Professors claim 'intimidation' attempt

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WASHINGTON, April 8 (UPI) -- Two University of Alabama professors say an attempt is being made to intimidate them for opposing mandatory campus "diversity" training sessions.

Allegations will be brought before a panel of the Faculty Senate that the professors "interacted" with state lawmakers in Montgomery "to attempt to lessen the Legislative appropriation which the University receives," wrote law professor Wythe W. Holt Jr., co-chairman of the senate's Faculty Life Committee in a widely disseminated March 22 letter to his colleagues.

In a phone interview, United Press International asked Holt for the identity of those who planned to bring the allegations before the committee. "That's none of your business," he replied.

Civil rights historian David T. Beito, one of the professors against whom the allegations will be brought, joked that mandatory First Amendment training for faculty would be more appropriate. "Of course, that's a contradiction in terms," he said.

Freedom of speech is the most basic right there is, he told UPI. "Even if we had gone to the state legislature and called for abolishing the university, demolishing the buildings and salting the ground, we had a perfect right to do that. This is intimidation," Beito said.

Anthropologist Charles W. Nuckolls agreed. "That's exactly what it is," he said. "We can always count on Holt for a hysterical response to just about everything."

Beito and Nuckolls are members of the Alabama Scholars Association, a state affiliate of the National Association of Scholars, which describes itself as "the only academic organization dedicated to the restoration of intellectual substance, individual merit and academic freedom in the university."

Nuckolls said those who dare to question the prevailing orthodoxy on affirmative action, race relations, or "diversity" on campus are treated like those who questioned matters of religious faith at medieval universities.

"You would have been accused of heresy and dismissed, if not worse," he said. Today "you're labeled a bigot, and your arguments are dismissed out of hand."

Holt did say he believes ASA members feel threatened because they want to be able to express bigoted ideas without economic or professional cost to themselves, a charge that Beito -- whose field is the civil rights struggle and black history -- dismisses as "laughable."

Holt said ASA members "are worried that it will hurt them in their advancement, that they won't get raises, if they're charged with bigotry or violation of some university policy concerning diversity or multiculturalism, or something like that.

"Why else would they make so much out of it?"

What about freedom of speech? Holt was asked.

"What about it?" the law professor responded.

Beito said that about two years ago, the Faculty Senate made an effort to bring in diversity workshops for faculty. They were voluntary, but professors received "guilt-tripping e-mail saying if you want to build a diverse society, you'll come to these workshops," he told UPI.

Workshops were being contracted out to a group called Crossroads, led by the Rev. Joseph Barndt, who teaches that all whites, including him, are racists who suffer from "false consciousness" about their inherent racism and unjust white privilege.

"I got his book," Beito said. "Very scary stuff. We kicked up a storm as individuals about it. They went ahead with these workshops, but they stopped sending out the e-mails, the attendance went down. It seemed like they were going to let them run out. ... We made it clear to the president and the provost that we were opposing these because we saw them as one-sided and an entering wedge for mandatory programs, eventually extending to students and nonacademic staff."

As an alternative, Beito and his ASA colleagues proposed a debate series that, he said, did not favor "one narrow, very radical perspective."

"We were under the impression we were done with this."

In December, Beito went to a meeting of the Coalition for Diversity and Inclusiveness, a group created by the Faculty Senate. He learned that the College of Engineering was going to do diversity workshops and that parts of the film "Blue Eyed" would be shown.

The ASA's case has been taken up by FIRE, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, a Philadelphia-based organization founded by University of Pennsylvania historian Alan Charles Kors and Boston civil rights attorney Harvey A. Silverglate. Kors has characterized "Blue Eyed" as "a filmed racism awareness workshop in which whites are abused, ridiculed, made to fail, and taught helpless passivity so they can identify with 'a person of color for a day,'"

At a Department of Education seminar on March 8, 2000, the film's creator, Jane Elliott, told federal employees that to vote for George W. Bush was to vote for a racist.

In January, Beito sent a letter to Engineering Dean Timothy J. Greene expressing the ASA's objections to such workshops as one-sided. He asked if the sessions were mandatory and who would pay for them. He also offered the ASA's assistance with a speaker series on issues of race and sex.

Greene's response did not answer the questions. "He brushed us off," Beito said.

Nuckolls called the College of Engineering and learned that eight workshops had been scheduled for faculty, staff and -- eventually -- graduate assistants. He asked if they were mandatory and was told, "The dean expects everybody to be there."

The ASA informed University President Andrew A. Sorensen of its objections. The association also sent a letter to the faculty and staff of the Engineering College and to the state legislature.

As a result of the letter, at least three Alabama legislators contacted President Sorensen and Dean Greene, "and I think that did the trick," Beito said, "but we got a lot of anger. A lot of people did not approve that we had done that."

A Feb. 28 memo from Sorensen informed Beito, Nuckolls and two other professors that the university president had received a letter from Greene stating that the engineering dean would not use "Blue Eyed" and that the diversity seminar the college was sponsoring was not mandatory for anyone.

Beito and Nuckolls did not want to suppress "Blue Eyed." On the contrary, they advertised the video and screened it at the Engineering College.

But anonymous tips from Engineering College staff said mandatory workshops would be held.

Greene told UPI that this was the result of a mistake. "When we initially planned them, we were going to expect all people to attend." Later they became voluntary. "We did not take attendance," he said.

The dean said one department head had mistakenly indicated that attendance was mandatory, but he was corrected and his memo was changed before the first session.

Holt holds mandatory diversity training sessions to be legitimate because the university has mandatory diversity policies. "You can take a pencil and doodle. You can do whatever you want. They can put you there, but they can't get into your head -- unless you let them," he said.

He was asked if he believes an employer has the right to mandate an employee's presence at a training session that includes material the employee finds repugnant.

"I expect bigots would find it repugnant," he replied. "It seems to me that you wouldn't show completely innocuous material to anyone. How can your learn from something that doesn't affect you in any way? Diversity training deals with bigotry."

Holt does not find the movie "Blue Eyed" repugnant. He has used it in class and finds it "very instructive."

Nuckolls sees things differently.

"We're trying to assert our right to do what universities are supposed to do by their very nature -- that is, provide an opportunity for open and free debate of all issues," the anthropologist said. "The other side is so unused to criticism that they respond in the manner that you've seen -- violently and with hysterical use of opprobrium."

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