

## **Academic Freedom: Liberal Professors, their Critics and the Effect on Today's College Student**

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University of Colorado Professor Ward Churchill drew national attention in 2005 for an essay in which he described the victims of the 9/11 attacks as “little Eichmanns” (Johnson & Seelye, 2009), a reference to the passively complicit Nazi Adolf Eichmann. On April 2, 2009, a jury in Denver delivered a verdict that the University of Colorado had wrongfully dismissed Churchill for voicing these unpopular political views. Some viewed the verdict as a victory for free speech and academic freedom while others saw it as further proof that America's universities had been corrupted by liberal professors who were intent on politicizing academia (Horowitz, 2006). The Churchill case has brought a long standing debate into the national spotlight during the 2008 presidential election season. Controversy arose on many campuses when some schools' officials discouraged teachers from wearing political buttons around campus, barred them from attending political rallies, and told them not to affix political bumper stickers on their cars. The argument was that students need to be protected from a liberal professorate who are taking advantage of their youth and inexperience and indoctrinating them into a liberal mindset (Jaschik, 2008). There were also accusations that conservative students were discriminated against in class and in grading, and that universities were not making an effort to hire more conservative professors to promote equality of viewpoints.

These accusations and calls for reform have gained momentum in recent years and inspired a great deal of literature in support of the ideas. In response, many liberal professors have responded to the accusations by publishing articles claiming they are protecting academic freedom and the state of education. This paper will start by inspecting the argument against liberalism on today's college campuses, including Horowitz's (2006) allegation of the bias of professors, claims that school administrations are ignoring the problem, and the perceived persecution of student conservatives. This paper will then examine the literature refuting these charges, including material from accused professors and articles relating to the possible detrimental effects of political interference in academia. By examining both sides, I hope to explore the full nature of the arguments and discover if there is common ground for a compromise.

### Conservative View

Inspired by the Churchill controversy, political commentator David Horowitz (2006) launched himself into the center of the academic freedom debate. He has traveled from state to state to encourage local governments and students to better police schools which he considers to be unfairly pushing liberal bias on the students. His goal is the widespread adoption of an Academic Bill of Rights (ABOR), a set of standards to ensure fairness in the classrooms and hiring practices at universities. He asserts, “many faculty members are no longer devoted to pursuits that are purely ‘academic,’ and the curriculum has been expanded to include agendas about ‘social change’ that are overtly political and make an invitation to a convicted terrorist seem appropriate rather than merely appalling” (p. ix). The reference to the ‘convicted terrorist’ refers to Susan Rosenberg, a former member of the Weather Underground, whom Professor Rabinowitz of Hamilton College invited to teach at the school, an invitation she later rescinded due to student protest over the woman’s past criminal activity (Johnson & Seelye, 2009). It was Rabinowitz’s invitation to Professor Ward Churchill that sparked the publicity about his “Little Eichmann” comment and eventually led to his firing from the University of Colorado. Rosenberg is a precise example of the professor that Horowitz (2006) proclaims to be the most “dangerous,” as he refers to in the title of his book *The Professors: The 101 Most Dangerous Academics in America*.

Horowitz (2006) explains the expansion of the liberal professoriate has come about due to anti-war activists in the 1960s and 1970s who were using college as a way to avoid fighting in the war. They stayed in school through their PhDs and then continued their anti-war political activism when they accepted tenure track positions at universities around the country. Most of Horowitz’s (2006) book is spent examining how “pervasive [is] the conflagration of political interests and academic pursuits on university campuses or in college classrooms?” (p. xxii). The programs he considers to be overtly political include Women’s Studies, African American Studies, Gay and Lesbian Studies, Post-Colonial Studies, Queer Studies, Whiteness Studies, and Cultural Studies (Horowitz 2006).

Less inflammatory in his accusations of liberalism on the college campus is Stanley Fish, a New York Times columnist and University of Florida Law Professor. Fish (2008), in his book *Save the World on Your Own Time*, argues that the only job of professors is to transmit and advance knowledge, and when they become political activists or agents of social change, they abdicate their true purpose. In another article he defines academic freedom as “the freedom to do the academic job, not the freedom to expand it to the point where its goals are infinite” (Fish, 2008). He does not want to foreclose the possibility of civic engagement and democratic action but rather to make sure it happens outside the university and the classroom (Fish, 2009).

