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Legislatures fight college political bias

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PHILADELPHIA (AP) -- Christian DeJohn returned from a National Guard tour in Bosnia only to fight his own war with academics at Temple University, who he says, have delayed approval of his master's thesis because of political conflicts in the classroom.

His case is just one in a national debate fueled by allegations that some liberal professors are infringing on conservative students' right to free speech at public colleges and universities.

In state legislatures, which dole out taxpayer funds to those schools, the controversy has largely sparked more talk than action.

In Pennsylvania, legislators traveled to Temple, where a small number of students aired complaints at a hearing Jan. 9 and 10 as part of an investigation into whether the state's public colleges are hospitable to divergent intellectual and political views.

"These are people who are sitting in judgment on whether I graduate," DeJohn, who entered graduate school in January 2002, said at the hearing.

DeJohn suspects the delay stems partly from conflicts he had with a military history professor who, DeJohn said, often criticized the Iraq war and the Bush administration during class. DeJohn contends it is also retaliation for a critical response he sent to a professor after he received an e-mail invitation to a campus war protest while he was serving six months in Bosnia.

Temple officials declined to respond to DeJohn's allegations, citing federal privacy requirements governing student records.

Legislation modeled after an "academic bill of rights" advocated by conservative activist David Horowitz, founder of Students for Academic Freedom, was introduced in at least 15 states last year, but none has passed it, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

Among other things, the document exhorts professors to present a wide spectrum of intellectual views in the classroom and discourages them from basing students' grades on their religious or political beliefs.

Julie Bell, the conference's education program director, said legislatures have not forced the issue because even public universities typically enjoy considerable autonomy in setting academic policies and procedures.

"Most legislatures have backed away because they really do acknowledge that separation," Bell said.

An Ohio state senator suspended his push for legislation last year after state universities approved a

resolution requiring them to ensure students are not graded based on political opinions.

Pennsylvania's inquiry was authorized by the state House at the behest of Rep. Gibson C. Armstrong. The Republican says he merely wants the committee to assess whether political orthodoxy is a widespread problem and whether a legislative remedy is warranted.

"I don't think anyone on this committee is interested in seeing the government ... interfere in what happens in our state college classrooms," Armstrong said at the Temple hearing.

William E. Scheuerman, vice president of the American Federation of Teachers, said universities fear the prospect of government micromanagement.

"Merely the threat of government intervention is enough, believe me, to frighten college administrators and some faculty so they are less likely to raise tough questions," he said.

It is difficult to verify the accuracy of every bias complaint, Horowitz said at the Temple hearing. But the American Council of Trustees and Alumni found last year that half of students surveyed said professors frequently comment in class on politics - even when it is not relevant to the course.

"I would not be here if I weren't persuaded by 20 years of walking around campuses and seeing this," Horowitz said.

Rep. Dan Surra, a member of the Pennsylvania committee who has questioned the need for the investigation, said nothing so far has swayed him. Students in his rural district complain about such issues as tuition, but not about professors' biases, the Democrat said.

"I've said it's the educational equivalent of the hunt for Bigfoot," he said.

On the Net:

National Conference of State Legislatures: <http://www.ncsl.org/>

Students for Academic Freedom: <http://www.studentsforacademicfreedom.org/>

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