

Commentary on the Hearing on Academic Freedom
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I attended the December 18 public hearing on Academic Freedom in Colorado's state-supported colleges and universities. I would like to take Senator Andrews up on his invitation, made at the close of the hearing, to submit additional written commentary on the issues. While I don't have insight into particular violations of academic freedom at public institutions, it might be useful for the committee to have a private school professor's perspective on the testimony that was offered at the hearing and the Academic Bill of Rights debate generally.

I'll organize my comments as numbered points. They are pitched as pieces of friendly advice that, I think, are relevant to *both* sides of the debate.

1. Defining "intellectual diversity" as political party affiliation, or implicitly agreeing to such a definition, is misguided and draws attention away from what we should be trying to accomplish as educators. Although Horowitz initially used party affiliation as a tactical strategy to call attention to what he sees as a problem on campus (see his essay "Postmodern Treacheries" at www.townhall.com), he reinforces this problematic definition with his widely-broadcast and oft-repeated slogan that "you can't get a good education if they're only telling you half the story". This slogan headlines the home page of the Students for Academic Freedom (<http://studentsforacademicfreedom.org/>). Most of the written testimonies of the students manifest the same belief. The great irony here, of course, is that if Academic Bill of Rights proponents *really* want to de-politicize college curricula, such sloganeering is not the way to achieve it. Dualistic thinking about education does not benefit our students, nor our society. Simple-minded, dualistic thinking about *anything* in life is something that serious educators try to struggle against. Indeed, it is clear from research on human cognitive development that truly critical thinking advances only with movement *away* from dualism.

A more relevant definition of intellectual diversity starts with *disciplinary* knowledge. For example, in anthropology intellectual diversity is measured by faculty having different theories of culture and cultural change, different methods of cultural analysis, different approaches to representing cultures in narratives and museum exhibits, etc. This is the more important, substantive intellectual diversity that we should be worrying about, and to which students should be exposed. It is perfectly possible for a faculty that is *exclusively* "liberal" (as measured by party affiliation) to present such diversity. Our

small department at DU (not exclusively liberal, although this is a guess because I don't have a clue how my colleagues are registered) has had knock-down, drag-out battles over hiring decisions based solely on what different candidates bring to the table in terms of their disciplinary perspectives, aims, ability to mentor students along diverse career paths and, of course, quality in teaching and scholarship. The same goes for our internal battles over curriculum: we have intense struggles over what our students need to know in order to prepare them for the job market, graduate school, and citizenship. Personal political beliefs are irrelevant in these deliberations.

2. Contrary to what was expressed at the hearing, “partisanship” or “bias” in teaching is not a bad thing. Rather, what’s bad is to be unaware of bias, purposely conceal it, or fail to contextualize it against competing alternatives. I understand the latter to be the rub for many of the December 18 testifiers. The last 100 years of cumulative philosophical and pedagogical wisdom has amply demonstrated that *all* scholarship and teaching is biased or “interested”, and that “objectivity” in the classroom is in fact best-served by the self-conscious admission of bias. Thus, to maintain a distinction between biased and unbiased practice is to reinforce another discredited dualism in intellectual life, and to uphold a quaint notion of the university as ivory tower. Partisanship is not a *betrayal* of professional obligation, but rather a *fulfillment* of it. Of course, this obligation is best met when students possess the critical thinking skills they need to move from dualism to other, more complex ways of thinking, and when professors respect student abilities to contextualize, critique, and compare different contributions to knowledge. At DU, partisanship in teaching and research is understood by many of us to be *required* if we are going to prepare our students to serve the public good—a key aspect of our institutional mission. Many other educators across the political spectrum have argued that you can’t fulfill the Jeffersonian ideal of teaching for citizenship without embracing political partisanship in your teaching. This is how we model, and inspire, civic engagement by students. Some professors do it better than others.
3. We need to settle on a reasonable “image” of the students we teach. Are students immature, impressionable pawns easily subject to the predations of propagandizing profs? Or, are they sufficiently savvy and well-versed in disciplinary knowledge to know what they’re getting (or missing) in course syllabi and reading lists? The CSU student speakers emphasized the immaturity and indoctrinability of peers on that campus. Other champions of the Academic Bill of Rights seem to want it both ways: they worry about the indoctrination of young minds, yet they have every confidence that those same minds will be able to accurately identify prejudiced professors from course materials, office door cartoons, and other evidence (a Students for Academic Freedom handbook chillingly details how they can accomplish the requisite detective work). It’s my experience that students at *every* level don’t always know enough about disciplinary knowledge and educational practice to really evaluate what’s missing from course syllabi and reading lists (and here I’m talking about *serious* scholarship, not the ravings of Michael Moore, Ann Coulter, and other dubious contributors to popular discourse), to fully understand the pedagogical motives of their professors, or to really tell what “value they are getting for their dollar” (see Kelly Weist’s “student as consumer” testimony). Weist’s “student as consumer” idea, if endorsed by the legislature, will surely spell the

