



Foundation for Individual Rights in Education

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September 15, 2006

President Lee C. Bollinger
Columbia University
535 West 116th Street
New York, New York 10027

Sent via U.S. Mail and Facsimile (212-854-9973)

Dear President Bollinger:

As you probably remember from our past correspondence, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) unites leaders in the fields of civil rights and civil liberties, scholars, journalists, and public intellectuals across the political and ideological spectrum on behalf of liberty, legal equality, academic freedom, due process, freedom of speech, and freedom of conscience on America's college campuses.

FIRE is profoundly concerned about the threat to the freedoms of speech and conscience posed by Teachers College's current policy of evaluating students and pre-service teachers according to a set of mandated "Professional Commitments and Dispositions." These "dispositions" require students to adopt fundamental outlooks with which they might not agree in order to conform to the "present consensus vision" on campus.

Not only do the dispositions unacceptably interfere with students' moral and intellectual agency, but they also contain vague language that causes confusion and invites abuse. Perhaps most concerning is the disposition that requires students to possess "respect for diversity and commitment to social justice." Such sentiment, high-minded and harmless though it may seem, amounts to an ideological loyalty oath to an entirely abstract concept—"social justice"—that can represent vastly different things to different people. The twentieth century well demonstrates that one man's idea of "social justice" potentially is another man's idea of totalitarian tyranny. Students enroll at Columbia for the purpose of obtaining the knowledge and skill sets necessary to teach, not to imbibe a narrowly defined set of political views.

Teachers College's NCATE documents and Conceptual Framework describe in great detail how your school evaluates student dispositions. In fact, the entire Conceptual Framework, which "represents the present consensus vision and philosophy for teacher education at Teachers College," is infused with specific

ideological declarations that would be far more appropriately determined by individual student conscience and critical reasoning. Instead, students are expected to recognize that dedication to “social justice” entails a commitment to, and belief in, a particular political and cultural worldview: that “social inequalities are often produced and perpetuated through systematic discrimination and justified by societal ideology of merit, social mobility, and individual responsibility.”

This rigid imposition of “correct thinking” should be anathema to any institution devoted to learning—particularly one under the distinguished umbrella of Columbia University—because it replaces the process of intellectual discovery with the imposition of dogmatic political orthodoxy. Additionally, it inhibits dissenting student discourse and scholarship dealing with controversial topics. Teachers are not meant to wage ideological war against their students. By prolonging this practice, your institution is disregarding its moral and contractual obligations to students.

Furthermore, dictating political beliefs opposes the principles and statements of the AAUP. In the *Joint Statement on Rights and Freedoms of Students* (1967), the AAUP advised that “students should be encouraged to develop the capacity for critical judgment and to engage in a sustained and independent search for truth. . . . [they] should be free to take reasoned exception to the data or views offered in any course of study and to reserve judgment about matters of opinion.” In 2000, the AAUP reaffirmed the necessity of these fundamental rights in its *Statement on Graduate Students*: “Graduate programs in universities exist for the discovery and transmission of knowledge, the education of students, the training of future faculty, and the general well-being of society. Free inquiry and free expression are indispensable to the attainment of these goals.”

Of course, professors may profess, and even openly advocate, the political views espoused in the Conceptual Framework. It is categorically different, however, to *require* students to hold certain arguments as unquestionable truths in order to succeed. Surely, some students at Teachers College believe that “societal ideologies of merit, social mobility and individual responsibility” are not inherently negative. Interestingly, the Framework itself acknowledges such students as problematic, lamenting that many “teachers do not see the invisible yet profound social forces at work that bring about inequality.”

According to the Framework, students who dissent “*must* recognize ways in which taken-for-granted notions regarding the legitimacy of the social order are flawed, see change agency as a moral imperative, and have skills to act as agents of change.” (Emphasis added.) Scrutinizing a student’s personal beliefs regarding “invisible social forces” and “flawed social orders” is a formula for excluding those with genuine dissenting views, and emphasizing that students *must* adopt certain beliefs is simply incompatible with universities in a free society. By imposing value conformity, a school will stifle intellectual innovation, critical dialogue, meaningful discourse, and true scholarship. This is true no matter what the ideology in question. FIRE would oppose with equal fervor classroom guidelines that demanded commitment to Christianity or to atheism for a degree in theology; to the free market or to socialism for a degree in economics; or to internationalism or to patriotism for a degree in political science at any institution that claimed to value free speech and thought. While we fully support the rights of Teachers College and

similar private institutions to create and enforce their own academic and professional standards, Columbia—like all institutions—must live up to its public promises and ideals. The Teachers College student handbook insists upon “the greatest degree of freedom of inquiry, teaching, learning and expression for all its members.” In order for students to enjoy this promised freedom, however, their progress cannot depend on their acceptance of certain politicized viewpoints.

Although the U.S. Constitution does not bind private universities like Columbia to guarantee freedom of expression to students, those that claim to value the open exchange of diverse ideas should pay heed to the wise and moral principles enshrined in the First Amendment.

Consider the Supreme Court’s counsel in *West Virginia Board of Education v. Barnette* (1943), which dealt with mandated allegiances to political ideologies at public schools. Writing for the Court, Justice Robert H. Jackson declared, “Freedom to differ is not limited to things that do not matter much. That would be a mere shadow of freedom. The test of its substance is the right to differ as to things that touch the heart of the existing order. If there is any fixed star in our constitutional constellation, it is that no official, high or petty, can prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion or force citizens to confess by word or act their faith therein.” The Court ultimately concluded that the Constitution intended to protect precisely “the sphere of intellect and spirit” from “all official control.”

Jackson’s words are particularly relevant here as many schools, public and private alike, follow your institution’s lead. As the nation’s largest and most comprehensive graduate school of education, Teachers College enjoys incomparable influence over the entire field. We hope you carefully consider the effect of your school’s policies in both the academic community at large and in your student community at home.

Concerned students, faculty, donors, and the general public expect promises of academic freedom to be honored, especially when, as is the case here, the most basic and private rights of students are at stake. Such promises will strain credibility until Teachers College abandons its policy of assessing student commitment to controversial, politicized, and wholly personal concepts like “social justice.” Considering NCATE’s decision only two months ago to remove “social justice” from its suggested dispositions criteria—the result of widespread and sustained criticism—revisiting the criteria at Teachers College seems especially timely and appropriate. Presumably, your own experience in education has demonstrated that excellent teachers can subscribe to a wide variety of political and social views. Teachers College should similarly reflect this reality.

We hope that you will seriously consider revising your policy. We thank you for your time and look forward to your response by October 6, 2006.

Sincerely,



Samantha K. Harris
Director of Legal and Public Advocacy

cc:

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