



April 1

Transparency or a 'Selig Strategy'?

By [KC Johnson](#)

As Commissioner Bud Selig and several prominent players attempted to evade subpoenas for recent House of Representatives hearings on baseball's steroid problem, Rep. Henry Waxman observed, "What strikes me is that baseball doesn't want to investigate it and they don't want us to investigate it." The California congressman summed up baseball's policy as "don't know, don't tell."

This "Selig Strategy" could also describe the academy's response to indications that the nation's humanities and social sciences departments suffer from a lack of intellectual and programmatic diversity. Calls for outside inquiries have been denounced as violations of academic freedom, while few if any signs exist that the very internal academic procedures that created the problem can successfully resolve it.

Instead of imitating baseball's strategy of trying to cover up relevant information, the academy should bring transparency to the now-cloaked world of faculty hires and in-class instruction, compiling and publicizing the necessary data, probably through college and department Web sites. Such a response would allow the educational establishment to employ the habits of the academic world, namely reasoned analysis through use of hard evidence, to address (and, when false, disprove) specific allegations of ideological bias. At the same time, the exposure associated with greater transparency might deter those professors inclined to abuse their classroom authority for indoctrination.

Calls for any greater openness have encountered fierce resistance from some quarters of the faculty — as seen in many of the contests for the American Association of University Professors' governing council, for which balloting concludes on April 15. Four of the ten races (Districts 1, 3, 8, and 10) feature one candidate who defines academic freedom as chiefly a tool for protecting the professoriate's dominant ideological faction — to the point of resisting outside scrutiny and limiting publicly available information about academic matters. In a fifth race, for District 7, both candidates have endorsed this vision.

This cohort has deemed transparency a negative force, and instead has outlined a vision of:

- *Imagined reality*, in which leftists and far leftists — despite myriad surveys suggesting their substantial overrepresentation on the nation's campuses — represent a besieged minority in the academy. In 1999, for instance, District 8 candidate Ellen Schrecker doubted that if "America was to enter another Vietnam War," junior faculty members would "express themselves as freely as we did in the 1960s." Though the professoriate's outspoken hostility to the Bush administration's Iraq policy belied this prediction, the platform of District 7 nominee Jeffrey Halpern nonetheless continues to assert, "The exercise of free expression among tenured faculty is being radically curtailed in the name of national security." *Radically curtailed?*
- *Professorial privilege*, in which faculty possess an apparently unlimited right to bring their political agendas into the classroom. After a 2001 job action by the California Faculty Association included calls for professors to insert pro-union statements into their course syllabi, District 1 candidate Susan Meisenhelder scoffed that

administrators who protested the policy overlooked how “important university traditions such as academic freedom” allowed professors to infuse their courses with political material. In this vision of the academy, undergraduates, like administrators, cannot even publicize their dissent. In early 2005, Schrecker charged that students who criticized the intimidating behavior of anti-Israel professors of Middle Eastern studies at Columbia University wanted “to impose orthodoxy at this university, often in the name of academic diversity.” Better, evidently, for universities to cover up classroom misconduct, especially if the professors in question are expressing the preferred viewpoint on contemporary foreign policy issues.

- *Freedom from oversight*, in which faculty members are responsible to no one and the goal of professional organizations is to conceal information that faculty ideologues find inconvenient. District 3 candidate Roxanne Gudeman promises to contest “unacceptable intrusions” that seek “to monitor and censor the political, ideological, and ethnic backgrounds of members of the academy and their teaching and research.” (Gudeman also champions ethnic and racial diversity programs, which, if nothing else, monitor the “ethnic backgrounds of members of the academy.”) District 10 candidate Michael Bérubé has committed himself to fighting “concerted and well-organized attacks on the professoriate,” including calls for an advisory board for Title VI area studies programs — as if professors, alone among recipients of federal appropriations, are entitled to receive public moneys without legislative oversight.

The polar extreme of these viewpoints, of course, is David Horowitz’s Academic Bill of Rights (ABOR), which the AAUP has formally condemned as a political intrusion into the academy. The “Selig Strategy,” however, represents a remarkably ineffective response to the ABOR movement. Public support for ABOR derives from a perception that most professors have little interest in restoring intellectual diversity to the academy. In light of scandals at such prestigious institutions as Columbia and Colorado, faculty organizations issuing blanket assertions that all is well in their ranks and dismissing outside criticism as illegitimate only reinforces the impression that the professoriate has something to hide regarding the ideological tenor of classroom instruction.

