



## Foundation for Individual Rights in Education

601 Walnut Street, Suite 510 • Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19106  
T 215-717-3473 • F 215-717-3440 • fire@thefire.org • www.thefire.org

Greg Lukianoff  
PRESIDENT

October 18, 2006

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Office of the President  
202 Low Memorial Library  
535 West 116<sup>th</sup> Street  
New York, New York 10027-6606

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Teachers College  
Office of the President  
PO Box 163  
525 West 120<sup>th</sup> Street  
New York, New York 10027-6606

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Dear Presidents Bollinger and Fuhrman:

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FIRE appreciates your response to our letter of September 15, 2006. Our concerns about the ideological litmus test at Teachers College, however, are not allayed; nor will they be until Teachers College's standards are rewritten in a way that respects the freedom of conscience of Teachers College students. In recent weeks, Columbia and its representatives have made many sweeping statements confirming the essentiality of freedom of speech at Columbia. Such commitments cannot be taken seriously if Columbia is unwilling to stand up for the most essential freedom of all: the freedom of the mind.

Our concern remains that Teachers College's standards require students to demonstrate a "commitment to social justice," a vague and politically loaded concept. At a college that claims to value freedom and intellectual inquiry, this is an unacceptable encroachment on a student's right to think, believe, and express what he or she sees fit. Teachers College employs "dispositions," which you define as "observable behaviors that fall within the law and involve the use of certain skills," to evaluate students. These dispositions, "expected of Teachers College candidates and graduates" and "assessed at each transition point," include "Respect for Diversity and Commitment to Social Justice." (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) Standards, Element 4: Dispositions for All Candidates.) Hopefully it is clear that evaluating a degree candidate's "Commitment to Social Justice" necessitates a normative conception of what

social justice is—and, concordantly, what it is not—and thus prescribes an “official” ideal. Evaluating students according to their commitment to this official ideal is a stark violation of a student’s right to decide for him or herself what is and is not socially just.

In your reply, you dispute FIRE’s claim that Teachers College’s Conceptual Framework “require[s] students to adopt fundamental outlooks with which they might not agree in order to conform.” Instead, you insist that the Conceptual Framework “represents the present consensus vision and philosophy for teacher education at Teachers College—that is, of how to teach, but *not of what values should be taught.*” (Emphasis added.) Unfortunately, this characterization is inaccurate. The Teachers College Conceptual Framework is replete with examples of prescribed “official” values, adoption of which is presumptively necessary to successfully complete a course of study at the college. The framework states: “We see teaching as an ethical and political act. We see teachers as moral actors whose job is to facilitate the growth and development of other human beings, and as such, as participants in a larger struggle for social justice.” (Teachers College Conceptual Framework, p. 26.; internal citation omitted.) If such statements are not explicit declarations of values—specifically, that teachers are “participants in a larger struggle” for the college’s imagination of “social justice”—it is difficult to imagine what would be.

What, a student might well ask, constitutes “social justice,” since the college envisions its students as struggling to achieve it? Again, the framework supplies a ready answer: “[E]ducators 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.” (*Id.* at 27.) Note well the word “*must.*” Such language directly contradicts your insistence that “the Conceptual Framework does not prescribe certain thoughts or beliefs for students.” Making matters still worse is the fact that, by Columbia’s own admission, these “[d]ispositions are a critical part of candidates’ assessment during all field experiences, student teaching, and internships.” (Teachers College NCATE Exhibit, Standard One, Element 4: Dispositions for All Candidates, Fieldwork/Student Teaching and Internship, <http://www.tc.edu/administration/ncate/ExhibitRoom/Element%201-4.htm>.)

The crux of Teachers College’s argument appears to be that the college does not, in fact, have an ideological litmus test for teacher candidates, and that students are not, in fact, judged on their ideology. Unfortunately, the plain language of Teachers College’s standards clearly indicates that the college does rely on both vague and subjective political criteria and, in other instances, on remarkably specific definitions of what the ideological criteria mean. This is a political litmus test. If Teachers College is arguing that while it maintains these “dispositions” on paper, it will not actually utilize them in practice, then the college should rewrite them to reflect this reality.

It is crucial for Teachers College to understand that—even if we are to believe they are not enforced—the mere presence of such standards is a harm in itself. As President Bollinger well knows, in constitutional law, vague, broad, and wholly subjective restrictions on free speech or free thought are considered highly dangerous to society in large part due to the “chilling effect” they cause. For example, a law prohibiting the expression of “unpatriotic sentiment”

causes harm regardless of whether or not it is actually enforced, because the vast majority of citizens will keep their mouths shut rather than risk violating the law. Here, Teachers College has both highly specific and highly subjective evaluative criteria for students, which may “chill” students from speaking their minds or even choosing to attend in the first place. One can readily imagine applicants considering the policies of numerous education schools. Would an applicant with conservative Muslim beliefs risk attending Teachers College if he suspected that his religious beliefs might not be considered “socially just”? What about Orthodox Jewish applicants, anarchists, evangelical Christians, or Randian atheists? Many potential applicants have internal beliefs that are inconsistent with the worldview laid out by Teachers College’s Conceptual Framework. Does this mean they would not make good teachers? Does it mean that Teachers College does not want them?

Teachers College must understand that FIRE’s concerns are not wholly theoretical. We have seen numerous cases in the past year alone where administrators have employed vague criteria like “social justice” to punish students with dissenting points of view. From Le Moyne College in New York State to Washington State University, from Rhode Island College and DePaul University to the California Institute for Integral Studies, students and faculty have been punished because they were deemed to have incorrect points of view or to have failed to live up to universities’ standards of “social justice.” The way to stop these betrayals of academic freedom before they start is to consider the values of a liberal arts education, to remove political litmus tests from policies and, most importantly, to recognize that dissent is complimentary and helpful to—not an unfortunate byproduct of—education.

While the problems posed by officially sanctioned and politically charged evaluation criteria are very serious, the solution to this problem is rather simple. FIRE asks only that a personal “commitment to social justice” or any other vague or politically loaded term no longer be *required* of Teachers College students, not that the school as a whole abandon its attachment to a certain model of “social justice.” Indeed, FIRE has no position or comment on the ideological or political nature of the college’s definition of social justice. We would oppose with equal vigor a policy requiring students to demonstrate their commitment to “patriotism,” “individualism” or “capitalism.” Any educational institution that claims to value free speech and academic freedom may not prescribe students’ final conclusions on questions of great personal, moral, political, and philosophical importance. Helping prepare students to research, reason, criticize, analyze, and argue on their own is education. Deciding what conclusions are correct and then asking students to accept these conclusions as truth is thought control and creates dogma rather than innovation.

Once more, we strongly encourage Teachers College to revise its policies, like the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education did this past June, to eliminate the use of impossibly vague and politically charged evaluative criteria. In following NCATE’s lead, Teachers College may find harmony between its institutional theories on good pedagogy and its students’ right of private conscience. Far from viewing this request as onerous, Teachers College should view it as an important opportunity. By addressing our concerns and reforming its policies, Teachers College may demonstrate that it shares an understanding of the basic premises of a liberal education and truly embraces human diversity on its most

profound and essential level. Great teachers come in all shapes and sizes, from all backgrounds and all beliefs. Let Teachers College's policies reflect this reality.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Greg Lukianoff".

Greg Lukianoff  
President

cc:

Alan Brinkley, Provost, Columbia University  
Susan Feagin, Executive Vice President for University Development and Alumni Relations,  
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College  
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Encl.