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'We Don't Need That Kind of Attitude'

Education schools want to make sure prospective teachers have the right 'disposition'

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Partway through her teacher-training program, Karen K. Siegfried started pulling her red compact car to the far end of the campus parking lot. She didn't want her professors at the University of Alaska at Fairbanks to see her bumper stickers: One proclaims her opposition to abortion, and the other is emblazoned with the name of one of Alaska's Republican senators.

"It worried me what they could do based on my politics," says Ms. Siegfried, who had already clashed with education professors over her views on affirmative action and gun control. When Ms. Siegfried disagreed with one professor's contention that video games make children violent, sh says, the professor told her: "We don't need that kind of attitude."

Although she earned a 3.75 grade-point average in the one-year program, Ms. Siegfried says her professors told her last spring th she lacked the "professional disposition" necessary to be a good teacher. She was inflexible, they said, and wasn't open to new ideas or responsive to other cultures. Ms. Siegfried left the teacher-training program, she says, before her professors could show her the door.

She is one of several students — backed by national conservative organizations — who have complained in the last year about education professors who are more interested in students' politica views than in their classroom performance. In addition to evaluating whether students are responsible and have good communication skills, for example, some education schools have begun questioning whether students value social justice, acknowledge white privilege, and agree to be change agents in battling sexism, racism, and homophobia.

Some conservative groups have written to members of Congress and the U.S. Education Department, complaining that the questions amount to a political litmus test that violates students'

rights to free speech. "It is not the job of a state university," says David A. French, president of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, "to implement an orthodox ideology." Professors, he says, have no business assessing students' dispositions "after a classroom session where they are encouraging students to voice their opinions, and then extrapolating from those that these people cannot teach."

This friction at education schools may be an indication of a broader political divide on campuses, pitting liberal-leaning professors against a student population that has grown more conservative over the past several years. The schism has caused people like the activist David Horowitz to call on universities to hire more Republican faculty members and be more tolerant of conservative students.

Education professors, however, say what they do has nothing to do with politics. Evaluating students' dispositions is important not only because the organization that accredits their programs requires it, professors say, but because states hold them responsible for turning out prospective teachers who treat all schoolchildren fairly. They deny this turns professors into thought police.

"We want students to ask questions and engage in discussion," says Eric C. Madsen, dean of the education school at Fairbanks, who says privacy laws prohibit him from discussing Ms. Siegfried's allegations. "From our standpoint, we aren't advocating any type of belief system." The professors with whom Ms. Siegfried says she ran into trouble did not want to speak to *The Chronicle.*

Social Justice

The idea of evaluating prospective teachers based on their "professional dispositions" has been around for at least two decades. But it became much more important in 2002, when the organization that accredits education schools changed its focus. It decided that examining a school's curriculum and the kind of educational experiences it offered was not enough to make sure schools turned out graduates who were ready for the classroom.

"We reoriented our system so that we could primarily make accreditation decisions on data revealing how much candidates had the knowledge and skills required to teach," says Arthur E. Wise, president of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education. "This was a very big change."

In the 2002 edition of its guidebook on professional standards, the accreditor detailed the kind of learning it expects, including the kind of professional dispositions it believes students need. Dispositions, the booklet says, are the "values, commitments, and professional ethics that influence behaviors toward students,

families, colleagues, and communities." They "are guided by beliefs and attitudes related to values such as caring, fairness, honesty, responsibility, and social justice."

It is the term "social justice," and the many ways in which education schools have defined it, that seems to have sparked most of the complaints.

Deborah A. Shanley, dean of education at Brooklyn College of the City University of New York, says a commitment to social justice means that a teacher "deeply believes that all children should be treated fairly so that they can reach their potential." Schools are filled with children from different races, classes, and social backgrounds, she says, and teachers must be prepared to teach all of them. "We live in one of the largest cities in the world," says Ms. Shanley. "We need to know: Do you really believe that all children have access to that knowledge base, and do you know how to deliver it?"