There is another contingent of conservatives who believe the entire college system is liberally biased. In his article “The Professoriate and the Truth,” John Kekes, professor at State University of New York at Albany, asserts that academic freedom, as used by liberals, is “set to favor causes political activists regard as being within the limits of toleration and to prohibit the advocacy of causes they find objectionable” (p. 26). He worries that professors seek to transform our society politically rather than to teach our culture as it stands today. He continues by alleging that the stifling of our students’ opinions on campus is evident. As proof he asks, “When did you last hear anyone defending fundamentalist Christianity or the superiority of Western civilization? Who has been allowed to express the opinion on our campuses that homosexuality is a perversion?” (Kekes, 2004, p. 1). Sara Hebel (2004), in her article “Patrolling Professors’ Politics,” writes:

Professors who unnecessarily interject their political views into the classroom contribute to conservative students’ feelings of isolation on campuses that often seem to be dominated by faculty members with liberal views...Several students who say they have Republican leanings argue that their grades have suffered or that their participation in classroom discussions has been stifled by liberal professors.

The isolation and persecution these students feel has inspired the formation of a website called Students for Academic Freedom (SAF). The Horowitz-created website is a movement dedicated to the ideas that a university is primarily an educational institution not a political party and that the attendant resources and authority should be used solely for learning and the pursuit of knowledge. This authority should not be abused in order to indoctrinate students in a particular political ideology. They believe that the principles of a good education and academic freedom require that students encounter multiple viewpoints in required reading, course discussions, and campus programs (Dogan, 2009). The site itself provides a place to log complaints against professors for various offenses including down grading due to political bias, assigning liberally-slanted books, and singling out a student for conservative views, among others. They also try to further their principles by encouraging students to start a group on campus that would lobby for the university to adopt the “Student Bill of Rights” (Dogan, 2009), a document that encourages colleges and universities to embrace all political or religious beliefs.

#### Liberal View

The complaints on the SAF website may suggest that some teachers do cross the line when challenging students. As Fisher & Foubert (2006) state, although the SAF site has only the student point of view on this topic, their very existence makes it “reasonable to assume that some educators may at least occasionally overstep the bounds of professional conduct” (p. 6). They propose that most would prefer to deal

with the issue within the boundary of higher education and that it should not be part of a political process on the state or national stage. In the article “Fear and Loathing in College Classrooms: A Survey of Political Science Department Chairs Regarding Political Bias,” the authors found that department chairs are already sensitive to “concerns about faculty who cross the line from legitimate political expression to proselytizing in the classroom” (Losco & DeOllos, 2007). Their findings also noted that the incidence of student complaints regarding political bias does not appear to be widespread.

Many peer reviewed journals find fault with the conservative movement’s attack on education and their logic. Jeff Lustig (2008), in his article “Thank You, Mr. Horowitz,” notes that though Horowitz is claiming him and his fellow thinkers to be an intellectual movement, they now seem to have a profoundly political attack. Furthermore, he found many of Horowitz’s assertions regarding the liberal left infiltrating the universities were false. Lustig (2008) wrote that “a long-term UCLA study shows that there are 2.6 liberals for every conservative in higher education as a whole, not 10 for every 1” (p.2). In two-year institutions, the same study showed that the numbers are almost equal. Further, he points out that Horowitz has never defined the term “liberal,” though he uses it often. Lustig continues “it is no surprise that students have been absent from this student movement” (Lustig, 2008, p. 2). The article ends with a quote from Thomas Haskell that explains that the true meaning of academic freedom does not lay in completely free speech but rather is contingent on colleges and universities being able to govern themselves and make their own professional decisions.

Kurt Smith (2006) counters Horowitz’s argument by claiming he is a sophist. Historically, sophists were hired by people with weaker arguments to use their expert debating skills to win a dispute. However, Smith (2006) claims that by examining his arguments like a philosopher, one can see why “the ABOR is unnecessary and...why its central claim about the academy is false” (p. 5). Julie Kilmer (2007) disagrees with the SAF’s opposition to the “liberal professoriate” itself. She reasons that if the goal of higher education is to teach college students to think analytically and develop their own opinions, a professor must have the freedom to introduce controversial ideas, both conservative and liberal, in the classroom. She also worries about the quality of teaching if professors are continually afraid that a student has been placed in their classroom to patrol their politics and question their ideas, ultimately undermining the teaching (Kilmer, 2007).

Howe (2004) refutes the Kekes article by asserting that many issues are not denied academic freedom, including homophobic speech, protestant fundamentalism, racial differences, and male domination. He suggests the reason the liberal left may not be espousing these beliefs or pursuing those who do is that they are concerned with the pursuit of truth and these views do not further that ideal. He also believes that in contrast to academics the think tanks who have acquired a great deal of political

influence and have provided much of the research for Horowitz's claims have "many PR resources but no Peer Review" (Howe, 2004, p.29).