end of teaching for critical thinking in the university. That said, *my* money is *still* on students being smarter and less vulnerable than most Bill of Rights advocates allow. I think that today's students are perfectly capable of handling the classroom partisanship that, more often than not, comes at them in philosophically and pedagogically appropriate forms.

4. We should be wary of the existing data on “liberal bias” in the academy that was alluded to in some December 18 testimony (e.g., findings that faculty at CU-Boulder are 94% Democrat, and 98% Democrat here at DU). There are problems with data selectivity and comparability in the survey (conducted by Horowitz’s Center for the Study of Popular Culture) that produced these findings and that was subsequently reported in the September 2002 issue of *The American Enterprise*. Other surveys—such as that published in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* on August 29, 2003—give a slightly different, arguably more balanced picture of the political orientation of college professors. But even granting a decidedly liberal tilt as measured by party registration, there could be any number of reasons as to why this is so beyond conscious or even unconscious “rigging” (to use Senator Andrews’ term in his “Lifespan of a Lie” article at www.coloradosenate.com) by faculties. Many have speculated that this leftward tilt is the product of conservative thinkers taking advantage of other opportunities in society. There could be some truth to that. But critical thinking also suggests that faculty who happen to be registered as Democrats might actually be better scholars and teachers *as judged by the standards of academic disciplinary communities*. Certainly, it’s my experience that universities want academic “stars” on their faculty more than they want fellow party registrants. I’m convinced that many departments would hire Adolf Hitler if he was well-published in peer-reviewed journals, because this boosts academic reputation, academic reputation in turn elevates an institution’s standing in *US News and World Report* college rankings, and the USN&WP ranking is often what gets a parent’s attention...and a college its tuition revenue. Finally, critical thinking suggests that any number of *other* external factors can shape the characteristics of faculties, such as budgetary imperatives to downsize and belt-tighten. Many departments nationwide are redefining and streamlining themselves in ways that try to capitalize on specific existing strengths so as to better distinguish themselves in incredibly competitive environments. And decisions to narrow rather than broaden the disciplinary focus can influence many other variables, including the distribution of faculty party affiliations. So, while it might be “laughable” to deny that university faculties are overwhelmingly liberal (*Denver Post* editorial, September 13), it’s equally laughable to claim that this matters in any substantive way to how a department operates in the transmission of disciplinary knowledge and the training of students.
5. We should treat the anecdotes about bad classroom behavior by liberal professors with caution. While disturbing on the surface, even some of the most dramatic examples don’t provide sufficient *contextual* information about course philosophy, goals, and pedagogy that would help a third party determine whether academic freedom is being abused. For example, the testimony from Danielle Robinson (also abstracted in her and George Culpepper’s *Rocky Mountain News* op-ed piece on December 13) fails to explain *why and how* Michael Moore’s work was being used in her philosophy class at Metro State.

