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THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The Chronicle Review

From the issue dated March 30, 2007

Social Justice and Political Orthodoxy

By GREG LUKIANOFF

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Columbia University has had more than its share of free-speech controversies over the last academic year, including a student melee that ended a speech by the founder of the Minuteman Project and a short-lived attempt to punish a sports club for using a rude word. One controversy, however, seems to have left the administration particularly puzzled: Why, they seem to be asking, would anyone object to Columbia Teachers College's requirement that students demonstrate their "commitment to social justice?" After all, doesn't everyone agree that social justice is a good thing?

Since at least 2003, Teachers College has maintained a policy of evaluating students on just such a commitment. Before last summer, Columbia could blame the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, the main accrediting body for schools of education, for those evaluation criteria. The council abandoned that requirement in June 2006, however, under criticism that it was recommending schools adopt a political or ideological litmus test. In the wake of the council's decision, right groups including the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education — where I serve as president — and the New York Civil Rights Coalition asked Columbia if it would stand by its social-justice requirement.

Teachers College responded only after FIRE took its objections public in October, and the college stated that it did not "assess or grade our students on their attitudes or beliefs." FIRE wrote the

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college back, "If Teachers College is arguing that while it maintains these 'dispositions' on paper, it will not actually utilize them in practice, then the college should rewrite them to reflect this reality." We also pointed out: "While the problems posed by officially sanctioned and politically charged evaluation criteria are very serious, the solution to this problem is rather simple. FIRE asks only that a personal 'commitment to social justice' or any other vague or politically loaded term no longer be *required* of Teachers College students. ... " We have received no reply to our second letter.

While nearly all of us believe in something that we could define as social justice, there is a problem: What does "social justice" actually mean?"

Vague, subjective, and politicized evaluation standards are dangerous. They invite administrators and faculty members to substitute their own opinions and political beliefs in place of evaluating students' skill as teachers. Many of us can think of teachers and professors whose politics we may not have agreed with but who were nonetheless exceptional educators. Having the "correct" political beliefs no more makes someone a good teacher than having "incorrect" beliefs necessarily makes someone a bad teacher.

Teachers College's standards are disturbingly vague and subjective. Its "Conceptual Framework" states that education is a "political act," that teachers — and hence teachers in training or students — are expected to be "participants in a larger struggle for social justice." At times, however, the standards are remarkably specific: "To change the system and make schools and societies more equitable, educators must recognize ways in which taken-for-granted notions regarding the legitimacy of the social order are flawed." The policy goes on to say that students are expected to recognize that "social inequalities are often produced and perpetuated through systematic discrimination and justified by societal ideology of merit, social mobility, and individual responsibility."

Those may be perfectly fine pedagogical theories appropriate for academic study, but when they are tied to mandatory evaluation criteria, they amount to a political litmus test. Does Teachers College really believe that a student who thinks "social responsibility" and "merit" are positive societal values would not make a good teacher?

The fact that such politicized standards may be well intentioned does not make them less troubling. Attempts to institute mandatory political orthodoxies for "good reasons" are nothing new. Depending on where the political pendulum is at any given moment, such tests may come from the left or the right. In the 1950s, attempts to root out Communist sympathizers in higher education were rightly opposed even by scholars and judges who believed the Soviet threat was very real, because they also believed such enforced conformity of thought incompatible with liberal

education.

The concern about the abuse of politically loaded requirements is not merely theoretical. Just in the past year, Washington State University and New York's Le Moyne College had to back down from attempts to punish education students for having "incorrect" beliefs.

Social-work students at Rhode Island College and Missouri State University report that they were required to lobby for political causes they did not support and were threatened with punishment for dissenting views. The Missouri student filed suit in late October, and the university promptly settled in the student's favor. According to her legal complaint, she was subjected to a closed hearing where she was asked if her professors were "sinners" and then forced to agree to "lessen the gap" between her own beliefs and those of the department.

At the heart of the modern liberal university is an ideal simultaneously grand and humble: None of us are omniscient, none can know what strange paths can lead to wisdom and understanding, and it is arrogant for any institution to assume the role of final arbiter of truth. Official orthodoxies impede rather than facilitate education and lead to dogma rather than living, organic ideas. One would hope that we are long past the time when education was viewed as an opportunity to inculcate "correct" and unchallengeable answers to philosophical, moral, and societal questions.

The problem of imposing mandatory political orthodoxies is a serious one, whether those beliefs concern "social justice," "individualism," or "patriotism." In 1943 the Supreme Court invalidated a mandatory school flag-pledge requirement challenged by Jehovah's Witnesses because it went against their religious beliefs. As Justice Robert H. Jackson wrote then, efforts "to coerce uniformity of sentiment in support of some end thought essential" have proven destructive throughout history, raising the bitter question of "whose unity it shall be." He concluded: "Compulsory unification of opinion achieves only the unanimity of the graveyard."

If Columbia's Teachers College truly believes that good teachers can come in all shapes, sizes, backgrounds, beliefs, religions, and philosophies, it should reassert its confidence in the value of freedom and rewrite its policies.

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