



Foundation for Individual Rights in Education

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October 25, 2006

Admiral John O. Agwunobi
Assistant Secretary for Health
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20201

Sent via U.S. Mail

Dear Admiral Agwunobi:

The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) unites leaders in the fields of civil rights and civil liberties, scholars, journalists, and public intellectuals across the political and ideological spectrum on behalf of liberty, legal equality, academic freedom, due process, freedom of speech, and freedom of conscience on America's college campuses. Our web page, www.thefire.org, will give you a greater sense of our identity and activities.

FIRE has learned that social workers hired by the U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps are required to have degrees from programs accredited by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE). FIRE is deeply concerned that CSWE is promoting vague standards that facilitate and encourage discrimination against students on the basis of their political viewpoints. Certainly, the Department of Health and Human Services does not want to put its imprimatur on viewpoint discrimination.

Specifically, CSWE's Educational Policy—compliance with which is a requirement of accreditation¹—effectively requires social work programs to impose ideological litmus tests on their students as a condition of accreditation. Educational Policy Section 3.0 requires that “graduates [of CSWE-accredited programs] demonstrate the ability to...understand the forms and mechanisms of oppression and discrimination and apply strategies of advocacy and social change that advance social and economic justice.” CSWE's requirement that graduates from its programs work to “advance social and economic justice” raises serious concerns. Because no objective consensus on the “correct” meaning of such terminology can reasonably exist in a diverse democratic society, these vague evaluative criteria too often become vehicles for pressuring students to alter or

¹ CSWE's *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards* explain that “the accreditation process reviews the program's self-study document, site team report, and program response to determine compliance with the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards.”

abandon their core political, philosophical, or moral beliefs. As the twentieth century well demonstrates, one man's idea of "social justice" may be another man's idea of totalitarian tyranny.

Moreover, CSWE's Educational Policy is infused with specific ideological declarations. Educational Policy Section 4.2 requires that CSWE-accredited programs "integrate social and economic justice content grounded in an understanding of distributive justice, human and civil rights, and the global interconnections of oppression." Section 4.2 gives a highly politicized definition to the "social and economic justice" that Section 3.0 requires social work students to "advance" in order to graduate, virtually necessitating the evaluation of the political views of social work candidates.

According to its website, CSWE currently accredits 673 social work programs. Not surprisingly, CSWE wields a tremendous amount of influence over the schools it accredits and over schools seeking new accreditation. Schools take CSWE's requirements and recommendations very seriously; many CSWE-accredited social work programs have adopted language similar or identical to the language of CSWE's requirements.

For example, Columbia University's School of Social Work "seeks to ground students in content about the sources, patterns, dynamics, and consequences of discrimination and oppression as well as the strategies of intervention aimed at achieving social and economic justice and at combating the causes and effects of discrimination and oppression." At San Diego State University, the undergraduate social work program "[p]repare[s] students to intervene in the agency, neighborhood, and community context, to advance social and economic justice." At the University of Louisville's Kent School of Social Work, the curriculum for the first year of graduate study "purports a belief in distributive justice that holds as primary each person's need for and right to a fair share of the benefits of society."

FIRE's concern over viewpoint discrimination is not merely hypothetical; FIRE has seen specific cases of viewpoint discrimination against candidates for social work degrees with dissenting views.

At Rhode Island College's CSWE-accredited School of Social Work, conservative master's student Bill Felkner was explicitly told that his views were not welcome at the school, and that he was required to publicly advocate for progressive social changes if he wanted to continue pursuing a degree in social work policy.

In October 2004, Felkner sent an e-mail to one of his social work professors protesting the promotion of Michael Moore's film *Fahrenheit 9/11* on campus and stating that he "would like to see a more balanced approach" to political issues on campus. The professor responded that:

Social Work is a value-based profession that clearly articulates a socio-political ideology about how the world works and how the world should be.... [I]n this school, we have a mission devoted to the value of social and economic justice.... [I]f a student finds that they are consistently and regularly experiencing opposite views from what is being taught and espoused in the curriculum, or the professional "norms" that keep coming up in class

and in field, then their fit with the profession will not get any more comfortable, and in fact will most likely become increasingly uncomfortable....

In class, the same professor assigned students to form groups to lobby the Rhode Island legislature for social welfare programs from an approved list. If a student could not find a suitable social welfare topic on the list, he or she could also lobby for gay marriage. Felkner did not support any of these programs or issues and asked the professor if he could instead lobby against one of them or for the Academic Bill of Rights. This request was refused. Felkner then joined with and participated in a group, but wrote an individually graded paper that argued against his group's position on the issue. The professor failed this paper, writing, "Regardless of the content, application of theory, and critical analysis, you did not write from the perspective you were required to use in this academic exercise. Therefore, the paper is must [*sic*] receive a failing grade."

As the Supreme Court stated with enduring eloquence in *West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624 (1943):

...[F]reedom to differ is not limited to things that do not matter much. That would be a mere shadow of freedom. The test of its substance is the right to differ as to things that touch the heart of the existing order....If there is any fixed star in our constitutional constellation, it is that no official, high or petty, can prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion or force citizens to confess by word or act their faith therein.

To be clear, FIRE has no position or comment on the ideological or political nature of CSWE's definitions of social and economic justice. We would oppose with equal vigor a policy requiring students to demonstrate their commitment to "patriotism," "individualism," or "capitalism." Any educational institution that claims to value free speech and academic freedom may not prescribe what students' final conclusions on questions of great personal, moral, political, and philosophical importance *must* be. Helping prepare students to research, reason, criticize, analyze, and argue on their own is education. Deciding what conclusions are correct and then asking students to accept these conclusions as truth is thought control and creates dogma rather than innovation.

CSWE and our nation's social work schools are improperly attempting to dictate the values and ideals that students must possess in order to become social workers. FIRE urges the Department of Health and Human Services to remember the absolute importance of the freedom of conscience as it decides whether to continue its relationship with the Council on Social Work Education.

Sincerely,



Samantha Harris
Director of Legal and Public Advocacy

cc:

Julia M. Watkins, Executive Director, Council on Social Work Education

Dean Pierce, Director, Office of Social Work Accreditation and Educational Excellence, Council on Social Work Education

Stephen H. Balch, President, National Association of Scholars

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