This information is crucial in order to determine the likelihood of professor bias and/or abuse. Another example is Erin Bergstrom's challenging of the appropriateness of Professor Dickinson's "postmodern" approach in his rhetoric class at CSU on grounds that it was emotionally-harmful. There are plenty of respectable educators who believe that a liberal arts education should *strive* to make students uncomfortable, and the examples such as those used by Professor Dickinson accomplish that. Many other educators believe that postmodernism has been a good thing for college campuses for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is that it teaches a relativist (in the philosophical, not moral or judgmental, sense) appreciation of difference—and that's a damn sight better than dualism's tendency to demonize one or the other side in a debate. Indeed, researchers in cognitive development suggest that it should be a *goal* of education to move students from dualism to relativism as a logical process in their intellectual development, as this paves the way for the more complex, reflective, and nuanced understandings of reality that, eventually, produce *truth*—and isn't truth what we are after?

6. I think that it would be useful for our legislators to evaluate the Colorado situation in a wider national context. On October 29, 2003 a US Senate education committee held hearings in Washington on the topic of intellectual diversity on America's college campuses. The testimony is available at http://www.labor.senate.gov/bills/031_bill.html. To me, these documents point out some of the same problems that I've tried to identify in the Colorado hearings, including un-contextualized charges of professor bias and simple, dualistic views of intellectual life (e.g., see the testifying University of Virginia student's recommendation that the university be *either* a vehicle for social change *or* an impartial guardian of liberal arts, when it surely must accept its responsibility to find a way of integrating *both*). The hearings also produced the interesting juxtaposition of a Brooklyn College professor's testimony about anti-conservative bias in his tenure case at that school, with that of a fellow testifier from the American Council of Trustees and Alumni whose organization is on record as extolling the Brooklyn College Core Curriculum as an exemplary program sensitive to conservative educational goals! To me, this points out the complexity of personnel and curriculum issues on college campuses, and suggests that we should let universities work things out for themselves. But this isn't stopping some lawmakers on Capitol Hill (see <http://www.hillnews.com/news/102203/kingston.aspx>)

Another useful touchstone for evaluating the nature and depth of the problem on a national scale is the student postings on the Students for Academic Freedom Bulletin Board (at <http://studentsforacademicfreedom.org/>). My reading of these entries suggests that, at least on this singularly important website, the evidence for liberal bias on campus and the level of national student concern about it is not very compelling. As of my last visit there were 448 postings by 33 people, but mostly the same 4-5 individuals. The entries tend to be rambling, unfocused, and scattershot, characterized by "drive-by debates" in the best tradition of Hannity and Colmes rather than serious engagements informed by disciplinary knowledge. And the latter is surely what we need to cultivate in college classrooms.

In conclusion, my overall impression of the September 18 testimony converges with that of Representative Paccione. What I heard was that Colorado institutions employ an excellent faculty committed to good teaching, with perhaps “a few bad apples” guilty of using some terrible judgment in the classroom. Some speakers clearly had axes to grind, for what I suspect are complex sets of personal as well as political reasons. I don’t think Colorado (or the nation) has any more classroom horror stories than we might expect given thousands of institutions and millions of students, and I certainly don’t see a pattern of systematic abuse. It’s clear that some if not many of the problems students had in getting attention to their complaints was related not to willful liberal prejudice but rather to an unresponsive academic bureaucracy. And the culture of academic bureaucracy is sometimes enough to turn Mother Theresa into a cold-hearted obstructionist.

As a final note, I would like to object to the Campus Accountability Project’s circulation of a document at the hearing containing the names of professors (like Professor Dickinson) accused of bias (and worse) in the classroom. This is especially unconscionable given that, as I mentioned above, no context was provided in student testimony that would allow for independent evaluation of the professor’s behavior against statements of course philosophy, goals, and pedagogy. Accusations of McCarthyism have been flying from both sides in the academic freedom debate, nearly all of them misguided. But if ever McCarthyism was evident in this debate, the CAP’s behavior is a prime example.

Many thanks for your consideration. Respectfully submitted,

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