Patrolling Professors' Politics

Conservative activists and students press campaigns against perceived bias on campuses

By SARA HEBEL

Gerald Wilson, a history professor at Duke University, says a student's question on the first day of class last semester caught him off guard: "Do you have any prejudices?"

Unsure what the young man meant, Mr. Wilson decided to reply with a joke. "Yeah, Republicans," he recalls saying. (He found out later that the student was asking about writing styles.)

"Everybody laughed," the professor says.

Well, not quite everybody.

Matt Bettis, a senior in the class, thought the comment among others was inappropriate and sent an e-mail message to Mr. Wilson telling him so. The professor apologized to Mr. Bettis, who had dropped the course, "American Dreams/American Realities."

"I was absolutely dumbfounded," Mr. Bettis later wrote about Mr. Wilson's comments in a letter to Students for Academic Freedom, a national group that is collecting stories about political bias on campuses. "What worried me was the excited and proud manner in which he stated it, thus implying that his politics would be a large part of the classroom experience."

While Mr. Wilson calls the incident "regrettable," he says his remark reflected his tendency to use humor to engage students. "Everybody knows I'm very political," he says. "But, dear God, I make jokes about Democrats as well as Republicans. This is a course where we're going to talk about different viewpoints."

To some college students -- and legislators -- who hold conservative views, however, comments like Mr. Wilson's raise a red flag. Professors who unnecessarily interject their political views into the classroom contribute to conservative students' feelings of isolation on campuses that often seem to be dominated by faculty members with liberal views, these critics say. Several students who say they have Republican leanings argue that their grades have suffered or that their participation in classroom discussions has been stifled by liberal professors.
"Our institutions of higher education have become institutions of indoctrination," declares Stephen Miller, a freshman at Duke. "That's a frightening trend."

Now conservative activists are fighting back. David Horowitz, president of the California-based Center for the Study of Popular Culture, is leading a national campaign to change campus climates. The centerpiece of his efforts is an "Academic Bill of Rights," which he is urging Congress and state legislatures to adopt. It enumerates several principles that colleges should follow, among which is that they should foster a variety of political and religious beliefs in such areas as making tenure decisions, developing reading lists for courses, and selecting campus speakers.

Republican members of the U.S. House of Representatives have introduced as legislation a version of the proposal. In Colorado, a visit paid by Mr. Horowitz to state officials led the president of the State Senate, a Republican, to ask the heads of the state's 29 public institutions to specify their processes for handling complaints about bias and the steps they are taking to promote "intellectual diversity" in classes and faculty recruiting. Now Colorado's Republican lawmakers are pushing for legislation that would force college governing boards to develop and publicize processes for resolving students' complaints about bias.

Mr. Horowitz says he believes that his proposal, or similar ones, could be introduced in as many as a half-dozen more state legislatures, which he declines to identify, as well as in the U.S. Senate, by this spring. He is also urging campus administrators and student-government leaders to adopt policies that would spell out students' rights to academic freedom.

"The university should not be a political place," says Mr. Horowitz. "It's a place where there ought to be reasoned discourse." He has conducted studies finding that at 32 universities he deemed "elite," Democratic professors and administrators outnumbered Republican colleagues by a ratio of more than 10 to 1.

He says he took a lot of time crafting his bill of rights so that it would protect faculty members and students who hold views across the political spectrum. Practically, though, most of the students and politicians who are backing such legislation are Republicans who complain of liberal bias on campuses.

As viewpoint-neutral as Mr. Horowitz's proposal may be, some argue that the principles it lays out are likely to give other conservative activists and lawmakers ammunition to push more-controversial plans in the name of intellectual diversity. For instance, Stanley Fish, dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Illinois at Chicago, argues in this week's Chronicle Review that lawmakers may try to use the goal of ideological balance as a rationale for requiring institutions to hire additional conservative scholars or to monitor students' assigned reading to make sure it is sufficiently "pro-American."
"It is obvious that for Horowitz these are debating points designed to hoist the left by its own petard," writes Mr. Fish, "but the trouble with debating points is that they can't be kept in bounds."

A Matter of Balance

Many university administrators, faculty members, and state lawmakers believe that Mr. Horowitz's plan, or similar proposals, would invite too much meddling by lawmakers in academic matters. Some insist that such legislative efforts might actually hinder debate on campuses and restrict professors' ability to appropriately balance classroom discussions of significant scholarly ideas.

