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Foreign Policy, Free Speech are Under Fire on Campuses

By Mary Beth Marklein

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The attacks of Sept. 11 are prompting a new war of words on college campuses between a group critical of a "blame America first" bias and professors who see academic freedom under assault.

With various polls showing most Americans support U.S. military strikes in Afghanistan, some faculty groups are re-emphasizing their right to hold unpopular views -- in this case, views critical of U.S. foreign policy.

"At a moment such as this, we must make sure that all informed voices -- especially those that are critical and dissenting -- are heard," says a statement signed by more than 2,000 professors and scholars. Coordinators hope to publish it soon as an advertisement in a national publication. The American Association of University Professors also has urged support for free speech. But longtime critics argue that faculty are squelching debate by imposing their views on students.

That attitude "has made some students and faculty somewhat loathe to speak their mind if it's contrary to the dominant campus ideology," says Anne Neal, vice president of the American Council on Trustees and Alumni (ACTA), a Washington-based group critical of liberal tendencies in academia.

This week, ACTA released a report documenting more than 100 examples in the media and on the Web that show a "blame America first" bias among faculty. At best, faculty reactions were "equivocal," Neal says. Patriotism was rarely promoted.

Among examples: Massachusetts Institute of Technology linguistics professor Noam Chomsky is quoted as saying the "only way to put an end to terrorism is to stop participating in it"; a University of Texas professor in Austin said the terrorist attacks were "no more despicable than the massive acts of terrorism that the U.S. government has committed."

Brown University English professor William Keach, whose remarks disparaging U.S. foreign policy were criticized in the report, says he doesn't mind the negative e-mails he has received after his comments. But professors elsewhere have been rebuked. The chancellor of the City University of New York, for example, publicly denounced faculty who criticized U.S. foreign policy at a teach-in.

ACTA, too, says it wants to expand the debate, not silence dissent. Its report, being mailed to 3,000 trustees, is part of a wider ACTA initiative to urge colleges and universities to strengthen programs and courses in American history and Western civilization.

Meanwhile, other participants in the free-speech debate say they aren't surprised by this latest twist. For years, conservative groups have argued that college campuses have become hotbeds of liberalism and say their concerns have largely been ignored.

Now, with public support of U.S. foreign policy so strong, "almost overnight on some campuses the worm has turned," says Harvey Silverglate, co-founder of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, dedicated to protecting free speech on campuses.

"In a country where power shifts back and forth, inevitably something is going to happen that is going to cause the pendulum to swing. It's a great advertisement for the notion that we have to protect the (speech) we hate."