

PC does not exist at Middlebury

by Melissa Ryan and Cynthia Stillinger

Upon reading the letter “The Meaning of Political Correctness at Middlebury” by Dan O’Neil in last week’s Campus, we felt the urgent need to reply, but we were almost as significantly plagued by an overwhelming sense of confusion.

Mr. O’Neil’s self-righteous response to what he has seen as the self-righteous PC movement strikes us as reactionary back lash toward a phenomenon that does not exist at Middlebury. Yes, Political Correctness is an issue at many American colleges and universities. The phrase evokes manifestations of change in several areas of higher education: the administration, the curriculum, and the student body. Political Correctness as such is problematic, to say the least. However, there is no point in attempting to address the pros and cons of Political Correctness when it does not apply to the situation.

There is little or no evidence of support for the movement you claim is stifling intellectual freedom at Middlebury. Does the student body consider itself PC? Mr. O’Neil acknowledges that the answer is no; the SGA rejected the proposed “Cherish the Earth” course. Thus he cries “thought control” where none exists. Apparently, what he so strenuously objects to are the issues which the PC movement attempts to address. The label of PC at Middlebury provides a convenient escape from the very real issues of sexism, racism, elitism, and other “perceived” social inequities. He may call his opinions simply “incorrect,” but to us, they are very dangerous.

For example, “negative comments concerning sexual orientation” are not a harmless, and certainly not a “peaceful, minimally confrontational” form of “dissent from politically correct positions.” This goes beyond the political; this is human respect. Mr. O’Neil may defend his rights to speech as vociferously as he can, but to intimidate, persecute, or even offend the gay and lesbian communities with his “incorrectness” is more than a breach of administrative policy; it is morally wrong.

We take issue with much of the language in Mr. O’Neil’s article. He labels the campaign against hate speech “abhorrent;” a social justice requirement (which might include gay-lesbian psychology or feminist politics) is to him “repulsive;” sexism, racism, and other forms of prejudice are merely “perceived.” The implications of his chosen words are very disturbing: this is the language of hate and intolerance. He may dismiss this assertion as more baggage of the PC movement, but he cannot deny that the language we use is both reflective and creative of the culture we are. More importantly, if he has an intellectual argument to present, sensationalist language is not an appropriate mode of expression.

Lastly, we would like to defend the much-maligned faculty, which he claims is “less interested in teaching than in meddling in the extracurricular lives of the students.” We would ask Mr. O’Neil to consider his academic experience at Middlebury (the college, not the corporation) and the

professors who have contributed to his higher education. Would you dismiss their efforts so carelessly? Secondly, though he may be inclined to view Middlebury in terms of “us vs. them,” this is for many of us a community—a community which counts students, administrators, faculty, staff, trustees, and him as members.

In conclusion, we respect Mr. O’Neil’s need and his right to speak out; however, he must respect ours as well. He cannot argue us away with the inappropriate label of Political Correctness; the issues existed before the phrase. In the future, if Mr. O’Neil would like to glorify fascism, please do not masquerade it under the cloak of diversity. Silence equals death.