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Getting beyond Barrett: UW-Madison's easy decision

By **CHARLES MITCHELL**

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It's easy to understand why the University of Wisconsin-Madison chose to investigate the teaching of instructor and 9-11 conspiracy theorist Kevin Barrett.

Advertisement Indeed, one can sincerely wonder why a university would hire someone who claims that the collapse of the World Trade Center was an "inside job" in the first place.

Fortunately for Barrett, UW-Madison apparently discovered that he is a fair teacher and does not indoctrinate his students. But, unfortunately, the administration's response since then has been remarkably tone deaf.

If the university does not reverse course - which it can, easily - the present melee will continue to escalate and, even worse, occur again.

Ever since concluding that Barrett's extreme beliefs do not pollute his classroom, the university's public statements have relentlessly gone back to whether he has the academic freedom to teach his strange theories.

Provost Patrick Farrell's July 10 statement is characteristic: "We cannot allow political pressure from critics of unpopular ideas to inhibit the free exchange of ideas. That classroom interaction is central to this university's mission and to the expansion of knowledge. Silencing that exchange now would only open the door to more onerous and sweeping restrictions."

But the issue that this controversy has brought to light is not just about what Barrett has the right to say.

It is indicative of a larger concern on the part of taxpayers and parents in Wisconsin - and across the country - about the politicization of the classroom and the lack of intellectual diversity on college campuses.

Simply put, the public does not trust that - apart from allowing a conspiracy theorist to say his peace - the university will expose students to a wide variety of views or that they will be safe from classroom indoctrination.

Just check the numbers. A recent poll by the American Association of University Professors showed that 58.4% of the American public has only some or no confidence in American colleges and universities. Another 45.7% told the AAUP that political bias is one of the most serious problems facing higher education.

And a 2004 survey by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni showed why this is a concern: Nearly half of the students surveyed at the nation's top 50 colleges said professors "use the classroom to present their personal political views" and reported campus presentations on political issues that "seem

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totally one-sided."

This is why the public reaction to the Barrett affair has been so vigorous - and why interest in this subject will continue whether Barrett teaches in Madison this fall or not. With that in mind, the university's leaders should quit obsessing over what his academic freedom entails and mount a more systematic response. They need to figure out what is going on in all of their classrooms, not just Barrett's, and take steps to keep faculty accountable.

ACTA proposed that course of action in a July 17 letter to the UW Board of Regents and several administrators. Our letter encouraged them to perform an institutional self-study of the classroom environment, institute post-tenure review of faculty, assess hiring and promotion practices to ensure that quality of research and teaching - not ideological litmus tests - are the criteria for job security, incorporate intellectual diversity concerns in guidelines on teaching and include intellectual diversity issues on course evaluations.

The reason, according to the letter: "While it is chilling to use political criteria to single out individual instructors for review, reviewing course offerings and content as part of a broader, established mechanism of quality assurance is an excellent practice."

As UW-Madison's leaders are learning, the recent occurrences at Madison are not an aberration.

To pick just a few examples, Vassar College has a course on how "our culture covertly and overtly condones the abuse of women by their intimate partners," Penn State's faculty boasts a professor who promises to promote "un-learning" on the part of his students and Davidson College offers a course that requires students to put on a skit on a topic such as "five ways to demonize an ethnic minority" or "more ways than one to be white."

So if UW-Madison wants to avoid the kind of headlines it is getting right now, its leaders have a choice: They can bet that no one else on the faculty will ever again say anything to raise the ire of a state legislator, or they can implement some simple and proactive reforms to show they care about the education students are receiving.

This should not be a tough call.

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