TOWARD A FAIR MICHIGAN

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Affirmative action debate cut short on college campus

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What can we learn from cupcakes?

Quite a lot, if the cupcakes happen to be those offered for sale last month by the College Republicans of Grand Valley State University. The student organization unleashed a storm of controversy when it gave preferential pricing to women and minorities as part of an affirmative action awareness bake sale.

It turns out that it was the student organization that had to pay the price: three student leaders were forced to resign their positions; the College Republicans gave a public apology for their offense; and the Student Organization Review Board put the club on probation for violating a university rule that requires that all financial transactions on the campus be non-discriminatory.

All this over cupcakes? Of course not. The real issue is the public policy of affirmative action. And the first thing we learn from the Grand Valley State example is that this particular public policy is "off the table" for discussion even, and perhaps especially, on the college campus.

A few of the voices raised in this debate have called this a free speech matter. But these voices have largely been drowned out in a cacophony of complaints denouncing this political activity as offensive and even racist.
And yet, Michigan as a state has an urgent need right now to talk about affirmative action. The State Board of Elections is currently reviewing the 508,202 signatures collected and submitted by Ward Connerly's Michigan Civil Rights Initiative Committee to place an initiative on the November 2006 ballot.

Their proposal amends the Michigan state constitution to ban affirmative action preferences in state and local government and in universities. Nothing is more important than that the citizens of Michigan have a fair opportunity to decide for themselves what is the right thing to do about preferences.

The controversy over cupcakes at the GVSU campus sends an alarming signal about just how difficult it may be for a thoughtful, civic and civil conversation to take place. Nonetheless, Toward A Fair Michigan (TAFM a new non-profit, Michigan-based, education organization, founded by Barbara J. Grutter, plaintiff in Grutter v Bollinger, and William B. Allen, a former chair of the U. S. Commission on Civil Rights) has dedicated itself to opening, spreading, and sustaining public discussion of the effects of, the alternatives to, the justifications for, and the ill consequences of affirmative action preferences.

TAFM will, among other projects, spawn a series of debates across Michigan (leaving no corner of the state unexplored, no citizen uninformed) for the purpose of providing a fair and open discussion of affirmative action. By recruiting experts in the legal and social history of affirmative action to carry factual, principled, and rational messages on both sides of this controversial issue, TAFM will facilitate just such an open deliberation as will produce the best public decision.

But the need for and obstacles to a civil discussion about an important public policy is not all we can learn from the Grand Valley State bake sale. If we will but listen carefully to the debate, we can hear the truth about affirmative action preferences. Students, faculty, administrators, and off-campus observers alike made one point about the bake sale repeatedly: it was discriminatory.

One purchasing policy should apply to all purchasers of cupcakes regardless of race, gender, or ethnicity. As GVSU president, Mark A. Murray, put it, "To leave groups free to charge differential pricing based on race as long as they assert that they had a political reason for doing so would be wrong-headed and dangerous." Exactly so.
One policy should apply to all, regardless of race, color, religion, national origin, or gender. One policy for buying cupcakes, seeking jobs, bidding for federal and state contracts, applying to college and awarding financial aid. It's only fair.

See what we can learn from cupcakes?

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