



October 1, 2002

ANDREW A. SORENSEN
PRESIDENT

Mr. Allan Charles Kors
President
Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, Inc.
210 West Washington Square, Suite 303
Philadelphia, PA 19106

Dear Mr. Kors:

I have reviewed your letter dated September 9, 2002 in which you express concerns about a document entitled "Guidelines for Classroom Discussion" utilized by Professor Lynn Weber in a Women's Studies graduate seminar at the University of South Carolina. I have also reviewed prior correspondence received by this institution from you on this subject, as well as Dr. Weber's article, published in Women's Studies Quarterly 18 (Spring/Summer 1990) describing the origins, use and effect of the Guidelines. Finally, I've discussed Dr. Weber's use of the Guidelines with the provost and the dean of the College of Liberal Arts, both of whom are familiar with this matter.

Based on my review, I have concluded that your concerns about the Guidelines are misplaced. The Guidelines do not, as you suggest, represent an "ideological loyalty oath" in which students are required to "embrace and remain loyal to Professor Weber's own viewpoints and beliefs." The Guidelines are instead a teaching technique utilized by Dr. Weber without incident for 18 years to foster increased classroom discussion and to make classroom participation more thoughtful and meaningful. It should be noted that Dr. Weber has received the highest teaching award bestowed by the American Sociological Association and that in her six years at the University, no student has ever filed a complaint about the content of her courses or her grading practices.

Dr. Weber takes strong exception to your suggestion that students could or would be penalized for failing to adhere to the Guidelines, and there is no evidence supporting your contention. Dr. Weber's students are encouraged to engage in free and open discussion and are not compelled to express any particular belief nor punished for the beliefs they express. Note that the document is entitled "Guidelines," not "Rules." As designed and utilized, the Guidelines do not violate University policy, AAUP policies on the rights of students, or the United States Constitution.

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The University is strongly committed to diversity and takes seriously its responsibility to defend within the academic environment the First Amendment rights of both students and faculty. You've requested that the University "reaffirm its students' right to have their own beliefs and to make up their own minds about fundamental issues and principles." I hereby do so. My belief that a university should be a place where free expression of various points of view is encouraged and nurtured has not changed. The University of South Carolina is such a university.

Although I am sensitive to your concerns, I believe in this instance the conclusions you have drawn about the purpose of Dr. Weber's Guidelines are unwarranted. However, in order to preclude future misunderstanding about her use of the Guidelines, Dr. Weber has advised that she will include in future course syllabi a statement such as the following: "To be discussed on the first day of class, the Guidelines ask students to make several assumptions for the purposes of the class." Such a statement will reinforce the principle that the Guidelines do not, as you suggest, "require students to hold certain arguments as unquestionable truths in order to participate in class without penalty," but rather are intended to facilitate classroom discussion in an environment promoting civility in discourse, yet which does not inhibit learning.

Sincerely yours,



Andrew A. Sorensen

AAS/gsf