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## Students fight for rights

By Susan Brinkmann  
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There may be an end in sight to the long reign of one-sided intellectual discourse on the nation's colleges and universities. New, on-campus movements by students as well as interest from state and federal lawmakers are beginning to make headway in guaranteeing intellectual freedom for all students.

According to Sara Dothan, campus director for Students for Academic Freedom (SAF), students at more than 150 campuses across the country have started SAF chapters to fight for the passage of an academic bill of rights.

The organization is growing rapidly and having an impact on campuses, Dothan said.

"One of the biggest effects is to make students start to think about and debate these issues," she said. "Even those professors who don't really agree with us are forced to think about these issues.

"They have to confront themselves, and ask, are they really being fair in their teaching? Are they really preserving their students' academic freedom?" she added.

SAF is part of the Center for the Study of Popular Culture, a non-profit group headed by the writer and social activist, David Horowitz.

The organization comes to the aid of students who come under fire because they don't go along with a professor's ideology.

Several Pennsylvania colleges and universities have SAF chapters, including Drexel University, Haverford College, Temple University, the University of Pennsylvania, and Penn State University.

Princeton University in New Jersey also has a chapter, which won a referendum to pass a student bill of rights in a close vote — 51.8 percent of the student body voted in favor.

"A lot of people tried, incorrectly, to characterize this as a 'radical, right-wing conservative,' movement, but it's not at all," Dothan said. "It's about academic freedom for all students, and anybody who reads the Princeton bill will see that."

A year ago, a Christian student group at Princeton was denied official recognition by the school, and it took a letter from lawyers at the Philadelphia based Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) to rectify that situation.

According to FIRE's president, David French, the university agreed to recognize the Christian group on an equal basis with other student organizations.

At the same time, French said, Princeton also "pledged to reexamine a policy that unfairly singles out

religious student organizations for additional and exceptional scrutiny.”

FIRE receives more than 500 inquiries a year from students who believe their religious liberty, free speech or due process rights are being violated on campus, French said.

Some experts believe part of the problem is a lopsided ratio of liberal to conservative ideology among the nation’s college-level faculty and staff.

One 2005 study found that 72 percent of those teaching at American universities and colleges describe themselves as liberal, and only 15 percent as conservative.

“Faculty imbalance, coupled with the idea that the politically-correct point of view has a right to dominate classroom and campus discussions, has had fearful consequences for university life,” according to Anne D. Neal, president of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni.

She made that statement during testimony before a Pennsylvania state committee in January 2006, in Philadelphia.

The list of consequences Neal cited included: dis-inviting politically-incorrect speakers; mounting one-sided panels and conferences, and sanctioning speakers who fail to follow politically a correct line; politicized instruction, and the virtual elimination of broad-based survey courses in favor of trendy, and often politicized, courses

Neal said the consequences also include reprisals against or intimidation of students who seek to speak their mind; political discrimination in college hiring and retention; speech codes, and campus newspaper theft and destruction.

The problem has become serious enough that many states are proposing or have already passed laws guaranteeing academic freedom on public campuses.

Last July, the Pennsylvania General Assembly established a committee to examine allegations of liberal bias among college faculty and evaluate the need for an academic bill of rights.

The last of four investigative hearings took place last week in Harrisburg.

Rep. Gib Armstrong (R-Lancaster) who sponsored the legislation that set up the hearings, said he believes there is a serious problem: “If you peel back a few layers of the onion beyond the initial rhetoric, what you find is there is a significant lack of intellectual diversity.”

He said he heard from students who had suffered a variety of repercussions, from receiving lower grades to being made to feel uncomfortable in class.

Professors or other staff members who complained were also treated harshly, he said.

“We’ve got a serious problem, and denying it won’t make it go away,” he said.

Now that the hearings are complete, the committee will write a report that Armstrong expects to be published sometime before Nov. 30. The next step will be determined at that point.

Opposition to the proposed state bill of rights is mainly coming from professional groups, such as the National Education Association (NEA) and other members of academia that fear the legislation would stifle debate, and silence controversial views on college campuses.

In a statement released by the NEA, Jane Munley, an associate professor of criminal justice at Luzerne County Community College, said she disagreed with those who think an academic bill of rights is needed.

“I fear the so-called ‘academic bill of rights’ will ... discourage confrontational and controversial issues from being discussed and debated,” Munley said.

“I fear that the political power holders — whoever they may be at any point in time — will be dictating the appropriateness of course content,” she added.

Federal lawmakers have also acted on the issue.

The U.S. House of Representatives passed the College Access and Opportunities Act of 2006, which contains

an academic bill of rights, by a vote of 221-199.

"We were thrilled when this passed," said Brad Shipp, national field director for SAF.

"These are public institutions that are using taxpayer dollars...," he added. "We believe academic freedom for a professor should also mean academic freedom for a student."

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