



News, Views and Jobs for All of Higher Education

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Disposition for Bias

By [KC Johnson](#)

Little doubt exists that the nation's college faculty has become less intellectually diverse over the past generation. According to one recent [study](#), self-described liberals or leftists increased from 39 percent in 1984 to 72 percent now, with even higher percentages among the ranks of humanities and social science professors. Speaking for the educational establishment, Jonathan Knight of the American Association of University Professors doubted "that these liberal views cut very deeply into the education of students."

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Knight might have looked at teacher-training programs before issuing his comment. There, the faculty's ideological imbalance has allowed three factors — a new accreditation policy, changes in how students are evaluated and curricular orientation around a theme of "social justice" — to impose a de facto political litmus test on the next cohort of public school teachers.

There would seem little or no reason why academic departments would seek to promote social justice, which is essentially a political goal. Though the concept derives from religious thought, "social justice" in contemporary society is guided primarily by a person's political beliefs: on abortion, or the Middle East, or affirmative action, partisans on both sides deem their position socially just. Literally and theoretically, though never in practice, education programs could define a number of causes as demonstrating a commitment to social justice — perhaps championing Israel's right to self-defense, so as to defend innocent civilians against suicide murderers; or celebrating a Roman Catholic anti-abortion initiative, so as to promote justice by preventing the destruction of innocent life; or opposing affirmative action, so as to achieve a socially just, color-blind, legal code. Yet, as surveys like those criticized by Knight suggest, adherents of such views are scarce in the academy.

Despite this clear threat of politicization, however, [dozens](#) of prominent education programs demand that their students promote social justice. For example:

- At the [State University of New York at Oneonta](#), prospective teachers must “provide evidence of their understanding of social justice in teaching activities, journals, and portfolios. . . and identify social action as the most advanced level.”
- The program at the [University of Kansas](#) expects students to be “more global than national and concerned with ideals such as world peace, social justice, respect for diversity and preservation of the environment.”
- The [University of Vermont](#)’s department envisions creating “a more humane and just society, free from oppression, that fosters respect for ethnic and cultural diversity.”
- [Marquette](#)’s program “has a commitment to social justice in schools and society,” producing teachers who will use the classroom “to transcend the negative effects of the dominant culture.”
- According to the [University of Toledo](#), “Education is our prime vehicle for creating the ‘just’ society,” since “we are preparing citizens to lead productive lives in a democratic society characterized by social justice.”

This rhetoric is admirable. Yet, as the hotly contested campaigns of 2000 and 2004 amply demonstrated, people of good faith disagree on the components of a “just society,” or what constitutes the “negative effects of the dominant culture,” or how best to achieve “world peace. . . and preservation of the environment.”

An intellectually diverse academic culture would ensure that these vague sentiments did not yield one-sided policy prescriptions for students. But the professoriate cannot dismiss its ideological and political imbalance as meaningless while simultaneously implementing initiatives based on a fundamentally partisan agenda.

Instead of downplaying the issue, education programs have adjusted their evaluation criteria to increase its importance. Traditionally, prospective teachers needed to demonstrate knowledge of their subject field and mastery of essential educational skills. In recent years, however, an amorphous third criterion called “dispositions” has emerged. As one conference devoted to the concept [explained](#), using this standard would produce “teachers who possess knowledge and discernment of what is good or virtuous.” Advocates leave ideologically one-sided education departments to determine “what is good or virtuous” in the world.

In 2002, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education explicitly linked dispositions theory to ensuring ideological conformity among education students. Rather than asking why teachers’ political beliefs are in any way relevant to their ability to perform well in the classroom, NCATE issued [new guidelines](#) requiring education departments that listed social justice as a goal to “include some measure of a candidate’s commitment to social justice” when evaluating the “dispositions” of their students. As neither traditional morality nor social justice commitment in any way guarantee high-quality teachers, this strategy only deflects attention away from the all-important goal of training educators who have command of content and the ability to instruct.

The program at my own institution, Brooklyn College, exemplifies how application of NCATE’s new approach can easily be used to screen out potential public school teachers who hold undesirable political beliefs. Brooklyn’s education faculty, which assumes as fact that “an education centered on social justice prepares the highest quality of future teachers,” recently launched a pilot initiative to assess all education students on whether they are “knowledgeable about, sensitive to and responsive to issues of diversity and social justice as these influence curriculum and pedagogy, school culture, relationships with colleagues and members of the school community, and candidates’ analysis of student work and behavior.”

At the undergraduate level, these high-sounding principles have been translated into practice through a required class called “Language and Literacy Development in Secondary Education.” According to numerous

students, the course's instructor demanded that they recognize "white English" as the "oppressors' language." Without explanation, the class spent its session before Election Day screening Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*. When several students complained to the professor about the course's politicized content, they were informed that their previous education had left them "brainwashed" on matters relating to race and social justice.

Troubled by this response, at least five students filed written complaints with the department chair last December. They received no formal reply, but soon discovered that their coming forward had negative consequences. One senior was told to leave Brooklyn and take an equivalent course at a community college. Two other students were accused of violating the college's "academic integrity" policy and refused permission to bring a witness, a tape recorder, or an attorney to a meeting with the dean of undergraduate studies to discuss the allegation. Despite the unseemly nature of retaliating against student whistleblowers, Brooklyn's overall manner of assessing commitment to "social justice" conforms to NCATE's recommendations, previewing what we can expect as other education programs more aggressively scrutinize their students' "dispositions" on the matter.

Must prospective public school teachers accept a professor's argument that "white English" is the "oppressors' language" in order to enter the profession? In our ideologically imbalanced academic climate, the combination of dispositions theory and the new NCATE guidelines risk producing a new generation of educators certified not because they mastered their subject but because they expressed fealty to the professoriate's conception of "social justice."

KC Johnson is a professor of history at Brooklyn College and the CUNY Graduate Center.

Comments

I'm guessing that the professor's quote wasn't "white English is the oppressors' language", or else it would have been quoted as one sentence like that, rather than broken into two noun phrases. If the professor was talking about communicating to underprivileged minority students, then I can see why it would be legitimate to suggest using some non-standard variety of English, since "white English" is perceived as language of the "oppressors".

Kenny Easwaran, graduate student at uc berkeley, at 7:50 am EDT on May 23, 2005

Absolutely correct

This is 99% on-target. I have been treated, as described in this column. To even raise a middle-of-the-road position is to invite scorn and ridicule. I've seen more 'diversity' in engineering courses than in (alleged) education/social science courses. If the yahoo's running these publicly-funded operations think the working-class are going to continue supporting these kind of weird, bizarre mind games, they are seriously deluded. Mr. W.L. Churchill (faux-Indian piss-ant #1) was merely the tip of the iceberg; the entire morass is coming into view. Prepare for a meltdown; either justify what you are doing with scarce public resources, or find something else to do with your life.

Art, Graduate Student at Midwest university (public), at 8:21 am EDT on May 23, 2005

Are sloppy arguments better than ideology?

What dreary work. . . trolling through Ed Department websites looking for scarlet words. Kudos to KC.

Unfortunately, his argument (?) is based on a familiar kind of hocus-pocus,