The American Association of University Professors issued a statement saying that Mr. Horowitz's proposal would encourage state and campus officials to exert oversight on faculty members on academic matters rather than trust their professional judgment. The group took specific exception to language in the proposal that would encourage institutions to make faculty employment decisions "with a view toward fostering a plurality of methodologies and perspectives."

"The danger of such guidelines is that they invite diversity to be measured by political standards that diverge from the academic criteria of the scholarly profession," the statement reads. For example, it said, a political-theory department might be required to hire a professor espousing Nazi philosophy if a college were forced to provide a real "plurality of methodologies and perspectives" in its academic courses.

Mr. Horowitz argues that the group has misread his proposal, and that it clearly states that professors' independence should be protected. He says he wants to promote "intellectual diversity," not "political pluralism."

"Political balance implies political interference (to correct any imbalance)," he wrote to the AAUP. "By contrast, intellectual diversity calls for intellectual standards to replace the existing political ones."

Political bias, rather than academic standards, has driven too many decisions by professors and other people on campuses, he says, citing a course in "Modern Industrial Societies" that he sat in on at Bates College a few years ago. The sole text, he says, was a 500-page document, put together by editors of the New Left Review, that included only Marxist views.

In a letter to the editor of the Web site Salon, which ran an article about Mr. Horowitz's visit to Bates, the professor, Kiran Asher, replied that the text that Mr. Horowitz complained about included "serious engagement of such conservative icons" as Francis Fukuyama. Ms. Asher, who is no longer at Bates, added that she also required her students to read The Economist, which she called "not exactly a bastion of leftist doctrine."
Colorado at Center Stage

Across the country, college students who hold conservative views are coming forward with dozens of reports of incidents in which they assert that professors treated them differently than their more-liberal peers. On Web sites that collect such anecdotes and in other forums, the students tell stories of faculty members who made demeaning jokes about Republicans and spent class time urging students to protest the war in Iraq. Some of the students expressed the belief that their conservative opinions, no matter how well argued, have resulted in low grades. Others describe reading lists that include controversial material that is unrelated to the subject matter.

Much of the debate in the past several months has centered in Colorado. State Sen. John Andrews, president of the chamber, who surveyed the state's public colleges about their policies, says he has long been concerned about bias against conservative students and faculty members. After reviewing the colleges' policies on academic freedom, he concluded that they are well established but that the procedures for filing complaints are "more ragged" and not well known to students.

Following up, State Rep. Shawn Mitchell, a Republican, introduced legislation last month that would require the governing boards of public colleges in Colorado to create and make known a process for students to challenge any discrimination they experience because of their political beliefs.

The proposal also would amend Colorado's existing "bill of rights" for students by spelling out the protections against political discrimination that students should be guaranteed. The legislation requires, among other things, that students' grades be unaffected by their political or religious views, that professors refrain from introducing controversial topics unrelated to their courses, and that student fees be distributed among campus groups only on a viewpoint-neutral basis.

"This isn't about stifling political debate," Mr. Mitchell says. "It's about allowing political debate and trying to create a fair environment for everyone."

Some members of Colorado's legislature, however, say legislation to reaffirm the political rights of students isn't high on their agendas.

"There are some huge challenges facing Colorado's higher-education system; this isn't one of them," says State Rep. Andrew Romanoff, a Democrat who is minority leader in the House of Representatives. "I haven't heard from any of my constituents who have identified the liberal-college conspiracy as a problem worth our time."

Instead, he says, his colleagues should focus on improving high-school graduation rates and college participation among Colorado residents, and providing more money for financial aid.

Robert Nero, spokesman for the University of Colorado System, argues that the
legislation is unnecessary because the institution has adequate policies to protect students, and that it would be "demoralizing to the faculty."

Administrators also believe it would be harder to draw top scholars to Colorado if the legislation passed, he says, because it would appear that lawmakers were "micromanaging" university affairs.

Mr. Horowitz acknowledges that involving lawmakers was not his first choice as a tactic for raising the issue of bias on campuses. But he decided to take that approach, he says, after public-university officials in various states failed to adopt stronger policy statements about the issue.

"I at least wanted to open the discussion," he says, arguing that his proposed legislation would make a difference in protecting students. "You can tell," he says, "by the resistance."

**Campaigns on Campuses**

As Mr. Horowitz works to drum up support, students on some campuses are taking their own actions. Student-government leaders at Occidental College, Utah State University, and Wichita State University have adopted a "Student Bill of Rights" modeled after Mr. Horowitz's.

