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Foundation targets school's applications

A civil-rights group finds objectionable a question about diversity on forms at Bucks County Community College.

By Oshrat Carmiel

INQUIRER SUBURBAN STAFF

A civil-rights group in Philadelphia is demanding that Bucks County Community College stop asking potential employees about their commitment to diversity, saying that such queries amount to McCarthyist tactics and stifle free speech.

At the urging of a professor at the community college, the group - the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education Inc. - has petitioned the college to remove a question on its employment application that asks candidates to describe their allegiance to diversity and show "how this commitment is demonstrated in your work."

"This is a politically correct equivalent of a loyalty oath, as objectionable as a 1950s question asking for a statement from an applicant about his or her commitment to patriotism or commitment to Americanism," Thor Halvorssen, foundation executive

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director, wrote to James Links, president of Bucks County Community College.

Links said yesterday that the clause, which has been on employment applications for at least three years, was in no way used as a litmus test for hiring. Rather, he said, it was a way of making applicants aware of a revised curriculum of the college that places value on "uniqueness and diversity."

Links added that the question, which he said he was not aware of until recently, also reflected a mandate from the college's accrediting institution that required the school to achieve diversity in "areas such as race ethnicity, gender and age in faculty ranks."

Sociology professor Myles Kelleher said he brought the matter to Links's attention last year. Kelleher said he was offended by the clause when he saw a completed application in his department office.

"The diversity goal here on campus is for superficial diversity of having people walking around looking differently but thinking in the same politically correct way," Kelleher said.

In a tight academic market - he said each opening for a liberal-arts professor drew about 200 applications - Kelleher said applicants would feel compelled to answer the question to the college's satisfaction, even if they did not agree with the college's philosophies.

"Would an expression of someone's exploration of Jewish cinematographic contributions to the 20th century count [toward the diversity question]?" Halvorssen asked.

Links said the question could be answered in any way the applicant felt comfortable and, in fact, was meant to encourage rather than stifle creative thinking.

Links sent an e-mail to Kelleher last year saying that the topic is "chock-full of PC implications" and would make for "continuously interesting dialogue."

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He said the application question needed to be discussed on campus through forums and debates rather than be removed through intimidation from an outside group. That is why, he said, he did not respond to the foundation's letter.

"Basically, they said: 'It's my way or the highway,' and that's not the basis on which to make a practical decision," Links said.

Halvorssen said the group was basing its opposition on a 1943 Supreme Court decision that said no one could be forced to pledge allegiance to the American flag. He said the foundation vowed to step up its opposition, contacting trustees and alumni of the community college until the clause is removed.

Links said that he was not opposing the group's efforts but that he was leaving the door open for anything to happen.

"They may still be right. They may in fact find support," Links said. "And we may ultimately decide that it's not worth the energy because it diverts us from what we're doing."

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