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## Guidelines for Discussion, or Thought Control?

### Rules for classroom discourse, popular in women's studies, set off a controversy

By THOMAS BARTLETT

When Lynn Weber flipped on her computer one morning this past spring to read her e-mail messages,

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she expected to find the usual -- questions about an assignment, a note about a research project, maybe an invitation to lunch. As director of the women's-studies program at the University of South Carolina at Columbia, she receives 75 or more messages a day, mostly from her students and colleagues. But as she scanned the subject lines this time, one of them shocked her: "Thought Nazis are running amuck."

In all, Ms. Weber received more than 100 similar missives over the next week, some nasty, some weird, all angry about a single page of a syllabus for one of her courses, a graduate seminar in women's studies. Articles in several newspapers and on various Web sites had recently accused her of stifling the free speech of her students. The objections centered on a set of discussion guidelines that ask students to "acknowledge that racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, and other institutionalized forms of oppression exist" and to "assume that people -- both the groups we study and the members of the class -- always do the best they can."

Critics see the guidelines as an ideological litmus test that some students can't pass and no student should be asked to follow. That's

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nonsense, say Ms. Weber and her supporters, who counter that detractors are plucking the guidelines out of their classroom context and using them to score political points.

The debate at South Carolina is one of several that have erupted recently in which professors have been accused of discriminating against students for their political beliefs or racial backgrounds. At the University of California at Berkeley, a graduate student teaching "The Politics and Poetics of Palestinian Resistance" wrote in the course description that "conservative thinkers are encouraged to seek other sections." At Arizona State University, a course on Navajo history restricted enrollment to American Indian students. Likewise, several Spanish courses offered at Florida International University were closed to non-Hispanic students.

At each of those colleges, the course descriptions were revised and the restrictions dropped after students and the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education expressed their disapproval.

Some critics have lumped Ms. Weber's classroom guidelines into the same category as the courses that restricted enrollment. However, the guidelines apply under different circumstances, say Ms. Weber and others who use them. Unlike the restrictions, Ms. Weber's guidelines are not printed in course descriptions but are included in her syllabus, which students see after they enroll.

Ms. Weber does not restrict entry to her class on the basis of race, political viewpoint, or any other criterion, she says. And she adds that she does not force anyone to follow her discussion guidelines.

But some scholars, including the chairman of her own department, suggest that Ms. Weber's guidelines are politically charged and have no place in any classroom, especially not one on the campus of a public college.

The debate pits the rights of students to express themselves against a professor's prerogative to conduct her classroom in whatever way she deems fit.

The conflict has generated a surprising amount of attention -- Ms. Weber recently declined an invitation to discuss her guidelines on the national television program *The O'Reilly Factor*. And while some critics are worried about violations of the Constitution, supporters wonder what could be so harmful about a set of guidelines that Ms. Weber says are created to encourage more sensitive and respectful discussions.

## Power Dynamics

Ms. Weber wrote the guidelines 18 years ago when she was an associate professor of sociology at Memphis State University, after talking with a colleague about how classroom discussions sometimes got out of hand. Other professors in her department started using the guidelines, and soon colleagues around the country included them with their syllabuses. Some used her wording verbatim, others tinkered with the language, adding several sentences, eliminating others. The guidelines have been used mostly in women's-studies or sociology courses, but a few professors in other disciplines have copied them, too. Without Ms. Weber's even knowing it, the guidelines took on a life of their own.

In 1990, the professor first published her guidelines in *Women's Studies Quarterly*. In 2000, they were published in *Teaching Sociological Concepts and the Sociology of Gender* (American Sociological Association Teaching Resources Center), along with an article by Ms. Weber explaining how the guidelines could help foster discussions that have a "high level of participation, where my students get to know each other well, and where multiple realities are revealed in respectful and enlightening ways."

Ms. Weber also hopes that they create an atmosphere in which "race, class, gender, and other power dynamics do not inhibit learning."

The guidelines work, according to Matthew R. Wawrzynski, assistant director of orientation for new student programs at the University of Maryland at College Park. "There needs to be a level of trust," says Mr. Wawrzynski, who says he has found that students feel freer to express themselves because the guidelines protect them from ridicule.

Rosalie Torres Stone, an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, agrees. "They're there so we can have a civil, respectful, and safe discussion," Ms. Stone says. "I don't see them as imposing an ideology."

## Threat to Free Speech?

But that is exactly what they do, say critics like Thor L. Halvorssen, executive director of FIRE. It was his organization that first objected publicly to the guidelines, sending a letter to the University of South Carolina at Columbia in April that called them "a threat to freedom of both speech and conscience." The letter continued, "While it is, of course, permissible for a professor to hold political views espoused in

the guidelines, or even to advocate these arguments in teaching and scholarship, it is categorically different to require students to hold certain arguments as unquestionable truth in order to participate in a class without penalty. ..." In an interview, Mr. Halvorsen put it more forcefully: "It would be a lot simpler if she wore an armband and handed them out in class."

A student in "Seminar in Women's Studies," Ms. Weber's spring course at South Carolina, objected to the guidelines and contacted FIRE, according to the organization. The student, who wishes to remain anonymous, has since graduated from South Carolina and is now teaching at another college. She says that while she does not disagree with any of the views expressed in the guidelines, she does object to "being told to think that way." The student adds that she felt Ms. Weber did not respect her opinions on some topics.

