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# The Policemen of Diversity

*How the Middle States Accreditors Threaten Academic Freedom*

By Jim Sleeper

**P**LENTY OF hot air has been expelled on all sides of the growing national debate over some colleges admitting minority students who may not be as fully prepared as white classmates. But the case of Bernard M. Baruch College poses a new problem: that of semi-official coercion to admit such students.

Baruch is part of the City University of New York. Its 16,500-member student body is 36 percent white, 26 percent black, 20 percent Asian and 18 percent Hispanic, and its faculty is 18 percent minority. But last year, Baruch's re-accreditation was put on hold when the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools found that Baruch didn't meet association standards for fostering racial and gender "equity and diversity" and hadn't embraced its "suggested" remedies. Accreditation was restored only after Baruch mended its ways.

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The Middle States action astonished many in academia and prompted the Bush administration this spring to defer federal recognition of the accreditor itself until it gives a clearer justification for its diversity standards. For the time being, the federal government will continue granting funds to institutions accredited by Middle States, but this newest phase of the national battle over affirmative action clearly is only beginning.

Middle States is one of six private regional associations that accredit American colleges and universities. Based in Philadelphia, it accredits 505 institutions in the District of Columbia, Maryland, Delaware, Pennsylvania, New Jersey and New York. Since 1988, Middle States has based accreditation in part on its "equity



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and diversity" standards—and thereby has acquired an institutional lever of enormous power. Because the federal government won't give financial aid to unaccredited colleges or their students, the accreditors can, in effect, threaten institutions with a loss of public money unless they admit, hire, retain and even graduate minorities in ways and at levels never contemplated in public law.

You don't have to join conservatives in romanticizing universities of yore—which, in truth, graduated lots of elitist dunderheads on "gentlemen's C's"—to be alarmed by these developments. Even some liberal academicians cheered in April when U.S. Education Secretary Lamar Alexander deferred the government's re-accreditation of Middle States.

Now the battle has been joined on Capitol Hill on both political and legal grounds. House Government Operations subcommittee chairman Ted Weiss (D-N.Y.) calls Alexander's actions "a wholesale assault by the administration on affirmative action programs." Alexander counters that the Middle States standards are "coercive restrictions" that could prompt hiring quotas and undermine academic freedoms. At a subcommittee hearing Wednesday, Weiss said federal law bars the secretary from exercising "any direction, supervision or control . . . over any accrediting agency or association." Alexander replied that other federal regulations require him to determine whether accreditation standards are consistently applied and generally accepted among educators.

In essence, both Baruch and Middle States have run aground on a hard reality: Many minority youths are simply unprepared for college work. The average Scholastic Aptitude Test scores of blacks and Hispanics, though rising rapidly, still are much lower than those of whites and Asians; last year only 1,475 of 94,000 blacks who took the SAT nationwide scored 600 or higher on the verbal test—the minimum score accepted by most high-level colleges.

Problems begin only when a college admits blacks and Hispanics who are markedly less well prepared than its white or Asian students. As the ill-prepared students begin doing poorly, whites who think minorities are inferior may feel vindicated; more ominously, fair-minded whites may feel stirrings of resentment or cynicism over the college's double standards. Ironically, that resentment—and black and Hispanic defensiveness—have been interpreted by Middle States as proof of the college's racial insensitivity and bad faith and of the need for redoubled race-specific remedies—even if the school already offers special minorities scholarships, support groups and academic and personal help.

At some point, it becomes reasonable to suspect that there's something racially divisive about campus "equity and diversity" policies themselves. Yet Baruch's deferral last July at first chilled such discussion instead of provoking it. The executive director of Middle States' higher-education commission, Howard Simmons, refused for months to take media calls. Not until April, eight months after the fact, did a U.S. De-

partment of Education advisory panel urge Alexander not to renew Middle States' own recognition by the government until the association justifies its diversity standards. Alexander agreed, and Middle States will have to make its case to the federal panel this fall.

Middle States' defenders consider Alexander's move a threat to academic freedom. Critics consider it a vindication of the same principle: It was Middle States, they note, which encroached on a member institution's freedom to define its own educational mission, a freedom affirmed in association bylaws. And now, it is Middle States that will have to do some defining.

In a recent essay in New York Newsday, Simmons defended Middle States' treatment of Baruch without offering details, and he asserted that its diversity guidelines are free of coercion and quotas. But the guidelines are also free of the specificity that might set appropriate limits on Simmons's and his colleagues' zeal to expand affirmative action.

That vagueness is what got Baruch into trouble. Joel Segall, its president at the time, had concentrated the college's limited resources on its first-class business school, the nation's largest, arguing that its allure for top corporate recruiters was its best contribution to minorities. But under CUNY's "open admissions" policy, Baruch admits every city high school graduate with an 83 average or better who applies. That includes many underprepared students, disproportionately black and Hispanic, who then flunk out because the college can't afford enough reme-

diation.

Some at Baruch have talked of raising admissions standards, but Middle States' evaluators decided Baruch should spend more on student retention and minority-faculty recruitment. Senior faculty countered that, given the school's fiscal straits and the paucity of minorities with business PhDs, such a shift would devalue Baruch's instruction and degrees. The evaluators warned the college not to use "labor market analyses" as excuses for failing to hire more minority profs. Promises by Segall to intensify minority recruitment and retention were brushed aside as pro forma and unenthusiastic.

