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Academic diversity lacking, panel told Democrats skip Senate hearing

By Jim Geraghty, States News Service, 10/30/2003

WASHINGTON -- A US Senate committee convened a hearing yesterday on "the lack of intellectual diversity in America's colleges and universities."

But the panel of witnesses who testified about the issue did not appear to reflect much diversity: All four contended that political pressures to conform, restrictive speech codes, and slanted courses were stifling the free exchange of ideas on campuses.

Three Republican senators attended the hearing of the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee, chaired by Senator Judd Gregg of New Hampshire. No Democratic members participated, although the witnesses identified themselves as Democrats.

Gregg said he did not know why Democrats on the panel, led by Senator Edward M. Kennedy of Massachusetts, ignored the hearing and did not invite their own witnesses.

Jim Manley, a spokesman for Kennedy, said: "While the title of the hearing was announced a month ago, we didn't have specifics and were just informed of those in the middle of last week. We just didn't have enough time to line up a Democratic witness."

The witnesses who appeared said that ideological diversity is under assault on campus in several ways, from the subjects studied to the awarding of tenure.

"Rather than being introduced to foundational subjects such as history, natural science, literature, government, and economics, students are permitted to pick and choose from a smorgasbord of academic offerings that are often trendy and tendentious," said Anne D. Neal, president of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni. She pointed to Williams College as an example of a school that has lax history requirements, and offering a course in "Witchcraft, Sorcery, and Magic."

Robert David Johnson, a professor at Brooklyn College in the City University of New York, said he was nearly denied tenure because some of his colleagues contended his research of political, diplomatic, and constitutional history was considered conservative on campus compared with the study of "social history" focusing on race, class, and gender. He said that despite authoring two books on left-wing politicians and wearing a Hillary Rodham Clinton

button in 2000, he was seen on campus as too conservative.

Greg Lukianoff, director of legal and public advocacy at the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, said a campus atmosphere of restrictive speech is not always ideological. "College and university administrators too often view criticisms of their policies as tantamount to sedition," he said.

For instance, Lukianoff said, administrators at Hampton University in Virginia confiscated an entire run of the student newspaper because the editors refused to run a letter from the university's president on the front page.

Anthony Dick, a third-year student at the University of Virginia, said that his school "has strayed from a strict liberal arts education and moved toward a more politicized function."

Neither panelists nor lawmakers were enthusiastic about Congress passing legislation to address the issues raised at the hearing. Gregg said he called the hearing to increase awareness of the problem.

One committee member, Senator Lamar Alexander, Republican of Tennessee, talked about his experiences as a visiting professor at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government.

"One would have to be pretty dull to not find some diversity there," he said. "They made a pretty good effort to attract Republican students and Republican faculty. But there was a sense there that the ones who got the best education were the Republican students, because they get their views challenged constantly."

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