Although Mr. Wise says the accreditor only meant to suggest that schools consider a commitment to social justice, not require it, many schools have adopted the term as part of the "conceptual framework" that sets each school's agenda. For example, the framework posted on the Web site of the University of Alabama's College of Education says it is "committed to preparing individuals to promote social justice, to be change agents, and to recognize individual and institutionalized racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism" and to "break silences" about these issues. The Fairbanks campus cites "social justice" as one of the teacher-training program's goals and says "all teachers, counselors, and administrators need to constantly examine the status and power that comes from being white."

The conceptual framework at Brooklyn College says: "We educate teacher candidates and other school personnel about issues of social injustice such as institutionalized racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism and invite them to develop strategies and practices that challenge biases."

The 'Oppressors' Language'

Perhaps that was what Priya Parmar, an assistant professor of education at Brooklyn College, believed she was doing when, in her course "Language Literacy in Secondary Education," she showed the film *Fahrenheit 9/11* the week before the 2004 presidential election. Five students in her fall 2004 class eventually complained to the dean, contending that Ms. Parmar presented a one-sided view of political issues and criticized those who disagreed. In particular, they said, Ms. Parmar — who is Indian — taught students that "white English" is the "oppressors' language," and that white people perpetuate a "culture of power." As one student, Christina Harned, wrote in a letter: "She made me personally feel like I should be ashamed of my heritage and the

fact that I am white."

The college investigated the professional disposition of one of the students who complained because, administrators said, his

"bullying" and "aggressive behavior" ran counter to what the school expects of prospective schoolteachers. Brooklyn College subsequently accused that student — and another who had complained — of plagiarism, and asked them to redo assignments in Ms. Parmar's course. K.C. Johnson, a professor of history at the college who has supported the five students, says the allegations of plagiarism were "flimsy," and says he came to believe the college was "using dispositions criteria to punish students who were otherwise academically qualified."

Ms. Parmar calls the accusations that she silenced students "totally false." She also says that while she introduced readings that labeled English the "oppressors' language," she was simply trying to teach students about Ebonics and other dialects they may encounter in a New York City classroom. "I know some of these topics are controversial," she says. "I state my position, but I don't want to indoctrinate students."

Ms. Shanley, Brooklyn's dean, says she did speak to Ms. Parmar about alternative ways to teach the subject. But she notes that "the majority of the students in her classes wrote glowing letters and talked about what a great teacher she was." Ms. Shanley says none of the students who complained were penalized for doing so, and the two who were accused of plagiarism redid the assignments.

Sensitivity Training

At Washington State University, professors in the College of Education use a 10-point form to evaluate their students' dispositions. Although the form does not mention social justice, one of the 10 points asks professors to confirm that a student: "Listens to others' perspectives in a respectful manner; exhibits an understanding of the complexities of race, power, gender, class, sexual orientation, and privilege in American society."

Ed Swan, who is earning his bachelor's degree in teacher education at Washington State, flunked the evaluation four times last academic year. He first ran into problems when a female professor talked about "white-male privilege" in her course as if it were a given, he says. "I told her I don't think it exists." Instead of completing a classroom writing assignment on how ethnic groups learn differently, he told her he wanted to write about how education could bring different cultures together. The professor, he says, encouraged him to do so, and he earned a good grade on the paper. But then she failed him on the test of his disposition. She said he "revealed opinions that have caused me great concern in the areas of race, gender, sexual orientation and privilege." In the evaluation, the professor acknowledged that she had "asked

students to be honest" about their opinions and that Mr. Swan's "honesty led to a number of concerns that I have about him." Another professor who evaluated Mr. Swan's disposition called him a "white supremacist." The professors made their determinations based on what Mr. Swan said and wrote in his classes; they had not yet witnessed him in a schoolroom.

Mr. Swan, who is 42 and runs a landscaping business, acknowledges that he didn't have much in common with most of his professors, although he says he is not a white supremacist. He is a self-described conservative Christian who has four Mexican-American children. He enjoys hunting and fishing and wasn't afraid to wear a T-shirt to class celebrating his Second Amendment rights. Mr. Swan acknowledges that he wore the shirt — and another supporting Michael Savage, a conservative radio talk-show host — in part as a way of taking a jab at professors who he felt were trying to bully students into "thinking in the same progressive, liberal mind-set they were teaching from."

But, he says, he didn't believe that would threaten his own bid to become a teacher.

