

Faculty senate approves position statement on academic rights

By Rebecca Laurie

The University of Denver faculty released a position statement in February reiterating its commitment to academic freedom. Passed by the faculty senate, the one-page "Position Statement on Academic Values, Rights and Responsibilities" summarizes the faculty's dedication to "independent thought, critical and creative inquiry, ethical behavior, and an education that serves the public good." (See www.du.edu/facsen for the full document.)

Issues about academic values, rights and responsibilities are entangled in a national debate between faculty and conservative students. The students argue that many liberal college and university faculty members are pushing personal political agendas in the classroom and are insensitive to intellectual diversity.

"The statement is not in response to the

debate, but it is closely related to the issue of academic freedom," notes DU faculty senate President Leon Giles, a finance professor. "It was developed through the senate's academic planning committee because it clearly is an issue that deals with the heart of the education process of the faculty, including hiring, promotion and tenure."

The national debate is led by Students for Academic Freedom (SAF), a coalition organized by David Horowitz, founder of the Center for the Study of Popular Culture. Established last year, the coalition now has 123 chapters. (DU hosts one of the seven Colorado chapters.)

The controversy erupted last fall after Horowitz's center released a study—based on 150 arts and humanities departments at 32 American colleges—reporting that Democratic faculty outnumber Republican faculty 10 to 1. Some conservative students

assert that the liberal foothold in academia has translated into partisan lectures, reading lists, exam questions and even grading practices.

The study itself is controversial because it excluded business schools and other academic programs where Republican faculty members are abundant.

Although conservatives and liberals disagree about some aspects of what constitutes academic freedom, the thorny issue is how to protect that freedom for both faculty and students. The SAF contends that academic freedom violations are happening too often in classrooms. That is why the group has endorsed an Academic Bill of Rights written by Horowitz and supports legislative initiatives that some believe would better protect academic rights (see www.studentsforacademicfreedom.org for the full document).

Faculty members counter that grievance procedures are already in place for students who feel their academic rights were violated, and that university classrooms must have autonomy from lawmakers.

Colorado became an epicenter for the debate in September when state legislators developed a bill for public higher education institutions based on concepts from the Academic Bill of Rights. Endorsed by the SAF and the Colorado Student Association, the bipartisan bill was heard—and passed—by the Colorado House Education Committee in February.

On March 18, the Colorado bill was shelved. Instead, lawmakers and four Colorado public institutions developed a memorandum of understanding. As part of the agreement, the institutions will revise their grievance procedures to include political diversity, and students will be better informed about how to file a grievance. Universities also will initiate dialogues that address political diversity. The memorandum of understanding does not apply to DU.

Second-year DU law student Ryan

Call, SAF's state and legislative coordinator, helped bring Horowitz to the University last fall to speak about the Academic Bill of Rights. He has reservations about portions of the DU faculty statement, but says that overall the statement demonstrates a positive effort by faculty to reiterate their commitment to the principles of academic freedom. According to Call, if all universities approached the issue in ways similar to DU and those involved with the memorandum, the need for legislative involvement would be moot.

But, he adds, until every university implements protections for students who are discriminated against by professors, the SAF will continue to push for legislation. "The unfortunate reality is that many institutions have been unwilling to acknowledge the abuses of academic freedom that routinely occur on their campuses and in their classrooms," he notes.

Not all students believe that legislation is the right way to protect academic freedom. "Enforcement of the values espoused in the Academic Bill of Rights and the DU statement should be addressed and implemented by students, faculty, administration and alumni—not legislators," says Jens Tobiasson, a second-year law student and president of the DU student chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union.

According to DU faculty senate academic planning committee member Dean Saitta, diversity of intellectual thought reaches beyond political beliefs and the language circulating in the national debate. "The faculty senate document is not simply a statement of where we stand on academic rights and responsibilities," says Saitta, an associate professor of anthropology. "It is an invitation to students to join us in a more sophisticated exploration of knowledge, truth, diversity and objectivity within contemporary intellectual life, as well as a more sophisticated discussion of the University's role in society."