In a statement from the Board of Directors of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, they assert that:

...freedom to explore significant and controversial questions is an essential precondition to fulfill the academy's mission of educating students and advancing knowledge. Academic responsibility requires professors to submit their knowledge and claims to rigorous and public review by peers who are experts in the subject matter under consideration; to ground their arguments in the best available evidence; and to work together to foster the education of students. (Anonymous, 2006)

They claim that David Horowitz, whom they refer to as a conservative political activist, is inappropriately inviting government and political oversight into their classrooms. The basis of their argument against the political censorship of professors is that students not only experience their teachers' political biases but benefit from them. The theory is encountering views and beliefs contrary to their own preconceived ones can provide a catalyst for the expansion of knowledge and encourages the development of independent political thought (Anonymous, 2006). Higher education's goal should be to teach students to think critically and independently and, as such, can never truly be apolitical. This is not to say that the Board suggests professors are free to berate students who hold opposing beliefs. On the contrary, they state that, "in a learning context one must both respect those who disagree with oneself and also maintain an atmosphere of civility. Anything less creates a hostile environment that limits intellectual diversity and, therefore, the quality of learning" (Anonymous, 2006). The Board continues by writing that students don't have the right to abstain from hearing opposing ideas or questions and not all opposing views need to be heard in a classroom. It is also unrealistic to expect that undergraduates will have the chance to study every angle to every dispute. Finally, they assert that a good education is less about imparting knowledge unto the student but rather teaching the student to acquire new knowledge for themselves and effectively evaluate those new ideas (Anonymous, 2006).

Many professors choose to defend liberalism itself. In the article "Defending Liberalism on Campus," the authors assert that one of the key understandings of the conservative attacks is incorrect. They argue liberals are accused of 'male bashing' and 'reverse racism' and the destruction of God, and yet they are also accused of being overly concerned about race, class, gender, and post-modern theories. The authors then attempt to demystify the seeming power of the professoriate by claiming that "procedural liberalism encourages (some would say ironically) the development of

conservative critiques rather than quashing them” (Weaver-Hightower & Apple, 2008, p.614). They also state that:

The mainly liberal professors in the United States have created one of the best systems of higher education in the world...this has been done through – not in spite of –decidedly liberal systems of accountability like tenure and promotion, affirmative action, and peer review, all while maintaining academic freedom. (Weaver-Hightower & Apple, 2008, p. 618)

Robert O’Neil (2008) cautions that although we are allowed to create controversy in the classroom, it can sometimes be best to avoid responding to debates in ways that convey partisan views. He argues that attempts by the government to intervene against this bias are misguided and unnecessary and that it would be more appropriate to institute “expectations that professors will respect students’ opinions—some of which may diverge sharply from their own—and will express their political or ideological views in ways that may challenge, but will not disparage or coerce, their students” (p. 3).

### Common Ground

Robert O’Neil’s solution may seem simple, but people on both sides of this issue can become fiery during the arguments. In many ways the debate has become emblematic of the polarized world we inhabit in the United States today. Neither side can really see the other clearly. As a registered Democrat, I find myself on the left of most issues and often identify myself as a liberal so trying to fully appreciate both sides of this debate can be difficult. However, some merit can be found in both arguments. I am certainly not in favor of government intrusion on our college campuses, and I do believe complete academic freedom is essential for professors to provide the kind of excellence in education that we should be expecting from the academy. Academic freedom allows professors to challenge their students without any punitive response (Ehrlich & Colby, 2004). But campus leaders should be aware if the school’s political climate seems to be stifling the minority opinions. In order to truly create a reasoned debate, university officials should be mindful to bring speakers to campus with differing perspectives on public policy issues to “emphasize the openness of the institution to a spectrum of differing views” (Ehrlich & Colby, 2004). Conservative groups could also strive for a more civil tone when discussing and critiquing the “liberal professoriate” to create a better dialogue. If their true intent is to make sure all students have a voice, then it can be said that we are all on the same side. It also seems much of the literature for their argument is in need of peer review, as it is difficult to find in academic journals.

I believe a healthy debate on the issue can occur if all sides agree the students view should be respected and valued, even if the professor happens to disagree with it. A professor’s political views, conservative or liberal, will not be poisonous to youth if the

ideas are conveyed in a reasoned manner. Whatever view is espoused, students should be encouraged to question all the ideas in order to form their own opinions. Liberal professors do not have a monopoly on intelligent thought. Academic classes will become bankrupt if they don't contain opposing views. Lectures and discussions can become ineffective if they steer clear of the dynamic and controversial debates that so often rage in the United States on a daily basis.

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