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## Academic rights panel told to watch where it steps

By [Paul Peirce](#)  
TRIBUNE-REVIEW  
Tuesday, September 20, 2005

A special state legislative committee assigned to determine whether professors' political biases are causing problems in classrooms for students at state-run institutions of higher learning was warned Monday to tread lightly when the issue involves freedom of speech.

David French, president of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education in Philadelphia, told the Select Committee on Student Academic Freedom that as it studies whether students have had their academic rights violated by professors "you must make sure you do not violate the constitutional rights of professors."

"Our agenda is to preserve the marketplace of ideas on campus. Often censorship comes from the best of intentions," French said.

"The fact of the matter is you don't violate the Constitution to meet that goal," he said.

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In July, state lawmakers -- mostly Republicans -- established a committee to examine academic freedom at the state's public colleges and universities.

Rep. Gibson Armstrong, a Lancaster Republican, introduced the legislation to form the committee after he said he received complaints from students who claimed that their educational opportunities -- and sometimes grades -- were impacted by professors who had conflicting political views.

Yesterday, Armstrong and committee chairman Rep. Tom Stevenson, an Allegheny County Republican, emphasized the purpose of the inquiry is not to vilify professors.

"Really, the purpose of House Resolution 177 is to inform the House on academic freedom issues. We want to make it clear we're focusing on institutions ... not professors," Stevenson said.

However, the rancor between Republicans and Democratic legislators was apparent from the outset of the first of at least five hearings before the committee reports back to the General Assembly. Committee member Dan Surra, an Elk County Democrat, complained that the inquiry is a "colossal waste of time."

"I have never in my 15 years had anyone call me to say their academic freedom has been abused," Surra said.

However, Armstrong maintains the committee is needed to study the issue.

"Mr. French himself, whose nonprofit, nonpartisan organization has five liberals and five conservatives on the board, himself said that freedom of speech is an issue on campuses in Pennsylvania. We all must hold freedom of speech sacred. ... It should not evolve into partisan politics," Armstrong said.



In his two-hour-long address to the committee, French reported that the majority of state-funded colleges and universities have student speech policy codes that he believes are "unconstitutionally" overbroad and "vague."

For example, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, French said, prohibits "the posting of material that is insensitive to affirmative action issues."

"How is an ordinary person to know what Indiana University of Pennsylvania's administrators might deem insensitive to affirmative action issues? Since most people do not want to risk punishment, students will self-censor in the face of these vague policies," French said.

Armstrong also maintained that the committee is not set on endorsing any legal remedy, including the proposed "Academic Bill of Rights" written by conservative David Horowitz. It already has been adopted in nine states.

Horowitz's bill, written in nonpartisan language, states several basic and accepted academic principles: Faculty should encourage discussion and free debate; they should not bring irrelevant political opinions into the classroom; a diversity of views should be taught; and students should be graded on the subject, not their political ideology.

Armstrong said the committee "still doesn't know if there is a problem."

"Maybe Penn State's (President Graham) Spanier is right and the universities properly police themselves and we do not have a problem. But we should occasionally take a look at the issue," Armstrong said.

"It's appropriate to debate ... ask questions. Maybe no law will be needed," he said.

Several institutions had representatives at yesterday's hearing, including Charles McLaughlin of the University of Pittsburgh.

"We don't know where exactly this committee is going yet, and we still don't have all the information after today. It has been a concern, but we're basically here to find out information," McLaughlin said.

While introductory remarks took up much of yesterday's hearing, testimony from students and professors alike is expected to be the focus of other sessions to be held throughout the state.

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