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Seebach: Prof's protest of 'political litmus test' raises hackles

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Seebach

Oh, that KC Johnson. He's always getting into hot water.

Of course, that may have something to do with the fact that the administration at Brooklyn College of The City University of New York keeps trying to bring the water to a full rolling boil, hoping he'll jump out.

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Well, perhaps he should. He deserves better, and his institution doesn't deserve to keep him. But his students, who on the evidence are unlikely to encounter many other faculty members who exemplify the academic virtues of free inquiry and principled disagreement, need him.

Robert KC Johnson is a tenured professor of history at Brooklyn College - and how that came to be is a story in its own right - but his current dispute is with the School of Education there.

The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, which gets to stamp its imprimatur on certification programs that conform to its views on pedagogy, in 2002 moved further into politics by making student "dispositions" a part of its accreditation process. To earn accreditation, teacher-preparation programs were evaluated on how well their graduates demonstrate a disposition toward social justice.

That's in addition to demonstrating that their graduates know their subject matter well and are effective in presenting it in the classroom, two essential matters that most ed schools are notoriously unable to accomplish.

The problem with "social justice" as a goal is that it is something everybody can be for as long as they don't have to agree on what it means. Does social justice in college basketball require that men and women play on the same teams, or on different ones? And if they play on the same teams, does social justice require that the teams "reflect" the male/female proportion of the student body, or that men and women with equal skills have an equal chance of making the team?

I'm sure you can all think of more consequential examples, but that's the point; people come to different conclusions on questions of social justice, and their conclusions are as rigidly aligned with their political views as iron filings constrained by a powerful magnet. And in university departments, which tend toward ideological uniformity, all the filings point the same way.

Brooklyn College adopted the "dispositions" standard with alacrity. And in an article posted on Inside Higher Ed May 23 (links from www.thefire.org) Johnson criticized the results.

The education faculty, he said, assumes as fact that "an education centered on social justice prepares the highest quality of future teachers." He cited a required course called "Language and Literacy Development in Secondary Education" whose instructor spent the class period before Election Day showing Michael Moore's political polemic *Fahrenheit 9/11* and insisted that students acknowledge that "white English" was an "oppressors' language." Several students, Johnson said, had filed written complaints with the department chair about inappropriately political instruction.

Because the education faculty has so little intellectual diversity, he said, the NCATE "dispositions" standard is a de facto political litmus test.

Such criticism is clearly within the boundaries of academic freedom (after all, Ward Churchill of the University of Colorado is in trouble because of other allegations; he got an official pass on "little Eichmanns"). Johnson's criticism may be mistaken, but it should be taken seriously and the facts alleged either confirmed or denied.

Instead, the School of Education went into full "How dare you say that!" mode. On official letterhead, signed by 34 faculty and administrators and sent to just about everybody important they could think of who might have some say over Johnson's position at Brooklyn College, they expressed their "contempt" for what they describe as his "attacks on a colleague" and decried his "woeful ignorance" of "what educators across the country are trying to accomplish."

They admit he has the right to make whatever claims he wishes, but conclude "we must insist you stop such attacks."

That is, he has the right to express opinions with which they disagree, but they insist he not exercise it.

You really ought to read the whole letter. Its language is so intemperate, and so devoid of any indication that facts entered into its writing, as to make clear that Johnson's analysis of the ed school's own political dispositions is dead on target.

According to FIRE (the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education), "the faculty union's Professional Staff Congress held an 'emergency academic freedom' meeting" shortly after Johnson's article appeared. It threatened an investigation by an ominously named "Integrity Committee," although Johnson has not been

officially notified of any such investigation. The college administration has not responded either to Johnson or to FIRE concerning whether there is such an investigation.

"Few forms of speech are more clearly protected than a professor's right to criticize pedagogical standards he or she may find unsound or unfair," said FIRE's Greg Lukianoff.

One would hope so. But apparently it's not true at Brooklyn College.

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