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Today!

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WSU challenge underscores true meaning of diversity

A recent case involving the conservative political views of a Washington State University student has provided an opportunity for academia to revisit a meaningful definition of "diversity" in teacher education programs.

Diversity means just that — a wide-ranging approach that must embrace the entire spectrum of views and issues.

Ed Swan, a 42-year-old who wants to be a teacher, has made no bones of the fact he's a social conservative, predictably opposed to the likes of gay marriage and abortion.

The Associated Press reported that a form used by the university asks professors to evaluate whether a student exhibits an understanding of the complexities of race, power, gender, class, sexual orientation and privilege in American society. Swan failed four times and was threatened with termination from the teacher training program after teachers said they feared he could not withhold his opinions in a classroom. He was ordered to a training session with the Office of the Vice President for Equity and Diversity.

Not surprisingly, Swan felt it was punishment for his conservative views in what he sees as a liberal environment. He defended those views and called for help from the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, a Philadelphia-based group that battles political correctness at universities.

Now officials at the university are taking a new look at the criteria used to determine if prospective teachers are suited to lead a classroom full of children.

Periodic revisiting of diversity standards is always a good idea to ensure they pursue — and protect — wide-ranging accommodation of political viewpoints, from liberal to conservative, as well as other important societal considerations.

While we don't necessarily support all of Swan's views, without qualification we defend his right to hold them. That's one of the basic tenets of the First Amendment.

Diversity means acknowledging and respecting the viewpoints of others, even if you don't agree with them. That is the test for those who don't seem to realize that life is not divided neatly into liberal or conservative camps.

When extended to teaching of children, how can those who accept no agenda but their own possibly teach anyone the value and skills of informed decision making best achieved by weighing all the options and not lock-stepping with a given agenda?

That's the real challenge of teacher education programs, not

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questioning the individual beliefs of conservatives or liberals. Find those who can operate in the broad middle. If Swan's outspoken views were cause for concern during the WSU diversity awareness process, then the views of someone as decidedly liberal should do the same.

His case has served a purpose. It's a reminder that diversity is a way of life in our complex times. In academia, the challenge is in who defines it — and how — to ensure the critical balance it demands.

n Members of the Yakima Herald-Republic editorial board are Michael Shepard, Sarah Jenkins and Bill Lee.

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