

# Congress looks at campus political correctness

Herbert London ([archive](#))

November 3, 2003 | [Print](#) | [Send](#)

On October 30 the Senate Committee on Education, Labor and Pensions held a hearing on “intellectual diversity” in higher education with the American Council of Trustees and Alumni president Anne Neal as the lead witness.

The Committee heard testimony on the extent to which “political correctness” – the reflexive intolerance of certain social and political views – creates a campus environment incompatible with the free exchange of ideas and diverse viewpoints.

President Neal offered a detailed account of the state of academic freedom on college campuses and outlined the manifold ways dialogue is often stifled, controversial figures disinvited, faculty members with unorthodox views criticized, courses converted into laboratories for ideological conformity and speech codes that limit or restrict open expression.

While I am reluctant to see the government engaged in an examination of practices at universities, it is certainly appropriate that the issue of political correctness is aired. At the moment p.c. has become a contagion on most campuses, at the very least having a chastening effect on debate and at times resulting in tenure denial decisions.

To her credit, Anne Neal identified ways in which alumni and trustees should address the issue. She notes that trustees should adopt a statement that says faculty members are expected to present points of view other than their own in a balanced and respectful manner, recognizing the right of students to make up their own mind on contentious issues.

Furthermore she contends that the focus of courses should be intellectual development and the acquisition of knowledge and skill rather than political activism or ideological conversion.

She also maintains that the campus should be a place where a range of views are considered and that a political litmus test for hiring, promotion and tenure should not be applied.

As I see it, this position is incontrovertible. Professors are in a classroom to teach, not to preach. It is indeed odd that the professoriate has arrogated to itself the role of proselytizer.

In the late sixties an Australian political scientist exemplified



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this attitude when he concluded one of his books with the claim that it is more important “to win” than to teach. By “win” he meant convert the culture through the mobilization of the student population. There are many professors on this side of the Pacific who would agree with that proposition.

Alas, college campuses have been converted into centers of orthodoxy with a totalistic worldview imposed on unwary students often too naïve to identify the propagandistic exercise of overzealous instructors. I find it ironic that while most college administrators will reflexively adopt diversity standards on campus in an effort to have different racial and ethnic groups represented, these same administrators often reject the diversity of ideas, noting that this requirement infringes on academic freedom.

On some campuses a student will not be permitted to register for a course if he disagrees with the professor’s point of view or if he wants to challenge the suppositions that undergird the course content.

I have visited campuses where students were threatened if they did not accept a particular viewpoint and, to my astonishment, the professor supported those leveling the threats.

It is also astonishing to me that while radical feminist views and homosexual views are treated respectfully (as they should be) the same level of respect is rarely accorded Evangelicals or Orthodox Jews or pro-life advocates. In the present environment some views are beyond the pale.

How remarkable it is that universities founded on a belief in the free and open exchange of ideas should come to this stance. Even more remarkable is the extent to which intelligent people can rationalize speech codes as a method consistent with academic freedom. How, I wonder, can stifling expression be compatible with the free exchange of opinion? This is Orwellian logic unmasked.

I’m not persuaded this Senate hearing will have any demonstrable effect on campus practice. Yet I do applaud the effort of Anne Neal and the American Council of Trustees and Alumni. At the very least she and her organization have shed light on an issue that is undermining the very essence of higher education. As many pundits have argued, “Sunlight is the best disinfectant.” Let’s hope this sunlight in the Senate chambers has that effect.

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