Carnegie Perspectives
A different way to think about teaching and learning

Political Bias in Undergraduate Education

Authors: Tom Ehrlich and Anne Colby, Senior Scholars
The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching

March 2006

Abstract: A thoughtful commentary that proposes an alternative course for faculty and campus leaders to navigate through the highly politicized Academic Bill of Rights debate.

Essay:

Under the banner of an "Academic Bill of Rights," legislation has been introduced in Congress and in several states to help remedy what the sponsors charge is liberal political bias on college campuses. The bill, which has yet to be approved anywhere, would challenge campuses to adopt voluntarily procedures that the sponsors claim would encourage a diversity of political perspectives among faculty, campus speakers, and student organizations.

While the goals of this effort are commendable, we think this particular solution is misguided. Leaders at every university agree that educating students in the practice of open-minded inquiry, while ensuring academic freedom of faculty, is a key component of undergraduate education, but creating a classroom and wider campus climate that is truly open to multiple perspectives on hot-button political issues is extremely difficult to accomplish.

Yet, if we are to educate our students for responsible citizenship, we and they can't steer clear of controversy. Liberal education and the values of the academy are all about the need to seek and consider alternative conceptions, stances, and views and to consider them respectfully. If a campus is to commit itself to open inquiry and the exploration of a diversity of views, it should affirm the many ways in which controversy occurs rather than limiting its focus to the often simplistic battles between left and right. In many domains, students must learn to think clearly about controversial issues, to form opinions

and make a strong case for them, to evaluate the evidence for competing positions, to understand alternative perspectives in their own terms, to engage opposing views with civility and a sincerely open mind, and to change their own positions when persuaded.

This is difficult to accomplish, perhaps especially when it comes to controversial issues that may have an ideological dimension. Unfortunately, in most settings, including universities, people with strong opinions talk primarily to those who agree with them. The result is that often neither students nor faculty are accustomed to communicating across ideological divisions.

In part because faculty may be unaware of the values and beliefs implicit in their approach to a subject, they may not raise their assumptions for explicit examination. This lack of awareness can happen at any point on the political spectrum. Even faculty who want to encourage open debate by drawing out minority opinions are sometimes so convinced of their ideological positions that they can't imagine how one might make a persuasive case for an opposing view.

A legislative approach to ensuring open inquiry fails because it casts the issue in negative terms, as a matter of policing the faculty—and the campus more broadly—to stamp out "indoctrination." It is a solution that inherently calls for less, not more, debate. Given the complexity and ambiguity of both political and academic discourse, this kind of policing is also impossible to implement objectively. Cast in negative terms, the effort itself would be destructive to the goal of civil discourse across ideological boundaries.

By contrast, a positive approach, in which administration, faculty, and students from different political perspectives join together to develop strategies for the positive pursuit of more open inquiry, contributes to a climate of openness, respect, and cooperation. This means that faculty and administrative leaders on a campus should be self-conscious in raising the issue of open inquiry—what is it, why is it important, and what should the principle mean in practice?

Convocations and other gatherings at the opening of the school year are often useful occasions to open conversations about these issues. Based on these conversations, the campus might choose to adopt the principles of open inquiry and individual commitment as explicit goals and probe more deeply about how they can be pursued. If such goals have already been adopted, their meaning in practice can be re-examined at these times.

Campus leaders should use multiple opportunities to endorse and support these goals. Materials sent to newly admitted students, as one example, should set an expectation that the campus will be a community of discourse, and that students will be exposed to a diversity of opinion about many issues, including political perspectives. The message should be modeled in the range of individuals invited to speak on campus. University officials do not control all of these invitations, but they do control some, and those invitations can be balanced in ways that emphasize the openness of the institution to a spectrum of differing views.

In the political domain, speakers should include respected exemplars of open-mindedness and civility who (despite their own political convictions) truly believe that in order to be effective, engaged citizens need to be skilled at communicating and forming alliances with people whose perspectives are different from their own. Invited guests should also include those who exemplify political engagement as cooperative public work within a community, reflecting the value of compromise in pursuit of the greater good.

Campus leaders should be in regular touch with a range of student opinions to test whether the campus climate seems to some students to stifle minority political opinions. If so, those leaders should work with students and faculty to ensure that forums are available for the expression of minority views and for thoughtful exploration of multiple points of view. In many parts of the academy, the role of scholarship is seen to include representing the perspectives of the powerless, those who are out of the economic and political mainstream. Academic freedom protects faculty's right to challenge prevailing views without punitive response. Likewise, it is important for academic leaders, including faculty, to protect the academic freedom of students who wish to challenge the prevailing views within their classroom or institution.

Faculty can also do much to promote the value of open-minded inquiry within the classroom. At the very least, they can examine carefully their assignments and what they say in class through the lens of open inquiry as a course goal. One strategy some faculty use is to ask students to conduct research on and present the strongest arguments they can marshal for two or more quite different positions on contentious issues. This requires students to bring a degree of sympathy to positions they do not hold.

Faculty should also pay attention to assessment. Sometimes students believe their academic work has been evaluated based on the political views it expresses, rather than its quality, even when this is not true. For this and other reasons (which concern good teaching more broadly), it is essential to make assessment criteria explicit and to provide as much feedback as possible based on those criteria.

It has become a commonplace to complain about America's polarized political landscape. If the next generation of citizens is to set a different tone, they must experience in college an alternative to the politics of vitriol.

.....

This Perspective is excerpted from an article originally published in the Summer 2004 issue of *Liberal Education*, a publication of the Association of American Colleges and Universities.

THE CARNEGIE FOUNDATION
for the ADVANCEMENT *of* TEACHING
51 Vista Lane
Stanford, CA 94305

http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/perspectives/