

OPINION & EDITORIAL

Ideology creeps into academic evaluation

by Charles Parsons

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At which point does diversity, a most recent shibboleth in academe, turn around and devour its own tail?

Just before the start of the fall semester, Edward Swan, a student in the College of Education at Washington State University, was informed he was in jeopardy of being removed from his program.

The college is bound by state law to evaluate the character of each student at graduation. Since 2001, the college has used a system where each semester, faculty members fill out a “professional disposition evaluation” for each student they have in class. The forms ask for marks on, among other things, students’ commitments to such politically charged concepts as “social justice” and “diversity.”

Mr. Swan, a self-professed conservative with strong opinions on the Bible and the role of men and women in a family, failed four of his evaluations.

According to the Moscow-Pullman Daily News, one faculty member flunked Mr. Swan for writing “diversity is perversity” on his copy of a textbook, while another claimed that he was a “white supremacist” and that he often sported a camouflage hunting cap and spoke of his love of hunting, both of which alarmed her.

Swan readily admits to being an avid hunter, but rejects the idea that he is a racist.

“I have four biracial children,” he told the Daily News.

The case at Washington State University is only the tip of the iceberg of so-called “dispositions theory.” Colleges and universities across the country have begun changing their admission and evaluation standards to add ideological criteria into the mix. Increasingly, institutions of higher learning are allying themselves with the proponents of social justice, blurring the line between knowledge and belief, education and indoctrination.

It should be clearly stated that in no way am I arguing against the social-justice movement, nor am I arguing that ideology has no place in a learning environment. Indeed, I am buoyed by the idea that ideology doesn’t have to be checked at the classroom door. There are classes where personal moral and social beliefs should play a part.

But when ideology becomes a litmus test — as it has at WSU’s College of Education — for determining competence and ability, a line has been crossed.

Many colleges that have adopted disposition-based evaluations claim the moral high ground, stating they are looking to create an environment that is “anti-sexist,” “anti-racist” and “anti-homophobic.” It is an honorable goal, but one that is beyond the scope of the classroom.

Education is ultimately aimed at explaining and understanding the world around us. It is an inherently passive undertaking. When it becomes excessively active, forcing action rather than observation, it becomes most dangerous. Classrooms should be merely “anti-ignorant.”

Somewhere along the line, colleges and universities have begun to believe that they are direct instruments of social change rather than places of education (and perhaps indirect instruments of social change). The alignment of teachers with the liberal side of the political spectrum has led to the belief that education is the key to social change.

Yet education is merely an instrument to be used as an individual sees fit. In the hands of some, it may be the beginning of progressive change. For others, it may be the defender of conservative values.

That the conservative political and religious views are protected speech seem to not matter to those defending disposition theory, nor does it seem to matter that punishing a student for expressing those views remains unconstitutional. Nor do they seem to acknowledge the irony in forcing students to accept a view that is in the minority outside academe.

Luckily for Mr. Swan, the Philadelphia-based Foundation for Individual Rights in Education intervened on his behalf. FIRE convinced the administration at Washington State University to reinstate him, without the mandatory diversity training and close university supervision conditions WSU had tried to impose, and with assurances from College of Education Dean Judy Mitchell that the disposition requirement would be reevaluated.

Yet, with many more universities using and considering similar disposition evaluations, students, FIRE and faculty members will have to keep a vigilant watch, lest diversity turn around and become synonymous with repression.

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