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Pa. House Committee Hears More Testimony on Liberal Views of State's Professors

By [JENNIFER JACOBSON](#)

Pennsylvania lawmakers continued to hear testimony on Tuesday about whether professors in the state's public colleges inappropriately express liberal political views in the classroom and discriminate against conservative students who disagree with them.

Members of the Select Committee of the Pennsylvania House of Representatives convened for the second day of a two-day hearing in Temple University's student center. And for the second day in a row the hot topic was the "academic bill of rights" proposed by the California activist David Horowitz. Versions of the measure have been introduced in several state legislatures, but none have passed it.

The first witness was William E. Scheuerman, who is a professor of political science at the State University of New York at Oswego and president of the United University Professions. That organization represents nearly 30,000 faculty and staff members in the SUNY System and is the largest higher-education union in the country.

Mr. Scheuerman told the committee that no formal complaints about political bias had been filed on any of SUNY's 64 campuses, which enroll more than 400,000 students. University officials, he said, verified that assertion with the presidents of the SUNY campuses in March 2004 after a member of the Board of Trustees began pressing the university to implement the academic bill of rights, whose supporters say it would make college campuses more intellectually diverse ([The Chronicle](#), February 13, 2004).

In the past two years or so, the possibility that the New York system might adopt the proposal has prompted faculty members at SUNY to call Mr. Scheuerman with their concerns. Once the issue is raised, he told the Pennsylvania committee, "faculty begin to wonder, Are we going to lose our autonomy?"

Rep. Gibson C. Armstrong, a Lancaster County Republican who introduced the resolution that established the committee, reassured Mr. Scheuerman that the purpose of the hearing was to determine whether Pennsylvania's public colleges were



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enforcing existing policies and following existing laws. "No one here is interested in telling a professor what they can and can't teach in the classroom," he said.

But as Mr. Scheuerman continued to voice his opposition to the academic bill of rights, Mr. Armstrong asked him to specify the exact language he opposed in the measure. When Mr. Scheuerman said he couldn't answer that question because he didn't have the bill in front of him, Mr. Armstrong asked Mr. Horowitz, who was standing in the room waiting to testify later in the hearing, to hand Mr. Scheuerman a copy, which he did.

Mr. Scheuerman thanked Mr. Horowitz and continued to raise general objections to the proposal. "There's a leap of faith that if you hold a certain political ideology, that you will bring that into the classroom," Mr. Scheuerman said. "It's insulting to people who practice the profession, because we teach. We don't preach."

Anne D. Neal, the president of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, disagreed with that assessment during her testimony. "Today the notion of truth and objectivity is regarded by many professors as antiquated and an obstacle to social change," she said. "In this postmodern view, all ideas are political, the classroom is an appropriate place for advocacy, and students should be molded into 'change agents' to promote a political agenda."

Ms. Neal cited a recent survey conducted by her organization. It found that 49 percent of students at the top 50 colleges and universities said their professors frequently injected political comments into their courses, even if the comments had nothing to do with the subject.

While Ms. Neal said she opposed government intervention to make colleges intellectually diverse, she urged the legislators to require universities to report steps they have taken to ensure such diversity.

Rep. Dan B. Frankel, a Democrat who is a member of the Board of Trustees of the University of Pittsburgh, reminded Ms. Neal that the issue of potential political discrimination at state universities had received a considerable amount of publicity since the committee's previous hearing three months ago ([The Chronicle](#), November 25). He said he might have expected students to come forward with complaints, but none have done so. "It seems to me we may be overblowing this problem," he said. "I don't have streams of people coming to me."

"Let's not put the burden on the student," Ms. Neal countered. "Let's put the burden on the institutions."

Stephen C. Zelnick, a professor of English at Temple, testified

that Temple professors routinely introduce their political views in the classroom, short-changing students by denying them a balanced view of the world.

Mr. Zelnick said he had sat in on more than a hundred different instructors' classes and seen all types of teaching. "In these visits, I rarely heard a kind word for the United States and our freedoms" he said. "I did hear about racial intolerance in the United States, about the evils of American imperialism, about the need to be skeptical of all institutions and traditional values, and about the stupidity and mendacity of prominent politicians."

When his turn to testify came, Mr. Horowitz told the committee that students who are members of religious or political minorities have a much more difficult time on campuses today than do students who are women or members of racial minorities. Universities have embraced racial and gender diversity, he said. "I'm just saying spread the tolerance around."

The committee holds its next hearing in March.

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