



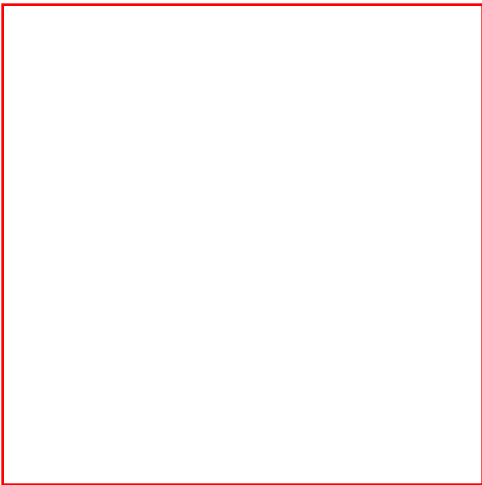
Conservatives take up academic-freedom cause

Some want say over what they don't want to be taught

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By Justin Pope
The Associated Press

At the University of North Carolina, three incoming freshmen sue over a reading assignment they say offends their Christian beliefs.



University of North Carolina junior Kris Wampler sued the university in an effort to block the a requirement to read a book about the Quran.
Ross Taylor, AP

In Colorado and Indiana, a national conservative group publicizes student allegations of liberal bias by professors. Faculty members get hate mail and are pictured in mock “wanted” posters.

And at Columbia University in New York City, a documentary film called *Columbia Unbecoming* alleges that teachers intimidate students who support Israel. The film drew the attention of administrators.

The three episodes differ in important ways, but all touch on an issue of growing prominence on college campuses.

Clashes over academic freedom have long pitted politicians or administrators against instructors who wanted to express their opinions and teach as they saw fit. But more and more, it is students who invoke academic freedom and claim that biased professors are violating their right to a classroom free from indoctrination.

In many ways, the trend echoes past campus conflicts, but it also turns them around. Once, it was liberal campus activists who cited the importance of “diversity” in pressing their agendas for curriculum change. Now, conservatives have adopted much of the same language in calling for a greater openness to their viewpoints.

Academic-freedom guidelines have traditionally been cited to protect left-leaning students from punishment for disagreeing with teachers about such issues as American neutrality before World War II and U.S. involvement in Vietnam. The same guidelines are now being invoked by conservative students who support the war in Iraq.

To some professors, there's a new and troubling aspect to this latest chapter in the debate over academic freedom: students trying to dictate what they don't want to be taught. “Even the most contentious or disaffected of students in the '60s or early '70s never really pressed this kind of issue,” said Robert O'Neil, former president of the University of Virginia and now director of the Thomas Jefferson Center for the Protection of Free Expression.

Some of those behind the trend want more conservative ideas expressed in the classroom. But some educators, while agreeing students should never feel bullied, worry that they just want to avoid exposure to ideas that challenge their core beliefs—an essential part of education.

Some also fear that teachers will shy from sensitive topics or fend off criticism by “balancing” their syllabuses with opposing viewpoints, even if they represent inferior scholarship.

“Faculty retrench. They are less willing to discuss contemporary problems, and I think everyone loses out,” said Joe Losco, a professor of political science at Ball State University in Indiana who has supported two colleagues targeted for alleged bias. “It puts a chill in the air.”

A recent study by Daniel Klein, a researcher at Santa Clara University in California, estimated that among social science and humanities faculty nationwide, Democrats outnumber Republicans by at least 7 to 1; in some fields, it's as high as 30 to 1.

Many teachers insist personal politics don't affect their teaching. But in a recent survey of students at 50 top schools by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, a group that has argued there is too little intellectual diversity on campuses, 49% reported at least some professors frequently commented on politics in class even if it was outside the subject matter.

Thirty-one percent said they felt there were some courses in which they needed to agree with a professor's political or social views to get a good grade.

Leading the movement is the group Students for Academic Freedom, which has chapters on 135 campuses and close ties to David Horowitz, a one-time liberal campus activist turned conservative commentator.

The group posts student complaints on its Web site, studentsforacademicfreedom.org, about alleged episodes of grading bias and unbalanced, anti-American propaganda by professors.

College instructors “need to make students aware of the spectrum of scholarly opinion,” Horowitz said. “You can't get a good education if you're only getting half the story.”

Conservatives claim they are discouraged from expressing their views in class, and are even blackballed from graduate school slots and jobs.

“I feel like (faculty) are so disconnected from students that they do these things and they can just get away with them,” said junior Kris Wampler, who recently publicly identified himself as one of the students who sued the University of North Carolina. He objected when all incoming students were assigned to read a book about the Koran before they got to campus.

“A lot of students feel like they're being discriminated against,” he said.

So far, his and other efforts are having mixed results.

At UNC, the students lost their legal case, but the university no longer uses the word “required” in describing the reading program for incoming students, which was the plaintiffs' main objection.

In Colorado, conservatives withdrew a legislative proposal for an “academic bill of rights” that was backed by Horowitz, but only after state universities agreed to adopt its principles.

At Ball State University, the school's provost sided with professor George Wolfe after a student published complaints about Wolfe's peace studies course, but the episode has attracted local attention.

Horowitz and backers of the academic bill of rights plan to introduce it in the Indiana Legislature, as well as in up to 20 other state legislatures.

At Columbia, debate followed the screening of a film by an advocacy group called the David Project. The group alleges some faculty members violate students' rights by using the classroom as a platform for anti-Israeli political propaganda.

Administrators responded this month by setting up a new committee to investigate students' complaints.

In the wider debate, both sides cite the guidelines on academic freedom first set out in 1915 by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP).

The objecting students emphasize the portion calling on teachers to “set forth justly ... the divergent opinions of other investigators.”

Teachers also point to the guidelines, which say that instructors need not “hide (their) own opinions under a mountain of equivocal verbiage,” and that their job is teaching students “to think for themselves.”

Horowitz said the AAUP, which opposes his bill of rights, and liberals in general are now the establishment and have abandoned their commitment to real diversity and student rights.

Critics said Horowitz is pushing a political agenda, not an academic one.

“It's often phrased in the language of academic freedom. That's what's so strange about it,” said Ellen Schrecker, a historian at Yeshiva University in New York City who has written about academic freedom during the McCarthy area. “What they're saying is, 'We want people to reflect our point of view.'”