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News

Ad Hoc Sessions on Freedom of Speech Controversy Begin

By Lisa Hirschmann
Spectator Staff Writer
 January 21, 2005

Today, and every Monday and Friday until late February, the ad hoc faculty committee founded in response to the controversy surrounding Columbia's Middle East and Asian Languages and Cultures department will meet to try to find out just what went wrong.

Columbia's MEALAC department entered the national spotlight because of Columbia Unbecoming, a film produced by the Boston-based Zionist group The David Project. The film alleged continued discrimination against pro-Israel students, but the debate that the film inspired between groups of students and defenders of MEALAC has broadened to encompass larger issues of freedom of speech and academic freedom.

Now, two civil rights groups—the New York Civil Liberties Union and the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education—have communicated in writing to University President Lee Bollinger official statements on the events, advancing two different views of academic freedom.

While the NYCLU's letter defends the MEALAC faculty, who have been accused by students of infringing upon academic freedom, FIRE's letter criticizes the NYCLU's statement for supporting a structure that would dramatically limit students' ability to dissent in the classroom and would obligate donors to the University to support it regardless of the institution's stance on controversial issues.

In its letter written Dec. 20, the NYCLU said that "freedom of thought and expression must be scrupulously protected even when, in doing so, protection is bestowed upon ideas that are deeply offensive to a distinct segment of the community."

"Students at Columbia are quite empowered in terms of respecting themselves," said Donna Lieberman, executive director of the NYCLU and one of the authors of its letters. "The outspoken students in the film were clearly not intimidated and afraid to speak out," she added.

The letter asserts that The David Project's documentary, which depicts current and former Columbia students' claims that they experienced anti-Israel bias in the MEALAC department, gives viewers the impression that the students' testimonials in the film are really concerned with "the content of academic lectures and writings."

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The NYCLU, whose staff members have not viewed the documentary but have collected information about it from secondary sources including Columbia students who have seen the film, also expressed concern that unless the fundamental principles of academic freedom are strictly respected, the recently formed ad hoc committee to investigate the allegations against faculty members would in the end serve only to scrutinize their ideologies.

The NYCLU said it wrote the letter after being contacted by members of the Columbia faculty. The FIRE letter was composed on Jan. 10 and was a response to the letter sent by the NYCLU to Bollinger.

“We read the NYCLU letter to President Bollinger and found it gravely deficient and did not want Bollinger to think it was reflective of the civil liberties community,” said David French, president of FIRE.

The FIRE letter included three main criticisms of the NYCLU letter: that it understated student academic freedom, the teacher’s role in academia, and institutional academic freedom.

French said that FIRE found the NYCLU letter to be “blatantly biased in favor of the professors ... almost as if the letter was written to defend the professors instead of to define academic freedom.”

“Columbia has to decide whether it wants to create an anti-Zionist department or a balanced one,” French continued. “We’re asking Columbia to decide who you are and be honest about it.”

In its letter, FIRE points out that in accordance with the NYCLU’s reasoning, a student, if not given permission by his professor to dissent in class, could be forced to sit through a lecture defending racial segregation without being able to rebut the teacher’s claims.

According to Bollinger, neither letter impacted his thinking on academic freedom more than the other.

“I don’t think one can take one view or the other view. It is one whole—it’s a seamless whole to me,” Bollinger said.

He also reaffirmed his belief that Columbia must ensure that it is living by its principles by utilizing faculty and peer review—namely, the newly formed ad hoc committee to further investigate students’ complaints, which begins its work today.

“Many people are weighing in on these issues,” Bollinger said. “Many people have points of view and have talked to me about it. In many cases, that’s good—I mean, it’s a very complicated subject so you want to think it through carefully, but the principles really involved here are very clear and sort of fundamental, so they’re part of the institution.”

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