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Review & Outlook

A Chill in the Classroom

Most Journal readers over a certain age can remember going all the way through college without politics intruding in the classroom. Until the Vietnam War, for instance, few students knew their professors' views, and even then most politicking took place on parts of the campus where participation was voluntary. That is no longer true -- and, as a new survey commissioned by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) documents, it is making many students uneasy.

The ACTA survey was conducted this fall by the Center for Survey Research & Analysis at the University of Connecticut, among students at 50 top U.S. universities and colleges. It sought to ascertain the perceived levels of classroom politicization and of intellectual intolerance among faculty members. The results were striking.

For instance, nearly half said that their professors "frequently comment on politics in class even though it has nothing to do with the course" or use the classroom to present their personal political views. In answers to other questions, the majority acknowledged that liberal views predominate. Most troubling, however, were the responses to the survey item "On my campus, there are courses in which students feel they have to agree with the professor's political or social views in order to get a good grade" -- 29% agreed.

ACTA's president, Anne Neal, is alarmed. "One case of political intolerance is too many," she says. "But the fact that half the students are reporting [some] abuses is simply unacceptable. If these were reports of sexual harassment in the classroom, they would get people's attention."

A recent informal survey at Yale, where students answered questions about academic freedom posed by the Yale Free Press, the conservative/libertarian student paper, also deserves attention. Although the entire first run of its November issue containing the study was stolen on campus, it can be downloaded at www.yale.edu/yfp. To sum up: While some

Yalies said that politics either didn't arise in class or caused no problem because they shared the professor's views, others recounted unpleasant experiences. One example:

"My teacher came into class the day after the election proclaiming, 'That's it. This is the death of America.' The rest of the class was eager to agree, and twenty minutes of Bush-bashing ensued. At one point, one student asked our teacher whether she should be so vocal, lest any students be conservatives. She then asked us whether any of us were Republicans. Naturally, no one volunteered that information, whereupon our teacher turned to the inquisitive student and said, 'See? No one in here would be stupid enough to vote for Bush.'"

Some students undoubtedly find such banter fun. But for others it can be chilling. And just as teachers' freedom of speech must be protected, so must students' freedom to learn, if it is threatened. After all, as ACTA's Anne Neal points out, "The inability to benefit from a robust and free exchange of ideas -- intellectual harassment if you will -- goes to the very heart of the academic enterprise."