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Babson dean provides rebuttal on 'lazy American students'



"That is not the way Babson operates," Babson College dean Dennis Hanno (inset) wrote of Kara Miller's op-ed piece

By Jason Woods and Matt Rocheleau
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Babson College's undergraduate dean is taking issue with a recent assertion by one of the Wellesley school's adjunct professors that American students often lack the work ethic of their international peers.

The op-ed column by Kara Miller titled "My lazy American students," published Dec. 21 in The Boston Globe, has been met with controversy and criticism, and prompted Babson administrator Dennis Hanno to pen a response on his college website blog, "Dean's Digest," two days later.

In his blog, Hanno noted that the piece by Miller was her opinion, based on "her limited and brief experience" teaching at Babson, and did not represent the college's official viewpoint.

Hanno, who could not be reached this week to comment on his blog, also wrote it is "apparent that she makes . . . broad generalizations about individual students on the basis of membership in a certain group or category. That is not the way Babson operates."

While giving Miller credit for "creating a spirited dialogue about the need to stay away from developing stereotypes and lumping people in categories," Hanno wrote, "For my part, having worked in higher education for over twenty years, it would be easy for me to produce anecdote after anecdote - and real data derived from the performance of students at Babson and elsewhere - that would illustrate the folly of ascribing the term 'lazy' to any one category of students."

He also wrote that "it may be an unintended positive consequence" of the piece, but "Miller has clearly struck a nerve and helped us to engage in an important dialogue."

Her column quickly became one of the most e-mailed stories on the newspaper's website, www.boston.com. In a follow-up column, and in an interview, Miller sought to temper her comments, pointing out that she did not intend to describe all Babson students as lazy.

"Some people at Babson thought it was a comment on Babson, and it wasn't at all," said Miller in a phone interview last Thursday. "It's not about any one place in particular."

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Miller, 31, taught history and rhetoric this fall and is scheduled to teach a media class in the spring semester.

It's important for students "to know I think everyone is an individual," she said, and that she does not judge them based on whether they are American or international students. "All I was trying to say is that we can all do a little better."

Miller said her column probably plugged into two emotions to triggered such a tremendous response: It hit home for Americans who are generally concerned about their country's place in the world, and it struck a nerve for those who feel it's wrong, or unpatriotic, to criticize American students.

"I think when you care about your country, you want it to be better than it is and as good as it can be," Miller said. "I love what I'm doing, and it's because I love what I'm doing that I want to improve it."

And although she criticized American students' work ethic, she said students from the United States tend to be more creative.

"I think in American education, and probably at home, we don't ask students to work particularly as hard as other countries do. . . In order to be competitive we have to adopt that work ethic a little bit more," she said. "We want our creativity to be combined with their work ethic."

However, she said, "It's hard to balance those things."

Jason Woods can be reached at jwoods@globe.com. ■

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