At the University of Colorado at Boulder, the College Republicans last month placed a form on their Web site for students to report experiences of bias based on political beliefs. The group says it wants to use the stories to help demonstrate the extent of the discrimination they see on the campus as they talk with state lawmakers and university administrators.

One Boulder student who has filed a complaint through the Web site is Meaghan McCarty, a junior. In her "Social Problems" class, she says, the professor would often speak over her and try to discredit her arguments during class discussions of issues like poverty. When she raised her concerns with the professor after class, Ms. McCarty says, he told her that no one agreed with her, and that she should consider taking a course with a more conservative professor. Ms. McCarty's professor could not be reached for comment.

"I'm not here for my views to be popular," Ms. McCarty says. But "it goes too far when a professor starts to stifle students' own thoughts. There should be less of their own opinion and more facts from both perspectives."

While many professors agree that courses should include healthy debates, some worry that legislation aimed at protecting students from political bias would place too much emphasis on simply balancing facts in course material.

"Learning is simply more than facts," says Mr. Wilson, the Duke professor. "What we
need is intelligent discourse on these kinds of things. To do that, we should have flexibility and freedom."

But students who support Mr. Horowitz's campaign argue that his bill of rights seeks to foster just the kind of wide-ranging discourse that Mr. Wilson seeks, by protecting the expression of more viewpoints.

"When students like myself feel alienated, that drastically compromises the educational environment," says Mr. Miller, the Duke freshman. "We need a completely, utterly, entirely unbiased pursuit of knowledge."

As part of a national effort to protect students with unpopular political views from discrimination on campuses, the group Students for Academic Freedom is collecting anecdotes from students who believe they have been treated unfairly. The group's Web site (http://www.studentsforacademicfreedom.org) contains an "Academic Freedom Complaint Form." It lists several ways in which, the group believes, students' academic freedom can be violated, including:

- Requiring readings or texts that cover only one side of an issue.
- Gratuitously singling out political or religious beliefs for ridicule.
- Introducing controversial material that is unrelated to the subject.
- Forcing students to express a certain point of view in assignments.
- Mocking national political or religious figures.
- Conducting political activities in class (e.g., recruiting for demonstrations).
- Allowing students' political or religious beliefs to influence grading.
- Using university funds to hold one-sided, partisan teach-ins or conferences.

EXCERPTS FROM 'ACADEMIC BILL OF RIGHTS'

Following are excerpts from the "principles and procedures" that the Academic Bill of Rights says universities should follow. The full text of the proposed code is available online at http://www.studentsforacademicfreedom.org

- All faculty shall be hired, fired, promoted and granted tenure on the basis of their competence and appropriate knowledge in the field of their expertise and, in the humanities, the social sciences, and the arts, with a view toward fostering a plurality of methodologies and perspectives. No faculty shall be hired or fired or denied promotion or tenure on the basis of his or her political or religious beliefs.
- No faculty member will be excluded from tenure, search and hiring committees on the basis of their political or religious beliefs.
• Students will be graded solely on the basis of their reasoned answers and appropriate knowledge of the subjects and disciplines they study, not on the basis of their political or religious beliefs.

• Curricula and reading lists in the humanities and social sciences should reflect the uncertainty and unsettled character of all human knowledge in these areas by providing students with dissenting sources and viewpoints where appropriate. While teachers are and should be free to pursue their own findings and perspectives in presenting their views, they should consider and make their students aware of other viewpoints. Academic disciplines should welcome a diversity of approaches to unsettled questions.

• Exposing students to the spectrum of significant scholarly viewpoints on the subjects examined in their courses is a major responsibility of faculty. Faculty will not use their courses for the purpose of political, ideological, religious or anti-religious indoctrination.

• Selection of speakers, allocation of funds for speakers programs and other student activities will observe the principles of academic freedom and promote intellectual pluralism.

• An environment conducive to the civil exchange of ideas being an essential component of a free university, the obstruction of invited campus speakers, destruction of campus literature or other effort to obstruct this exchange will not be tolerated.

• ... Academic institutions and professional societies formed to advance knowledge within an area of research, maintain the integrity of the research process, and organize the professional lives of related researchers serve as indispensable venues within which scholars circulate research findings and debate their interpretation. To perform these functions adequately, academic institutions and professional societies should maintain a posture of organizational neutrality with respect to the substantive disagreements that divide researchers on questions within, or outside, their fields of inquiry.

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