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## Professors should teach not preach, advocate says

By [GAIL SCHONTZLER](#) Chronicle Staff Writer

Too many liberal faculty members use their classrooms as "platforms for propaganda," Anne Neal, president of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, said Tuesday in Bozeman.

Two longtime academic leaders from Florida and California disagreed, saying that only a few professors step over the line in the classroom. They argued a small problem is being blown out of proportion in a well-funded, highly coordinated effort by conservative groups.

The debate came during the second day of Montana State University's conference "Without Interference? Academic Freedom in the 21st Century," attended by about 40 people in the Strand Union Building.

"The obligation of professors is to teach, rather than preach," said Neal, a Harvard Law School graduate.

Neal recently testified in favor of a South Dakota bill that would have required state campuses to file annual reports on efforts to increase "intellectual diversity." The bill failed in a close vote in February, but Neal said the South Dakota regents have agreed voluntarily to report on academic freedom.

Larry Abele, Florida State University provost, said he's astonished to hear conservatives calling for greater government regulation.

There are legitimate complaints about some professors, Abele said, citing a former professor at his college who "fought with the communists in Argentina and couldn't get it out of his system."

But, Abele said, even with millions of dollars from conservative foundations, groups investigating academia have turned up perhaps 600 student complaints, out of the 1.1 million professors teaching 96 million courses nationwide. Any profession that large would have a certain percentage who make inappropriate comments, he said.

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About half the student complaints, posted on Web pages like academicbias.com, consist of "My professor is too arrogant," Abele said, joking that those are "redundant" terms.

David Hollinger, history department chair at the University of California, Berkeley, and academic freedom chair for the American Association of University Professors, said some believe where there's smoke there must be fire. But sometimes where there's smoke, it simply means "there's a smoke machine."

Neal countered that universities won't know if it's really a fire or just a smoke machine until they investigate what's going on. Trustees and regents should look into the problem, so that legislatures won't have to, she said.

Neal cited a University of Connecticut survey of students, which found that 49 percent reported professors frequently inject political comments in class, even if it had nothing to do with the subject. And 29 percent said they felt they had to agree or risk a lower grade.

Gordon Brittan, MSU philosophy professor, said some on the right seem to think if students aren't protected from professors' political views, young people will be warped.

"If they think there is a left-wing trend in U.S. politics," Brittan said, "I don't see it."

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