

Last month I noted that the University of Pennsylvania seems ready to rename any building for the right price. But there is something else going on there (as well as at most universities) that I find equally disturbing. I had lunch a few weeks ago with Robert Freedman, a longtime lawyer in Philadelphia. Mr. Freedman has taught at Penn Law School and is a Harvard graduate; a candidate for Harvard's board of overseers, he is passionate about higher education and what he views as some of its major problems. He feels that there is an atmosphere on our college campuses that demands that everyone toe the line of liberal groupthink—a demand so strong, Mr. Freedman believes, “that there’s a climate of fear, of being ostracized,” if students or faculty members dare to espouse contrary views. “It’s like McCarthyism. It’s no different from the Hollywood black list.” Except this time it’s in the name of liberalism and “open-mindedness.”

And then Robert Freedman mentioned his friend Alan Charles Kors, a Penn history professor. A few years ago, I wrote about Dr. Kors, highlighting the organization, FIRE, that he co-founded. FIRE exposes how many of our best colleges have caved in to absurd tenets of political correctness, and how they brainwash and intimidate students (and professors) into proper behavior. Other professors on Penn’s campus, Robert Freedman says, have been surreptitiously coming up to Dr. Kors and whispering their thanks to him for speaking out, for telling the truth about what’s going on.

It was high time, I thought—as we head into another school year—to give Dr. Kors another call. Unfortunately, he says Robert Freedman is right.

“And the situation,” Dr. Kors believes, “has grown worse. I think there is increasingly, without us being aware of how dramatic it is, a political litmus test in hiring in the social sciences and humanities.” Part of what makes this problem so dangerous, as Dr. Kors sees it, is its insidiousness. His description—“a soft tyranny of groupthink, of unconscious bias, and a self-inflated sense of mission to demystify the world for students”—sounds positively Kafkaesque. It boils down to professors seeing their role not as helping students learn to think more deeply and clearly, but as telling them *what* to think.

And that’s frightening—not because liberal ideals are necessarily bad, but because if Robert Freedman and Alan Kors are right, the basic mission of our universities has changed. Students at Penn—and other schools where Dr. Kors speaks—tell him two things “all the time,” he says: first, that professors often state their almost exclusively liberal politics or worldview at the beginning of a course, thus setting a tone that makes students afraid to engage in any sort of oppositional debate. And second, Dr. Kors says, students say they fear they’ll be graded down for coming to any conclusions that don’t agree with their professors’ politics.

Dr. Kors freely admits that this critique of Penn is anecdotal, but makes this point: “One hears this from students so often, but when you have a faculty not wanting to deal with it, that’s something of a scandal in and of itself.” Certainly, Dr. Kors points out, there would be an investigation if students were complaining of racist or sexist biases.

All of this has me wondering what it would be like to stand up in a classroom at Penn and speak positively about George Bush and John McCain, or even find some benefit coming from the war in Iraq. Just how do you think those “discussions” might go?

Al Herbert Lyso

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