

The black legend of higher education

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The concept of “fake news” is not new by any stretch of the imagination. Over centuries people have invented stories of all types and dimensions. From dragons to the “fake” moon landing, from the Masons behind every political conspiracy to the Jews trying to control the world, there have been complex stories that try to indict entire peoples or nations with all kinds of atrocities. One of the most famous is the “black legend” (or leyenda negra), according to which Spain has been the culprit for everything bad that happened in the western hemisphere for centuries.

As Alfredo Alvar described it in his book “La Leyenda Negra,” the black legend is “a careful distortion of the history of a nation, perpetrated by its enemies, in order to better fight it. And a distortion as monstrous as possible, with the goal of achieving a specific aim: the moral disqualification of the nation, whose supremacy must be fought in every way possible.”

Unfortunately, not only countries but entire human activities, like higher education, can be the victims of black legends.

For years, conservatives have been mischaracterizing what is going on regarding higher education. When describing the problems with that sector they emphasize issues such as political correctness, uselessness of degrees, misuse of taxpayers’ money and the like. They never talk about actual problems such as extremely diminishing financial support (which translates into higher costs for the students so these groups can pursue their anti-tax ideology) or bad leadership (so they can continue to place on boards of trustees and executive positions their acolytes instead of quali-

fied individuals).

They have been persistent and effective in advancing this narrative, and they don’t care how outlandish their claims are. Take, for example, Attorney General Jeff Sessions, who in a speech last Tuesday said that colleges are performing “a disservice to their students and a disservice to this nation.” He claimed, in a prepared statement, that college students these days have some growing up to do and it is because many of the nation’s colleges are creating and coddling “a generation of sanctimonious, sensitive, supercilious snowflakes.”

According to The Washington Post, during Sessions’ speech the crowd started chanting “Lock her up,” a favorite call of Trump supporters regarding Hillary Clinton. Sessions chuckled, and repeated the chant himself. What a moral example to high schoolers from the country’s top law enforcement officer. Sessions would say later that he could have handled the situation “differently.”

This speech was delivered at a summit for high-school students sponsored by Turning Point USA, a conservative group that constantly attacks colleges and professors that they see as hostile to conservative ideologies. Sessions then warned the high schoolers at the conference that some people would try to silence them and added that President Trump has questioned whether federal funding should be pulled from higher education.

Sessions’ Department of Justice has filed statements of interest in lawsuits against universities and has actively participated in other lawsuits in issues ranging from what he sees as violations of free speech of conservative speakers to alleged

racial discrimination against Asians (but not African Americans or Latinos).

This is not the first time that Sessions has used this kind of rhetoric. Last September at Georgetown University, he disparaged college campuses as “an echo chamber of political correctness and homogenous thought, a shelter for fragile egos.” The response from leaders of higher education or liberal leaders in this country? Almost nothing, so Sessions’ diatribe went unchallenged. The only exception was from the University of California at Irvine Chancellor and free speech expert Howard A. Gillman, who said about the “snowflakes” comment that “calling each other names isn’t productive.” That is a high-minded response, but totally ineffective from a communications viewpoint since such rhetoric will not change the minds of those targeted by Sessions’ statements.

In the same meeting the education secretary, Betsy DeVos, proposed curtailing Obama Administration loan forgiveness rules for students defrauded by for-profit colleges, requiring that student borrowers show they have fallen into hopeless financial straits or prove that their colleges knowingly deceived them. In other words, those who were duped by for-profit colleges with promises of “great jobs” after graduation, now have to return the money unless they provide almost impossible evidence of extreme poverty.

For-profit universities are a favorite of Secretary DeVos, who has been accused of stocking her department with former executives of for-profit colleges and universities to free the industry from oversight. The Obama Administration had eased access to loan forgiveness for students who were left encumbered with debt after two for-profit college chains,

Corinthian Colleges and ITT Technical Institute, imploded in 2015 and 2016. The schools were found to have misled their students with false advertisements and misleading claims for years. Yet, they had long benefitted from federal government subsidies while being the most responsible for the current level of student debt in this country – \$1.5 trillion.

But all of this information has been well known for years. What is the difference now? The difference is that conservative, extremist groups are winning the battle for public opinion.

According to a survey by the Pew Research Center published last week, of about 10,000 respondents, 61 percent of Americans say the higher education system in the U.S. is going in the wrong direction, with Republicans and Democrats differing over why they think this is the case. Seventy-three percent of Republicans and those who lean to the Republican Party say higher education is headed in the wrong direction, primarily because of political correctness. Fifty-two percent of Democrats and Democratic leaners agree that higher education is going in the wrong direction, but blame its cost.

This state of mind will translate is less political and financial support for higher education since nobody likes to back disparaged institutions.

Unless we, in colleges and universities, come up with better communication approaches we will lose the public opinion battle and all because the enemies of higher education were able to generate a black legend while we were incapable to counter it.

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