Ms. Weber says no one in the course complained to her. In fact, she says, only a handful of students have raised concerns about the guidelines in the 18 years since they were introduced. And, Ms. Weber contends, any student who did have a problem with them would not, as FIRE has claimed, receive a lower grade. In the case of the student who complained to FIRE, that is true: She says she received an A in the course (no one in the class received a grade below a B, according to Ms. Weber). "I offer them the opportunity to make changes in the guidelines if they want to," she says. "It's not about agreeing. ... I want us to lay on the table some guidelines for promoting respect while recognizing difference."

A column published in the student newspaper criticized the guidelines, calling them unconstitutional. Some student leaders, like Charles Duncan, chairman of the university's College Republicans chapter, have also voiced their disapproval. "I think she should rethink her method of classroom discussion and not have such a closed mind to conservative opinions and those who believe otherwise," he says. While he has never taken one of Ms. Weber's courses, Mr. Duncan, a sophomore majoring in political science, says he would have a problem with the guideline that asks students to acknowledge heterosexism. "My personal opinion is that homosexuality is wrong," says Mr. Duncan.

Several of Ms. Weber's colleagues have rallied around her. Deborah Parra-Medina, an assistant professor of women's studies who taught the spring seminar course with Ms. Weber, says no one complained to her about the guidelines. "They set a framework for how we are going to go about discussing things in class," she says. "I don't think there is anything wrong with them."

Lee Davinroy, now an assistant professor of English at the University of Texas-Pan American, took the same seminar course from Ms. Weber several years ago and says she "never shut down discussion" or lowered anyone's grade because of his or her political beliefs. "I think it's ridiculous. Her guidelines are *guidelines*. They are not rules," she says.

### **Pressure From the Top**

The criticism that worries Ms. Weber most comes from her own bosses. Some at the university, including the chairman of the sociology department, of which women's studies is a part, along with the dean of the liberal-arts college are uncomfortable with the guidelines. "I've seen a lot of syllabi, and I've never seen anything like that. Ideological guidelines are kind of unusual," says Barry Markovsky, the chairman of the sociology department. He particularly objects to the guideline that asks students to "agree to combat actively the myths and stereotypes about our own groups and other groups so that we can break down the walls that prohibit group cooperation and group gain."

Says Mr. Markovsky, "It sounds as if she is requiring political activism outside the classroom in order to fully participate in the classroom."

Not so, argues Ms. Weber, who says she doesn't require political activism in or out of the classroom, but only asks that her students maintain open minds. (The reference to actively combating myths, she contends, refers to dispelling stereotypes in classroom discussions.) Ms. Weber says her approach to teaching and research is very different from the chairman's and that they don't see eye to eye on most issues.

After the letter from FIRE arrived, Ms. Weber met several times with Joan Hinde Stewart, the dean of the College of Liberal Arts. Though they both describe those meetings as cordial, neither emerged from them satisfied. While Ms. Stewart says she stopped short of insisting that the professor stop using or change the guidelines, she says she encouraged Ms. Weber to consider rewording them to make them sound less like students were being urged to hold certain beliefs.

"If she changed the verb tenses, I would feel fine with it," says Ms. Stewart, who adds that she is confident Ms. Weber has not violated the free speech rights of students.

For her part, Ms. Weber says she will not alter the wording of her guidelines, except as a result of discussion with her students. "I think administrators have a right to make suggestions," she says. But "they don't have the right to order you to change something."

Critics have said that, because the University of South Carolina is a public institution, guidelines that coerce students to agree with certain political beliefs are illegal. According to J. Peter Byrne, a professor of law at Georgetown University who writes about academic freedom, Ms. Weber is probably not in violation of any laws. However, Mr. Byrne is concerned that the guidelines "go beyond merely academics to having a party line."

Ms. Weber, a visiting professor at the University of Maryland at College Park this year, adamantly defends the guidelines. She is angry at what she believes has been unfair and inaccurate criticism and worries that other professors will now shy away from using similar discussion guidelines in their own classrooms. "I really hate that an organization like this can silence people who are doing good things," she says.

FIRE has hinted that it may bring legal action against Ms. Weber. And Ms. Stewart, the dean, says she will "continue to have conversations" with the professor about the guidelines. Says the dean, "I will work with her and other professors to make sure the free-speech rights of students are not abrogated."

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### **GUIDING CONVERSATIONS: POLITENESS OR POLITICS?**

Lynn Weber, director of the women's studies program at the University of South Carolina, created the following guidelines for classroom discussion in 1984.

- 1.** Acknowledge that racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, and other institutionalized forms of oppression exist. \*
- 2.** Acknowledge that one mechanism of institutionalized racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, etc., is that we are all systematically taught misinformation about our own group and about members of other groups. This is true for members of privileged and oppressed groups.
- 3.** Agree not to blame ourselves or others for the misinformation we have learned, but to accept responsibility for not repeating misinformation after we have learned otherwise.
- 4.** Assume that people -- both the groups we study and the members of the class -- always do the best they can.

**5.** Actively pursue information about our own groups and those of others.

**6.** Share information about our groups with other members of the class and we will never demean, devalue, or in any way "put down" people for their experiences.

**7.** Agree to combat actively the myths and stereotypes about our own groups and other groups so that we can break down the walls that prohibit group cooperation and group gain.

**8.** Create a safe atmosphere for open discussion. If members of the class may wish to make comments that they do not want repeated outside the classroom, they can preface their remarks with a request that the class agree not to repeat the remarks.

\* Many other institutionalized forms of oppression could be listed here. A more complete list might include age, ethnicity, disability, color, national origin, and physical appearance. Although the major focus is on the four oppressions listed, analogies can fairly easily be made to other forms.

Note: These guidelines were developed by Lynn Weber and published in Women's Studies Quarterly 18 (Spring/Summer 1990).

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