On a visit following the deferral announcement, Simmons refused to examine Baruch's data on minority admissions, hiring and retention. "I don't want to get into a numbers game with you," Simmons declared, according to Segall and other CUNY sources. Yet he demanded to know why Baruch had no black administrator higher than a dean (there are only five higher positions, one of them the presidency), and he dismissed Segall's response that a black dean was on track to a vice presidency.

Meanwhile, two Baruch black professors who'd lobbied Middle States evaluators to censure the college stepped up their charges of institutional racism. Education professor Donald Smith dismissed "white" definitions of "excellence" and characterized university scholars as "pseudoscientists" who foist excuses for white domination upon unsuspecting students. But Middle States' deferral had already reduced the controversy to one over power based on federal dollars. Black studies professor Arthur Lewin warned his colleagues they were jeopardizing re-accreditation by challenging Middle States.

He was right, of course, and the college quickly responded. CUNY Chancellor Joseph Murphy found money to elevate the black dean to a vice presidency. Affirmative-action plans were expanded. Segall resigned, and a black acting-president was chosen. In short order, Baruch's accreditation was renewed.

Another aspect of the controversy arose later last year when Middle States ordered Westminster Theological Seminary near Philadelphia to put a woman on its governing board or risk losing its accreditation. The school argued that its religious freedom was at stake because the board has always been made up of ordained elders, and women may not be ordained as elders. Westminster, like Baruch, bent to Middle States, agreeing to give women non-voting positions on board committees.

Only thanks to Alexander's action has the question of diversity standards now become the focus of a necessary national debate. But it happened almost by accident: The feds renew their recognitions every five years, and Middle States just happened to be up for renewal. The federal panel at first voted to renew; that night, Richard Kunkel, dean of education at Auburn University, read the Baruch case documents more closely and convinced his colleagues

to reverse themselves and recommend further study. Kunkel favors diversifying college communities, but he doesn't think accrediting agencies are the right catalysts. Anyway, he notes, Middle States didn't follow its own and federal guidelines: It judged Baruch without a strong consensus among its own members on the diversity standard; it did not consult with other accrediting agencies (only one, the Western States Association, shares Middle States' notions about diversity); and it failed to spell out the diversity standards in detail.

Middle States' critics were lucky once again. The education secretary at the time was Lauro Cavazos, who probably wouldn't have rocked the accrediting-world boat by accepting the federal panel's recommendation. But before he could decide, Cavazos was replaced by Alexander, the independent-minded former Tennessee governor who was willing to buck his own bureaucracy, which leaned toward routine renewal of Middle States.

Now that Alexander has spoken, even such defenders of Middle States as the Western States Association president, Stephen S. Weiner, admit there are "questions about the relationship between academic quality and diversity which we are obligated to discuss." But those questions did not seem to be on his mind last year when he wrote in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* that cultural diversity must be infused into every campus and curriculum because "all study is expected to break down the narrow certainties and provincial vision with which we are born. In a sense, we are all from the provinces, including New Yorkers and Bostonians, whose view of the world can be as circumscribed as that of native Alaskans who have never left their village."

But if policies promoting racial and gender diversity are to work, mightn't Baruch students from New York ghettos need more white classmates and instructors? Shouldn't some historically black colleges be denied accreditation for lack of diversity? Shouldn't those who develop Afrocentric and Islamic studies be required to teach the truth about the status of women and minorities in those cultures? Then there is the question Alexander asked in deferring Middle States: Wouldn't imposing a formulaic "diversity" upon all colleges undermine a great national strength—diversity among institutions?

Accreditors' evasive answers to these questions hint at the power-play behind the platitudes. The concept of racist oppression magically transforms even backwater black colleges, isolated ghettos and sexist cultures into bulwarks against Eurocentric hegemony. Accreditors don't say so in writing. But Leon Goldstein, chairman of the Middle States higher-education commission, tipped his hand when he said this spring that state budget cuts for CUNY constitute "genocide."

The political battle is institutional as well as philosophical. As associations of autonomous colleges, accrediting agencies should apply only those standards which members agree to

adopt in specific detail. Such standards develop slowly, as in peer review within academic disciplines. The pressure on an institution to meet them turns on a desire to be accorded full membership in the community of scholars.

But linking federal dollars to accrediting standards introduces a different sort of power into the equation. It gives over-zealous accreditors an inappropriate weapon with which to impose standards without adequate debate.

When accreditors threaten, however gently, to block aid in order to enforce standards about which there's no consensus, it is they who compromise both academic independence and government integrity by enlisting public power, without public review, on behalf of a private agenda. The secretary of education, as executor of public policy, has every right to insist on such a public review.

The associations would be far more honest to ask the feds to find some other way to determine who's eligible for public funds. Weiner notes that the accrediting associations never asked to be arbiters of federal aid; they were founded years before the government, eager to help World War II veterans, decided to grant aid only for studies at accredited schools. Shedding that burden would restore the integrity of the accreditors' debates about standards.

In its pursuit of diversity, Middle States not only overstepped a member-driven consensus by using the club of federal aid, but by doing so it politicized a peer-evaluation process that academics have tried to safeguard from outside influence ever since McCarthyism pushed its own political nightmares upon universities. For the moment, and in a reversal fraught with ironies, it may be Alexander and the government who are academic freedom's best hope.