

Seebach: Churchill not alone among profs with an ax to grind



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The American Council of Trustees and Alumni has released a study of college and university courses that are aimed more at indoctrination than instruction, at least as judged by their course descriptions or syllabi.

The title is *How Many Ward Churchills?* and it is loosely pegged to his case in particular (it was released May 12, and is available online at www.goacta.org). I think that may have been a tactical error; and ACTA President Anne Neal almost acknowledges as much in her foreword, where she writes, "We do not mean to suggest that issues of alleged plagiarism, dubious claims of ethnicity, or inadequate credentials - problems specific to Ward Churchill - apply broadly to all academics. What we do mean to suggest is that the extremist rhetoric and tendentious opinion for which Churchill is infamous can be found on campuses across America. In published course descriptions and online course materials, professors are openly and unapologetically declaring that they use their positions to push political agendas in the name of teaching students to think critically."

Well, if you don't mean to suggest something, and you suspect people will read what you publish as if you did mean to suggest it, wouldn't it would be better to write something different? It's not as if they had any shortage of material, even from the University of Colorado at Boulder.

ACTA, by the way, is often described as "conservative" by people who don't like it, and it is certainly more so than the academy as a whole. But then, so is the rest of the country, and it would be more accurate to describe the group as traditional, in the sense of supporting the view that politics should not mix with education in the classroom. When it was started in 1995, former Colorado Gov. Dick Lamm and Sen. Joseph Lieberman, D-

Conn., were among its supporters, as well as Lynne Cheney, as former head of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

But Churchill aside, this is worth a look. It chooses a few courses from each of 47 institutions, including top private universities and four-year colleges as identified by *U.S. News & World Report* as well as the Big 10 and Big 12 schools, which is why CU-Boulder made the list. CU is represented by four courses. One in sociology is called "Animals and Society," and, according to the course description, "Investigates the social construction of the human/animal boundary. Challenges ideas that animals are neither thinking nor feeling. . . . Explores the moral status of animals."

I don't find that one particularly troubling, because I know that there is lively scholarly debate over just how to draw the line between human and animal cognition, for instance. But the phrase "social construction" tends to be a code word for a certain way of thinking about what's being constructed, so it would depend on how the course is taught and whether the instructor is open to debate.

The other three (one now has a different course description) are from INVST Community Studies (International and National Voluntary Service Training), which is a special program intended to "develop engaged citizens and leaders who work for the benefit of humanity and the environment" and for a "just and sustainable world."

People who talk that way tend to flock together, and if students want to spend their entire undergraduate career talking mainly to people who all think alike, that's their lookout. They get to take courses such as "Facilitating Peaceful Community Change," where they "are encouraged to apply concepts of life experiences and to examine themselves as change agents." Or "Implementing Social and Environmental Change," where they "develop an understanding of the use of democracy for positive social change, identify how changes are initiated within movements, and learn the theory and practice of effective and responsible change efforts."

Sounds all very high-minded and noble, but what happens when people disagree about which direction of social change is positive? Would allowing same-sex couples to marry be a good thing or a bad thing?

Still, the students in INVST are self-selected, and presumably like what they get. But of the nine courses in the department that are open to all CU students, six are cross-listed with other departments, including sociology, women's studies, ethnic studies and one in political science that is approved for CU's core curriculum. Are the cross-listed courses less tendentiously political, or are activist courses considered acceptable in those departments as well?

"Academic freedom is bestowed on professors so that they can pursue truth wherever it may lead," Neal says, but it entails responsibility as well. When there is scholarly debate on a subject, professors should fairly present diverse views, not just their own (this does not mean that biologists are obliged to include young-Earth creationism in their syllabi). They should respect differing views expressed by students, and they certainly should not believe they have the right to remold students into the kind of people they themselves approve of.

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