

WSU takes hit on free speech

Disposition assessment for teachers draws criticism

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A national higher education watchdog group says Washington State University is failing to protect the speech rights of students who have controversial or unpopular opinions.

In the latest case, an education student who describes himself as a conservative Christian was threatened with dismissal and ordered into diversity training over comments that he didn't believe that whites are privileged, opposed adoption by gays, and wrote "diversity is perversity" in the margins of a book.

Professors accused the man, 42-year-old Ed Swan of Othello, of being a white supremacist and anti-gay, but WSU dropped its threat of dismissal against Swan after the university heard a complaint from the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), which pursues free-speech complaints at campuses around the country.

Swan denies being a racist and said his views wouldn't prevent him from being a good teacher or from treating children of different backgrounds fairly.

"Why am I more likely to proselytize than someone that's on the extreme left?" he said. "I'm no more likely to preach to a child in class than they are."

It's the second case in a year in which FIRE has helped stoke a controversy at WSU. Last year, the group defended student Chris Lee, who wrote and staged a play that he intended to be provocative.

Student protesters with tickets purchased by the university disrupted the play. The university has repeatedly refused to denounce them, saying the protesters were expressing their free-speech rights.

FIRE says that in both cases, the university "has shown an embarrassing lack of respect for the rights of its students."

"I think Washington State is not too different from all too many other schools around the country," said David French, president of FIRE. "They have a real inability to handle a certain kind of controversial or dissenting speech."

WSU Provost Robert Bates, who runs the Pullman campus, said thorny issues arise at any school over time and that WSU works to resolve them as fairly as it can. He said the College of Education is reviewing the use of the assessments that faulted Swan for not being "sensitive to community and cultural norms" of the program and for not valuing diversity.

"I don't think we're any different from any other public institution where you have varying viewpoints," Bates said Friday.

Dispositions

The most recent case involves a method of assessing the character of education students known as "dispositions," in which students are evaluated on their attitudes and behaviors. Dispositions range from assessing a student's cooperation and willingness to offer help to those regarding respect for "cultural norms" and diversity.

Swan is a senior studying elementary education. Over the last year, he was given four substandard evaluations, known as Professional Dispositions Evaluations or PDEs, though he was an A student. Swan was criticized in the PDEs for not having an open mind, for expressing "anti-gay/lesbian sentiments" and ideas about "a woman's place," according to FIRE and Swan.

On the web

Catch FIRE

The Philadelphia-based Freedom for Individual Rights in Education has compiled a series of public documents relating to the free-speech cases at WSU. To view them, visit the group's web site at <http://www.thefire.org/>.

Swan told his professors that he didn't believe in the idea of white privilege or male privilege, or that there is a bias any longer in favor of majority groups. One professor called him a white supremacist in one evaluation, though Swan saw that after the fact.

"I didn't know I was a white supremacist until I read my file," said Swan, who points out that he has four bi-racial children from a former marriage to a Hispanic woman.

Swan was made to attend a diversity training course and ordered to sign an agreement to abide by the dispositions to respect community norms and appreciate diversity. Swan didn't sign it, and the university withdrew it after receiving complaints from FIRE, which argued that it was an unconstitutional intrusion on Swan's freedom.

"That is incredibly dangerous," said French, who added that Swan was not being judged on his behavior but on his opinions. "They focused on the various expressions, whether it was writing phrases in notebooks, the T-shirt he wore ... even wearing a camouflage hunting cap led one person to conclude he was threatening."

Judy Mitchell, dean of the College of Education, did not return a message seeking comment. But she has defended the dispositions, telling the Moscow-Pullman Daily News they aren't intended to enforce certain opinions, but to ensure that teachers are open to the range of people they may encounter in the classroom.

She said the school has used the forms for four years, in keeping with national accreditation standards. State law also requires an evaluation of student character. Mitchell said 1,364 students have undergone the assessments test and 34 have failed it, including some who are still doing student teaching and others who changed majors.

When asked by the Daily News whether U.S. Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia – generally considered the most conservative member of the court – could pass the dispositions test, Mitchell said, "I don't know how to answer that."

"It was a fascinating response," French said. "To me, the easy answer to that question is, if Antonin Scalia can manage a class of 10-year-olds, there's nothing in his ideology to prevent him from being a teacher."

In a letter to FIRE on Sept. 9, Mitchell wrote that the college would review its use of the dispositions and be careful not to apply them to political views.

"However, (Swan) may not display prejudice in the classroom setting and expect to successfully complete this program," she wrote.

'Institution must change'

FIRE and others say that such dispositions assessments are more and more common in the training of teachers. The group calls it a "new form of campus censorship."

Syndicated columnist John Leo referred to the matter in this week's column, and FIRE has intervened on behalf of another professor at Brooklyn College who objected to the same method of evaluations.

The controversy has also drawn the attention of state Rep. Don Cox, R-Colfax, and state Sen. Mark Schoesler, R-Ritzville, who represent Pullman.

"If a (Supreme Court) justice could conceivably not meet any institution's criteria for dispositions acceptable to the profession, the institution must change," said Cox, a former WSU College of Education faculty member.

Schoesler said, "You hear about this kind of thing on the radio, with someone kept out of something at a university because of their conservative views. But here it is happening in our own back yard."

Swan echoes a longtime bone of contention among many conservatives, who complain of a liberal orthodoxy on campuses. He said that when he began taking classes again as an adult, he found that liberal politics were the rule in almost every environment, but he was largely able to express himself without problems.

He acknowledged that his views fall outside the mainstream on campus, where an emphasis on diversity has been a priority for years. He said he thinks the issue is raised too often.

"If you as a white male embrace your heritage, you're a racist. That's the way it is," he said. "These issues come up in every

class, how white people have done so many things to minorities. That comes up in almost every class."

Bates, the WSU provost, said it's difficult for universities to reconcile being open to students who believe homosexuality is a sin with a campus vision that includes respecting diversity of sexual orientation. He said that the school's goal – and the goal of the dispositions process – is not to enforce a particular opinion but to ensure that teachers are prepared and qualified to teach classes that come from a diverse world.

"The idea of the dispositions theory is putting individuals into the classroom who are accepting of differences," he said. "Will they be able to work with all students to bring them up to the next level of education?"