

Thoughts on Academic Free Speech
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My main concern about the Churchill affair is what it portends for the future of informed, provocative speech in classrooms that are already being monitored by conservative thought police. Before the Churchill story broke faculty members at CU and elsewhere confessed to being careful about what they said lest they come off as too “liberal”. After Churchill the scrutiny has extended beyond individual faculty to entire programs accused of having Blame America First agendas (e.g., Ethnic Studies). The current assault on academic free speech comes not only from the Right but also from the Left. Harvard president Larry Summers’s comments about evolved bio-psychological differences between women and men has sparked an anti-intellectual backlash from liberals (including, no doubt, many in Women’s Studies programs) at least as offensive as the one aimed at Churchill. Both reactions stand to chill discussion of the complex relationships and causal powers that shape human life. And the political center’s response isn’t much better if an op-ed piece in the February 26 *Rocky Mountain News* is any indication. There, we have a call for *all* professors to renew commitments to objectivity and impartiality in the classroom. Such ideals are not only philosophically debatable and ethically questionable, but also potentially inimical to teaching for good citizenship.

All of this suggests that citizens across the political spectrum should pause and reflect on what we know about the nature of human knowledge and the university as a site of learning. I take what I suspect is a fairly common position: our obligation as faculty is to teach a breadth of ideas, critically examine their social causes and consequences, boldly experiment with new ones and, from time-to-time, actively champion particular ideas that can advance what we know and change how we live. If we make some of our stakeholders uncomfortable in the process then we’re probably doing something right. The DU Faculty Senate’s “Position Statement on Academic Values, Rights, and Responsibilities” (online at <http://www.du.edu/facsen/>) establishes an inclusive, progressive view of knowledge and learning. It allows that what Gordon Gekko said about corporate greed in *Wall Street* also goes for classroom partisanship: bias is good; bias works. Sometimes there’s no substitute for a strong, informed polemic as a conversation-furthering tactic...even one that risks being construed as reprehensible, repugnant, or morally depraved. The need for no-holds-barred critical inquiry and debate is greater now than ever before, seeing as how nationalism and fundamentalism—historically some pretty effective conversation-stoppers—are insinuating themselves into American life and thought in increasingly insidious ways.

Keeping the academic climate supportive of speech that provokes, challenges, and advances thought requires vigilance. We should reach a better understanding with our students about the purpose of a university education. We should teach that, in a world where traditional disciplinary boundaries are rapidly disintegrating, *any* bit of knowledge is potentially relevant to the classroom subject at hand. We should remind citizens that professors actually *are* constrained by standards of professional accountability and rules of civil society. And we should aggressively defend the proposition that, all things considered, tenure is still the best guarantor of freedom, innovation, and collective enlightenment.