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Conservative collegians tell legislators of bias on campus

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Conservative college students from around the state told legislators Thursday they have been discriminated against and ostracized from their campus communities because of their political beliefs.

The students said they have been made to feel uncomfortable in classrooms, have had trouble bringing conservative speakers to campus, and have even had work downgraded because, an instructor said, it showed a political bias.

State Senate President John Andrews, R-Centennial, organized the informal bipartisan committee at the state Capitol to listen to the concerns. He has led an investigation into whether the state's 29 colleges and universities have policies that protect diversity of thought.

Kelly Maher, a student co-president at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs, said the presentation she did on higher education was marked down 10 points because her instructor said it was biased.

Maher said her instructor was concerned that when she listed the contact information for El Paso County elected officials, she didn't include any Democrats. After Maher took the matter to a dean, the grade was changed and her instructor was reprimanded, she said.

'As a Republican and a Christian, and dang proud of it, I have been discriminated against in the classroom,' Maher told the panel.

The hearing was the latest development in Andrews' plan to encourage or require state schools to hire more conservative faculty. After the hearing, Andrews said it's not clear whether he will propose legislation to solve the problem.

Last month, Andrews announced he had asked the state's college presidents to explain the policies each institution has to ensure no student is subject to discrimination 'on account of his or her political or religious beliefs.'

Andrews said he has received the policies and was encouraged by them. The hearing, he said, was to see if the

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policies are working.

George Culpepper, a junior at Metropolitan State College of Denver, said he was disturbed after the adviser to the Political Science Association, Oneida Meranto, accused the Auraria College Republicans of working to get her dismissed.

According to Culpepper, Meranto said, 'Republicans need to withdraw from the Political Science Association.' This disturbed the student because the association is nonpartisan, he said.

Meranto also was Culpepper's professor. She sent him an e-mail calling him unfair and unethical, Culpepper said. He said he felt threatened by her and withdrew from her class.

Meranto said in an interview later that Culpepper misquoted her. She said she expressed concerns about the alliance the Republicans had formed with the Independence Institute, a conservative think tank, which she said was trying to get liberal professors fired.

Meranto said she had been the target of a similar campaign in 1995 when fliers with her picture on them were passed out calling her a racist and a sexist.

She said Culpepper dropped her class because he hadn't done enough of the work and knew he couldn't pass. Meranto also said she did call him unethical and unfair after he said in the school paper that the Republicans started a petition to save the basketball team. The Political Science Association and another group had done that work.

Many of the 20 or so students who testified Thursday said that, for the most part, professors don't push their political points of view. Most also said their political views didn't affect their grades.

Maher, the CU-Colorado Springs student, said that overall she thinks the school's faculty is well rounded and represents both ends of the political spectrum.

Not everyone was pleased with the hearing. Rep. Alice Madden, D-Boulder, said committees usually start with a neutral presentation of facts and include all interested parties, not just the aggrieved.

'Committees hear from a wide variety of people,' Madden said. 'It's really impossible to make a decision when there's not a fair and balanced approach.'

Metro State student Joel Tagert called the hearing an "ideological crusade." He said the legislature's time would be better spent figuring out how to better fund higher education, which has faced massive budget cuts.

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GRAPHIC: PHOTO: The Denver Post/Cyrus McCrimmon Tamara Louden Neo, left, and Stephen Polk listen to fellow

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CU-Denver student Gabriel Schwartz describe a 'gross bias' in how faculty treat conservative students. Schwartz was among 20 students from around the state who testified before a bipartisan committee at the Capitol. PHOTO: Andrews: State Senate president wants to encourage or require state colleges to hire more conservative faculty.

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