

Academic Freedom: The Latest Challenge

Adapted from "On Academic Freedom," remarks made by AAUP Associate Secretary, Marcus Harvey, at Irvine Valley College, November 13, 2003.

Academic Freedom and Political "Balance"

More pernicious than direct attempts to curb faculty speech is a subtler initiative intended to transform the meaning of academic freedom, itself. Once denoting the faculty's authority to determine the content and methods of their professional work, "academic freedom" is in the process of being re-invented to connote the "right" of students to be taught by a politically "balanced" faculty.

The AAUP has long recognized that academic freedom has "two applications. . . the freedom of the teacher and . . . that of the student, *Lehrfreiheit* and *Lernfreiheit*."

However, *Lernfreiheit* does not imply a right to any particular content, but rather the right of the student to freely express his/her interpretation of that content. Some have suggested that grades amount to a coercive mechanism, a tool to compel ideological conformity. This view is facile. Grades are a measure of the student's mastery of the materials presented, not a litmus test for belief. It is, for example, perfectly appropriate for a biology instructor to insist that students demonstrate a mastery of the theory of evolution, but inappropriate—and, in fact, quite impossible—for that same instructor to insist that they "believe" in this theory.

Spurred by the efforts of David Horowitz, there is a movement afoot to conflate the ideological predisposition of faculty members with the substance of their students educational experience. It is a movement that has built momentum in several states, as well as in Washington, DC. Based on thin and

selective data, Horowitz has announced a clear and present "liberal" bias amongst faculty in the humanities and social sciences. This bias, he suggests, is a result of "blacklisting" and the deliberate exclusion of conservatives from academic departments.

Although not advocating any specific measures for redressing this perceived imbalance, Horowitz's highly public findings call into question, if not disrepute, the mechanism of peer review. Moreover, his campaign for an "Academic Bills of Rights" aims at the further erosion of faculty authority and increased legislative intrusion into university affairs.

The core problem with Horowitz's study is not simply—as some have already demonstrated¹—the paucity or selectivity of its data, but rather the equation of the terms "right" and "left," "conservative" and "liberal," with the two-party politics of the American state. Additionally, Horowitz fails to draw the obvious conclusion from his data. Where strong unanimity of opinion exists on particular issues amongst social science and humanities faculties—that is, amongst those members of our society who have dedicated their lives to the study of human interactions and behavior—such unanimity might be evidence of

AAUP Responds to the "Academic Bill of Rights"

Committee A on Academic Freedom and Tenure has issued a new statement on the "Academic Bill of Rights." This statement is available online at <www.aaup.org> or by request from the AAUP's West Coast office (800-431-3348).

valid bias. Put another way, the conclusions reached by a majority of specialists may reflect their knowledge and understanding, rather than an ideological predisposition.

Scholarship requires an open mind, but this does not mean that faculty members are unprofessional if they reach definite conclusions. It means rather that faculty must always stand ready to revise their conclusions in light of new evidence or further discussion. Scholarship also requires the exercise of disinterested reason, but this does not mean that faculty are unprofessional if they are urgently committed to a definite point of view. It means rather that faculty must form their point of view by applying professional standards of inquiry rather than succumbing to external and illegitimate incentives such as monetary gain or political coercion.

From Robert Post, "Academic Freedom and the Intifada Curriculum," *Academe* (May-June 2003), 19.

Regardless of its specific deficiencies, Horowitz's argument fits nicely with the modern tendency to view the world in terms of binary opposites and to mistake the juxtaposition of competing views for substantive debate. Whether a show on NPR or on network TV, intellectual discourse is presented as if every argument has two sides and each side is equally valid. The reality, of course, is that any complex issue is susceptible to multiple analyses, and so calls for faculty members to teach "both sides of the story," or to "give equal time to the other side," are quite literally meaningless.

Academic freedom—as Robert Post explained in a recent issue of *Academe*--entails no obligation on the part of individual faculty members to avoid taking stances on controversial matters.

¹ For a critique of Horowitz's findings, see: Howard Fienberg, "Looking for Liberals in the Ivy League," *Common Dreams* (March 7, 2002), <www.commondreams.org/views02/0307-10.htm>; Scott Smallwood, "Survey of Ivy League Professors Finds Few Conservatives," *Chronicle of Higher Education* (February 1, 2002), p. A10.