color, read [the bake sale] as placing a higher value on white students,” Basri told the New York Times. Basri, in other words, obeyed the ironclad script for all such minor perturbations in the otherwise unbroken reign of campus political correctness. That script requires that the massive campus-diversity bureaucracy treat the delusional claims of hyperventilating students with utter seriousness. Students in the ever-expanding roster of official campus victim groups flatter themselves that by attending what is in fact the most caring, protective, and opportunity-rich institution in the history of the world, they are braving unspeakable threats to their ego and even to their physical safety. (Indeed, so desirable is this alleged threatened status that a gender and women’s studies major held a sign during Tuesday’s protest of the bake sale decrying the exclusion of “queer people” from the Republicans’ pricing structure.)

This supposedly toxic “campus climate” has engendered a nauseating rhetoric about the need for “creating safe spaces” for various endangered groups, who would otherwise risk utter obliteration in the tsunami of hatred and bias that daily washes over them. Reality check: no adult on today’s college campuses wishes for anything more than to see females and minority students succeed to the utmost of their capacities. The overwhelming majority of students, meanwhile, are indifferent to race and gender and simply want to get along. It is hard not to attribute bad faith to Basri for his stupendously misguided interpretation of the bake sale as “placing a higher value on white students.” If he really is incapable of understanding such a simple satire, he does not belong in an institution of higher learning—or at least what used to pass for one. One might think that a college administrator’s mission would be to work for enlightenment, diffusing whatever tensions may arise from ignorance and misunderstanding. Basri has, after all, been granted an enormous piece of taxpayer largesse, commanding an expensive office of 17 staffers.

But like all such campus diversocrats, Basri is in fact a partisan in the crusade for unending identity politics, stoking tensions rather than calming them. The University of California is already wasting millions of dollars on these ever-expanding diversity sinecures—(And UC Berkeley itself has gone into the business of diversity activism, sponsoring a student-run, credit-bearing course in how to agitate for racial preferences.) If Governor Brown signs SB 185 into law (likely violating the state’s constitution, which, after Proposition 209, forbids granting preferential treatment on the basis of race, sex, or ethnicity), the diversity bureaucracy and its political supporters in Sacramento will have scored another victory and ensured the diversocracy’s future growth—as students admitted for their race, not their academic qualifications, provide the pretext for yet more vice chancellors for equity and diversity.

MacDonald characterizes the Increase Diversity Bake Sale as an act of parody, which would seek to make an argument by portraying a situation in a humorous light. How effective is this strategy?
1. Did you get new information from this selection about the bake sale at Berkeley that had not been included in the previous selections on that topic? What information is new? How does it help you understand the bake sale and the ensuing protests?

2. Mac Donald's argument is obviously evaluative in nature. What specifically is she evaluating? (She has at least several targets.) What evaluative criteria is she using? Which are explicitly stated and which are implicitly stated or assumed? (Chapter 10 presents information about evaluative arguments.)

3. How does Mac Donald use the behavior of the gender and women's studies major at the bake sale to support her claims (paragraph 4)? What specific claims is she making with this example?

4. Describe Mac Donald's invoked audience. Is it likely that she will persuade anyone who does not already agree with her position to change theirs? Why or why not? Note at least a half-dozen particular word choices that will surely appeal to those who already agree with her but that will likely alienate those who do not. How do such word choices function as arguments based on emotion? As arguments based on character? (Chapter 6 discusses audience, while Chapters 2 and 4 discuss arguments based on pathos and logos, respectively.)

5. Chapter 19 discusses using sources. Imagine that you are using this source in a factual essay about the bake sale held at Berkeley. Write a two-to-three-paragraph summary of this article in which you describe and characterize Mac Donald's position on the issue. You will surely want to use some direct quotations, but you will also want to pay careful attention to the verbs that you use to introduce those quotations, especially the signal verbs you use, as well as the words you choose to characterize the stance or position she takes. If you succeed at your task, your readers will not be able to tell exactly what your own stance on the bake sale is, but they will have a very clear picture of what Mac Donald's is. Be sure to add the appropriate citation for this article in two forms: as if you had gotten the information from the original Web site and as if you had taken it from this book.