Stateline.org
Politics & policy news, state by state

© Copyright 2004 Stateline.org

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 26, 2005

Conservatives push for political balance on campus

By Eric Kelderman, Staff Writer, Stateline.org

Conservative lawmakers and activists are seeking to whip up interest in at least nine states in countering what they say is an overwhelming liberal bias at the nation's colleges and universities.

But some free speech advocates and university officials say that efforts to mandate intellectual diversity are misguided and could have the opposite effect and suppress any speech that might be controversial.

Legislators in the Republican-controlled statehouses of Georgia, Indiana, Michigan, Oklahoma, Texas and Utah, as well as Democratically-controlled Washington state, are expected to consider an "Academic Bill of Rights," a proposal that seeks to keep students' grades from being affected by their political or religious beliefs.

In addition, it calls for faculty to "make their students aware of serious scholarly viewpoints other than their own," and would make it illegal for instructors to be hired, fired or rejected for tenure because of their political or religious views.

Leading the charge for this legislation is Students for Academic Freedom (SAF), a nonprofit group launched in 2003 by outspoken, conservative activist David Horowitz and funded by his Center for the Study of Popular Culture. With help from the conservative American Legislative Exchange Council, a nonprofit group representing more than 2,400 state legislators, bills or non-binding resolutions could be introduced in as many as 20 states, said SAF spokesman Brad Shipp.

SAF, which has 135 student chapters across the nation, hopes to build on a victory in Colorado last year. After a bill based on the Academic Bill of Rights passed the Education Committee of the state House of Representatives, the presidents of four major Colorado public universities voluntarily signed a memo agreeing to its principles. The Colorado Senate also passed a resolution supporting the Academic Bill of Rights, as did the Faculty Senate at the University of Denver.

This year, a Colorado Democrat has filed a bill in the state Senate to counter SAF's efforts and protect professors who discuss their personal political or religious beliefs in the classroom.

A resolution supporting the Academic Bill of Rights also was adopted by the Georgia Senate last year but was not introduced in the state House of Representatives, and a version was introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives in Oct. 2003.

In addition to the statehouse actions in Georgia and Colorado last year, student councils at six universities have voted for resolutions supporting the Academic Bill of Rights.

Marissa Freimanis, a junior at California State University, Long Beach, is trying to start an SAF chapter on her

campus after taking an English class that she says focused more on politics than prose. “It is sad to say that as a college student, you learn to expect that the majority of your classes will be taught by a liberal professor and will be taught in a way that is complimentary to those viewpoints,” she said.

SAF is collecting anecdotes that it says show an infringement on free speech and academic rights. Along with faculty and a statewide scholarly association, SAF convinced Indiana University Bloomington to overhaul a workplace safety course that SAF charged had become a “propaganda class against the United States and Israel and their efforts in the War on Terror.”

State Rep. Luke Messer (R) of Indiana, executive director of the state GOP, introduced a bill on Jan. 18 based on some of SAF’s concerns, especially the fear that instructors are rejected for jobs or promotions because of their personal views, he said. But Messer said he has concerns about regulating classroom teaching.

Larry MacIntyre, an Indiana University spokesman, said that there is no widespread support for an Academic Bill of Rights in his state and that the act would create more problems than it would solve.

“We’re aware of the concern that conservative points of view be heard, and we’re not hostile to that,” he said. “We don’t think we need more rules.”

Horowitz, who launched a radical campus liberal movement in the 1960s, said an “intolerant left” has taken over on most college campuses, driving conservatives from the faculty and punishing students who don’t agree with their instructors’ political positions.

As a result, students are only hearing or reading the liberal response to issues, Horowitz said. “It’s an odd moment in America, when there’s only one right answer to a controversial question.”

But some education and free-speech experts said a requirement to teach balanced points of view is unnecessary and could have a host of unintended consequences.

Even private colleges and universities that get state grants or accept students receiving financial aid from the state might be forced to accept new hiring and free speech mandates, said Jon W. Fuller, a senior fellow at the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities. And such rules could have a bigger impact on private schools that now require faculty and students to adhere to religious values, he said.

Greg Lukianoff, a lawyer for the nonpartisan Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, argues that governments should work to better enforce existing laws, rather than try to tailor new statutes, which "could too easily result in a nightmare of abuse and suppression as different sides fight to label the other sides’ arguments ‘indoctrination’ and their own as simply ‘truth.’"

Send your comments on this story to letters@stateline.org. Selected reader feedback will be posted in the Letters to the editor section.

Contact Eric Kelderman at: ekelderman@stateline.org

© Copyright 2004 Stateline.org