

Academic Freedom and Responsibility
Conference on Academic Freedom Sponsored by
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I am delighted to be here for a variety of reasons. Nevada is the home of a distinguished past president of the AAUP, Jim Richardson, and a number of other AAUP leaders, including Candace Kant, who has served in a variety of leadership positions at every level of the Association. The AAUP is very grateful to your chancellor, Jim Rogers, for his strong support of academic freedom, evidenced by supporting this conference and by agreeing to serve on the AAUP's National Committee for the Campaign for the Common Good; and his exceedingly generous pledge—a challenge grant of \$250,000 over ten years that requires the AAUP to secure donors at the \$25,000 level. Jim Rogers indeed puts his money where his mouth is! We suspect that he is the only university system chancellor in the nation who is philanthropic in ways that directly benefit higher education.

The American Association of University Professors (AAUP), in its 1940 *Statement on Academic Freedom and Tenure* takes the unequivocal position that faculty should avoid persistently introducing controversial issues in the classroom unless they are relevant to the subject. However, the AAUP has also recognized the right, indeed the necessity, of faculty to introduce controversy as an integral part of the academic enterprise. But because faculty members wield power over their students, it is important to be aware of the manner in which that power is manifested in the classroom.

The legitimate role of controversy and advocacy in the classroom has been under siege in this country at least since the middle of the last century, starting with the infamous assaults by Senator Joseph McCarthy and culminating in the current attacks by the religious and political right on what they perceive to be insidious brainwashing of impressionable and vulnerable youth by a powerful radical leftist intellectual elite. The popular and academic news media are filled with horror stories of students and faculty locked in legal combat over racist and sexist language and the creation of hostile environments. Faculty have been suspended or dismissed by institutions for expressing opinions that appear to some to be constitutionally protected. And legislation adopting language modeled on the so-called Academic Bill of Rights has been introduced in more than a dozen state legislatures and in both the U.S. Senate and House versions of the Higher Education Act. So far none of the proposed legislation has been enacted.

It is increasingly obvious that the sound and fury have been sustained by the repetition of a few particularly egregious examples of faculty abuse of power or the exercise of poor judgment, such as the Ward Churchill case. A second level of attack is based on the assertion, perhaps sustainable, that the majority of faculty in the humanities and social sciences are politically liberal. Even if that assertion is true, it does not follow that professors use their positions to indoctrinate students. The evidence on which such attacks rely is largely, if not entirely, anecdotal. Hard data providing evidence of a widespread problem are largely nonexistent.

Further eroding the claims of professorial abuse of power is the fact that, as of 2003, the most recent year for which we have data, 65%—almost two-thirds—of the professorate were contingent, that is, ineligible for tenure, and an additional 11%, although tenure-eligible, had not yet achieved it. Only 24% were both full-time and tenured. The issue is not one of full-time versus part-time employment, but of tenure status. Without tenure, academic freedom is fragile at best and nonexistent at worst. Contingent faculty, especially part-timers struggling to eke out an existence, must find the temptation to self-censor in order not to offend their students almost irresistible, when it is their students who often serve as their sole evaluators. In such cases, ultimate power resides not in the hands of magisterial and omnipotent professors, but in the hands of their charges who are too frequently viewed by fiscally strapped administrators as customers.

Most of the debate on the issue of classroom controversy has focused on real or imagined transgressions on the part of faculty members. Little attention has been paid to the characteristics of students.

Political indoctrination requires a pliant and acquiescent audience. But there are two assumptions that are relevant to this discussion and that are fairly well supported by research evidence. The first is that we develop beliefs early in life and resist changing them, even in the face of contradictory evidence. The second, and corollary, assumption is that we seldom change beliefs in adulthood except as a conversion phenomenon. If true, these assumptions, coupled with the pernicious characterization of student as customer, contradict the notion that college students are helpless victims of a powerful and malignant faculty.

Several years ago I conducted a survey of 152 student volunteers in undergraduate psychology classes at Delaware State University, a historically black institution. Without going into great detail, I shall share a few highlights from that study. Questions were designed to elicit opinions about the introduction of controversial material in the classroom and about efforts on the part of faculty to indoctrinate students. There was a high degree of tolerance for faculty members expressing opinions on controversial subjects and a great deal of agreement among students as to what constitutes a controversial topic. Not surprisingly, most respondents agreed that abortion rights, the death penalty, and decriminalization of marijuana are controversial issues.

Only 25% of the respondents agreed that faculty should avoid expressing an opinion on controversial subjects in the classroom, and 83% said it is acceptable to do so when the topic is relevant to the subject matter. There were no significant race or gender differences concerning these statements.

In response to the statement that it is acceptable for faculty to express an opinion, provided they label the opinion as such, 76% of all respondents agreed. Students regardless of race or gender also showed a high level of tolerance for faculty members wearing religious jewelry and campaign buttons and for the introduction of controversial topics by students. Only 31% of the respondents agreed with the statement that faculty should avoid discussing their religious beliefs in the classroom. On the issue of faculty attempts to change student opinion on controversial subjects either in the classroom or outside it, the majority of respondents found such attempts to be unacceptable. In short, if the students who responded to my survey are typical, most support the healthy exchange of ideas involved in discussing controversial issues, while simultaneously rejecting the appropriateness of faculty proselytizing.

More informally, I often employed a classroom demonstration of how we reveal our attitudes indirectly. This exercise was designed to show prospective teachers that it is difficult, if not impossible, to convey perfect neutrality. Towards the end of a semester, I would ask my students to list controversial topics, such as affirmative action, abortion rights, etc., that had never been discussed in the class because they were not relevant to the subject. They then indicated by a show of hands what they thought my attitude was to each, either pro, con, or undecided or neutral. Although I have not kept detailed data, I can report that my students were amazingly accurate in reading my opinions, including my indecisiveness or neutrality where that was the case. I think that this is evidence, albeit very informal and unscientific, that students, at least mine in that setting, were not helpless pawns, but sophisticated and thoughtful adults capable of making mature judgments.

We are not always right when we speak out, but we are always wrong when we do not.