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Churchill Fallout: There Are More Like Him

By [Anne D. Neal](#)

The American Council of Trustees and Alumni's report ["How Many Ward Churchills?"](#) has caused an uproar in some corners of the Internet. Criticism has centered on two issues: method and message. The report's principal critics, Swarthmore history professor Timothy Burke and *The Myth of Political Correctness* author John K. Wilson, have attacked it, respectively, as a "casual, lazy, cherrypicking survey of whatever materials the author(s) were able to access on the Web," and as part of "a vast new right-wing witch hunt on college campuses." Both critiques share confused and erroneous assumptions about the report's message and about ACTA's right to criticize academic culture.

[Burke complains](#) that the report's criticisms are ill-founded: They "see what they want to see," they "ignore context or specificity," and they "avoid REAL argument of the kind that scholars routinely engage in," he grumbles. "The report talks about the need to guarantee that students have unrestrained rights to the free exchange of ideas in the classroom. Seriously, unless you bother to get off your ass and stop reading catalogues online, you have no idea what happens in classrooms."

Setting aside Burke's contemptuous tone, let's examine the gaps in his reasoning. Burke's initial objections are throw-away examples of faulty logic. The first, in which he accuses ACTA of *post ergo propter hoc* thinking, is itself an example of that logical fallacy: Burke sees ACTA seeing what ACTA wants to see because Burke wants to see ACTA that way. But the course descriptions ACTA cites are hardly unique or isolated. There are hundreds of similarly tendentious descriptions published by institutions across the country. They were chosen for their utter typicality, not their uniqueness.

Burke's second objection is remarkably solipsistic — context and specificity are whatever he defines them to be. ACTA quotes course descriptions verbatim, working from exactly what students (and interested parents) read to select a class. The

reason? Course descriptions are designed to stand alone — if they are all a prospective student needs to know about a class, then they are also all tuition-paying parents, taxpayers, and concerned citizens need in order to form a preliminary judgment.

This objection is part of Burke's larger criticism of the report's reliance on course descriptions. But his claim that these documents — the main resource students use to decide whether or not to register for a class — do not tell us anything about what happens in the classes in question is illogical at best, disingenuous at worst. If true, this charge would mean either that professors routinely engage in false advertising or that the process by which students choose courses is a charade that fools no one but students themselves.

In so arguing, Burke has chosen to stretch a point ACTA freely concedes — that course descriptions are neither courses nor perfect windows into the curriculum — in order to avoid ACTA's more fundamental argument about *why course descriptions matter*.

They matter because they are professors' own public representations of what happens in their classrooms. That so many professors describe their pedagogical aims in ideologically loaded ways raises entirely legitimate questions about accountability and balance.

Of course, ACTA has never claimed to know exactly what is happening in classrooms, and does not assume authority to determine whether a class is pedagogically sound. All ACTA's report does is to urge college and university presidents, deans, and faculty to examine the issue themselves. ACTA has already outlined ways campus leaders can review departments and programs while still being fair, respectful, and sensitive to academic freedom and academic autonomy. Our 2005 report, "[Intellectual Diversity: Time for Action](#)," was praised for its sensitivity to academic freedom and self-governance. Burke's hasty and intemperate critique studiously evades these points.

Burke's other criticism, that ACTA avoids "REAL" argument because it does not argue in the same manner as scholars do, is self-servingly dismissive: ACTA's argument need not be considered, Burke implies, because ACTA has not made its argument as Burke thinks arguments should be made. But the truth is that ACTA's report is expressly not an academic paper. It is a report designed to initiate dialogue about the college curriculum by outlining some of the dominant terms and patterns displayed in course offerings across the country. To condemn it, as Burke has, for failing to maintain scholarly standards of data analysis is like damning an apple for not being an orange.

Burke thus badly misunderstands ACTA's report. He both thinks ACTA isn't qualified to judge the academic curriculum and complains that ACTA has not framed a satisfactory program of reform. But ACTA stresses that academics should address the problem of self-regulation, and that they should do so now — in the face of mounting

legislative interest in controlling the curriculum. ACTA's report is as friendly to institutional self-governance and academic freedom as it is possible for a watchdog organization to be.

Now for Mr. Wilson.

Writing at [Inside Higher Ed](#), John K. Wilson treats ACTA's report as Exhibit A in "a vast new right-wing witch hunt on college campuses": "The far right is already pursuing leftist academics for expressing their views in the classroom," Wilson writes. "ACTA threatens that academic freedom will be revoked from colleges unless they start censoring their professors and ban [courses that mention social justice, sex, or race]." But Wilson's scaremongering misrepresents the report to an audience who, he seems to expect, will not check his sources.

Nowhere does ACTA advocate censoring professors or banning courses. The report urges academic officials to address — voluntarily, and in institutionally appropriate ways — professors' obligation to respect students' academic freedom to learn about controversial issues. The report recommends institutional self-study, hiring administrators committed to intellectual diversity, careful vetting of job candidates' work, review of personnel practices, post-tenure review, and — most importantly — fostering robust debate on campus.

Here are the study's concluding paragraphs, which follow directly from the sentence Wilson quoted to argue that ACTA is endorsing censorship:

Ultimately, greater accountability means more responsible decision-making on the part of academic administrators, more judicious hiring on the part of departments, and more balanced, genuinely tolerant teaching on the part of faculties. It also means acknowledging openly and unapologetically education and advocacy are not one and the same, that the invaluable work of opening minds and

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honing critical thinking skills cannot be done when professors are more interested in seeing their own beliefs put into political practice. Finally, it means defending the academic freedom of even the most militantly radical academics. Our aim should not be to fire the Ward Churchills for their views, but to insist that they do their job regardless of their ideological commitments. We must insist that, in their classrooms, they teach fairly, fostering an open and robust exchange of ideas and refusing to succumb to a proselytizing or otherwise biased pedagogy. Only then will their ideas be subject to debate; only then will they and their students learn to defend their positions in the marketplace of ideas. Only then will other views challenge, complicate, and even displace theirs. Only then can we hope to create a truly diverse academy.

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Far from calling for censorship or the banning of classes, ACTA urges transparency

about what professors teach; far from trying to silence politically engaged professors, ACTA defends academic freedom while at the same time noting that 1) academic freedom does not mean freedom from criticism or freedom from accountability; and 2) students have academic freedom too. Also worth noting: When the Ward Churchill scandal broke in 2005, [ACTA defended Churchill](#) from those who sought to fire him for his speech.

Wilson mistrusts definitions of research misconduct that include egregiously misleading citations — and no wonder. His own argument about ACTA depends on the willful manipulation of sources.

Neither Burke nor Wilson reads ACTA's report objectively, choosing instead to see it as proof of that worn professorial complaint, that no one outside the ivory tower understands academics. But what neither grasps is that it is not the public's job to intuit the special worth of professors. Insofar as Burke and Wilson represent an academic consensus that outsiders are not qualified to judge — or scrutinize, or question — higher education, they signal the depth of the complacent insularity ACTA's report takes to task.

If ACTA's report has a take-home message for academics, it is that they urgently need to justify to a skeptical public why their work deserves special protections. Only then, ironically, will they have a chance of preserving the independence they cherish. With transparency comes respect; with accountability comes autonomy. That's the paradoxical point of "How Many Ward Churchills?" — that the more open one is about one's practices, the more willing one is to allow one's work to be scrutinized, the more responsive one is to legitimate criticisms, the more likely one is to be allowed to carry on without undue interference. What a pity that Burke and Wilson could not take off their ideological blinders long enough to see that.

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