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A Spirited Disposition Debate

For months, an education school accrediting group's use of the phrase "social justice" to describe a desirable quality in candidates to become elementary and secondary teachers has fueled a debate that has been robust and at times contentious. Monday, as critics formally challenged the accreditor's policy before a U.S. Education Department panel, the accrediting group defended its evaluation methods and took steps to defuse the issue.

The words "social justice" appear in a glossary of terms that the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education uses as an example of what programs might consider using when evaluating a teaching candidate's "disposition" and classroom readiness.

Supporters of a traditional curriculum have argued that evaluating students based on their commitment to social justice is an inherently subjective practice with ideological undertones. Late last year, the National Association of Scholars [filed a complaint](#) with the Education Department saying the accreditor encourages standards that violate students' First Amendment rights.

Arthur E. Wise, president of NCATE, has argued that the "disposition" component of evaluation helps education schools measure how their students would respond in a classroom setting. On Monday, as Wise sat before the Education Department's National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity, which has the power to extend the council's authority or set the agenda for changes, a set of critics raised the issue once again.

The committee said it didn't have the jurisdiction to consider the "social justice" matter, as department staff deemed the topic to be outside of the scope of the education secretary's "Criteria for Recognition." But Wise knew who was behind him, both in physical proximity and in order of speech — a small group of third-party witnesses ready to pick apart NCATE's practices.

So Wise preempted his detractors. "I categorically deny the assertion that NCATE has a mandatory 'social justice' standard," Wise testified. "We don't endorse political and social ideologies. We endorse academic freedom, and we base our standards on knowledge, skills and professional disposition."

And then, Wise threw the witnesses a bone, announcing that NCATE had decided to eliminate references to "social justice" from its current glossary because "the term is susceptible to a variety of definitions."

The Education Department committee, which shares the task of recognizing accreditors with the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, also voted unanimously to renew NCATE's recognition for five years and to expand the agency's scope to include accreditation of programs offered via distance education.

Wise said the council would not get in the way of nor discourage its member programs from incorporating social justice in the curriculum.

The speakers who followed admitted some of their thunder had been stolen. "One of the reasons for me being here today has become moot," said Greg Lukianoff, president of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education. "I applaud what NCATE has done today; it's a step in the right direction."

Stephen H. Balch, president of the National Association of Scholars, echoed Lukianoff's sentiments, but said that only time will tell if education programs make any changes in their evaluation policies.

Anne D. Neal, president of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, said in an interview that the omission of the "social justice" phrase "will make absolutely no difference" in the practices of either NCATE or its member institutions. "Removing social justice doesn't eliminate the issue of imposing disposition on teacher candidates."

George A. Pruitt was the only advisory committee member to enter into the "social justice" debate. "I'm struggling to find how this is a radical agenda," he said. "I'm saddened by the notion that our children need to be protected from 'social justice.' This is one issue that shouldn't be controversial."

The Education Department committee meets again today in Arlington, Va., to determine the accreditation status of other agencies.

— [Elia Powers](#)

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