There are, of course, occasions — the McCarthy Era was one, the early stages of the Vietnam War, perhaps, another — that justify aggressively utilizing the principle of academic freedom to prevent inappropriate outside scrutiny. But higher education, like baseball, is an institution whose survival depends on public support. Just as Mark McGwire sacrificed the public’s trust when he told congressmen that he would not “talk about the past,” so too will higher education’s public standing be diminished by continued claims that academic freedom allows the professoriate to ignore allegations of ideological bias. Even institutions not reliant on taxpayer support cannot long flourish in an atmosphere of widespread public distrust of the academy’s values.

Fortunately, a middle ground exists between the “Selig Strategy” on the one hand and having state legislatures dictate classroom content on the other. Transparency — not a claim that academic freedom prevents public scrutiny — represents the most effective way to respond to criticism of bias among the professoriate. “Sunlight is the best disinfectant,” noted Alan Charles Kors and Harvey Silvergate in *Shadow University*, applying Justice Louis Brandeis’ famous dictum to the problems of higher education. The Internet provides an unparalleled opportunity to demonstrate the inner workings of the academy to legislators, trustees, alumni, and taxpayers. If professors have nothing to hide, they have nothing to fear from drawing back the curtains regarding personnel and curricular actions.

To my knowledge, no university requires departments to publicly explain how and why they have allocated new lines. Imagine if every other year, every college department published on its Web site a statement about shifts in lines. For example, a religion department that had replaced one of four slots studying Christianity with one focusing on Islam might explain that it did so because of increased scholarly and student interest, post-9/11, or because the field had produced important new scholarship on Islam-related themes.

My own discipline, for example, has witnessed a sharp decline in positions in political, diplomatic, constitutional, and legal history over the past generation. Perhaps intellectually compelling reasons exist for dramatically shifting staffing toward adherents of the trinity of race, class, and gender. Yet absent any public justification, it’s hard to think of a

reason other than ideological bias why, say, the University of Michigan's [History Department](#), whose ranks already included five U.S. women's historians, used new lines to hire three more specialists in women, gender, and sexuality — all while the department lacks even one historian currently working in U.S. foreign policy.

Even more discouraging, despite the credible allegations of in-class bias by professors, I know of no university that requires faculty members to publicly post their course descriptions, syllabi, assignments, and lecture notes. The latter requirement, admittedly, would mean more work for professors, in that notes would need regular updating, but it also would provide concrete evidence that faculty members are always revising their in-class presentations to reflect new scholarship in their fields, while seeking to teach the subject matter at hand rather than attempting to shape their students' viewpoints on controversial contemporary issues.

Of course, this strategy also would expose improper conduct to the light of day — as when Professor Joseph Massad, of Columbia's Middle Eastern studies department, informed one class that "Israelis introduced plane hijackings" to the Middle East and that Zionist leader Theodor Herzl allied with "anti-Semites" to "help kick Euro[pean] Jews out." Faculty members committed to the indoctrination approach could theoretically post neutral lecture notes while maintaining wholly biased classroom presentations. But such a strategy would constitute outright deception on the part of the professor, behavior that few administrations would be likely to tolerate.

In their platform, Schrecker (who has darkly hinted of an Internet-related "virtual McCarthyism") and her cohort oppose any movement toward greater transparency. Might they fear that sunlight would confirm some or all of the outside critique of ideological bias? More ominously, do they speak for a majority in the academy?

"The thought police," Harvard professor Stephan Thernstrom recently [observed](#), are now "not just outside, on some congressional or state legislative committee. They are inside too, in our midst." The educational establishment can imitate baseball's 1990s strategy and ignore the problem, hoping that no one notices the ever more powerful internal threat to academic freedom. But, as Bud Selig and Mark McGwire have just discovered, the "don't know, don't tell" approach entails substantial risks. In this situation, transparency, not utilizing "academic freedom" to shield professors from outside scrutiny, represents the best course for the academy to adopt.

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Comments

Well put, but why bother? The corrupt academy has already been replaced by the vibrant intellectual community of the internet. It's dead, even if it hasn't lain down yet.

PersonFromPorlock, at 4:28 pm EST on April 1, 2005

Selig doctrine and higher education

Is any one truly surprised that professors would resist this? Even if the fact that the teachers are stacked far to the left, and many instruct students to despise the very country and system that allows them to flourish, another fear would be that parents could find out how often their children were being taught not by the professor himself but by a TA or grad assistance. And if you are going to charge full price for a class then the school is obligated to make the teacher teach more often than not, otherwise that is simply false advertisement. This also would hurt some professors from being able to make the rounds of protests and speaking engagements.

matt, at 8:50 pm EST on April 1, 2005