"You need to make sure that a teacher likes kids and isn't a pedophile," says Mr. Swan. "But as far as evaluating him on political ideas that don't even belong in a classroom, I don't know what that has to do with teaching." (He says one professor even told him that if he ever did become a teacher he couldn't wear the conservative talk-radio shirt to the grocery store.)

Last fall, however, Washington State asked Mr. Swan to sign a contract, pledging that he would attend a sensitivity-training session and complete two assignments before professors would allow him to practice working in an elementary-school classroom. Mr. Swan balked at the contract and contacted the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, which challenged the university, saying the contract was unconstitutional because it required Mr. Swan to hold certain beliefs to continue his education.

Mr. French, president of the foundation, says students' beliefs should not be part of the equation. "You may think the sun god Ra has appointed you to be his ambassador in the Pacific Northwest," he says. "But if you're teaching seventh-grade math well, you're teaching seventh-grade math well."

Washington State backed down, saying Mr. Swan did not have to sign the contract after all. He is scheduled to graduate next May and hopes to teach third or fourth graders.

Judy Nichols Mitchell, dean of education at Washington State, refused to discuss the particulars of his case with *The Chronicle,* and the professors with whom Mr. Swan clashed did not return telephone calls and e-mail messages. But she says she is

concerned with how prospective teachers act, not with what they think. "Even though teachers may have a wide range of opinions," she says, "they can't act on those opinions if they are harmful or discriminatory when it affects real children in their class."

Classroom Paddling

Like Mr. Swan, Scott W. McConnell is hardly shy about his conservative views. But he hasn't fared as well. Last fall Mr. McConnell started taking courses in the graduate program in education at Le Moyne College, and wrote a paper on classroom management in which he advocated the use of corporal punishment.

He earned an A– on the paper, but the chairwoman of Le Moyne's education department sent Mr. McConnell a letter last January, saying she had "grave concerns regarding the mismatch between your personal beliefs ... and the Le Moyne College program goals." Mr. McConnell, wrote the chairwoman, was no longer welcome in the graduate program.

Mr. McConnell filed a lawsuit in a New York State court, charging the university with violating his First Amendment right to free speech and asking to be reinstated. Le Moyne officials refuse to talk about the case, but the university told the court that barring Mr. McConnell was an admissions decision. In its response to Mr. McConnell's suit, the university told the court: "We could not be confident that this individual would abide by the laws of New York State."

New York is one of 28 states that have outlawed corporal punishment.

In October, a judge refused to get involved in the case, ruling that the court should not tamper with college admissions decisions. But Mr. McConnell has appealed. He says it is ironic that Le Moyne promotes "multiculturalism," but barred him because of his views. "They promote it," he says, "but they don't practice it."

Counting Character

Joseph P. Frey, assistant commissioner of the Office of Quality Assurance for the New York State Education Department, says universities like Le Moyne have reason to be concerned about the character of prospective teachers.

"Colleges recommend a person to the Education Department, and based on that recommendation we give that person a teaching certificate," he says. "Institutions have to assess whether the students will be able to comply with state regulations."

Ms. Mitchell, of Washington State, says that for each student who earns a degree in teacher education, she must sign a state form,

recommending that the graduate be granted a teaching license.

"I'm signing and attesting to their good character and fitness to teach, under the penalty of perjury," she says. "I don't view this as a free-speech issue. It is a professional issue."

At least some education professors, however, are uncomfortable with screening prospective teachers based on their beliefs, particularly when students' views are solicited in class papers or classroom discussions.

Gary R. Galluzzo, a professor of teacher education at George Mason University, performs research on the best way to evaluate students' dispositions, and favors using videotapes of students teaching. He is concerned about the possibility that students' views and personalities are being used against them.

"There are many doctors who have lousy dispositions but are excellent doctors," he says. "Some creepy people are excellent instructors. What is the right personality for a teacher? That varies from building to building."

Last month, in the midst of the controversy, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education sent a bulletin to the 614 programs it accredits, saying that education schools should not evaluate students' attitudes, but rather assess their dispositions based on "observable behavior in the classroom." It also said it does "not expect or require institutions to attend to any particular political or social ideologies."

The guidance is apparently too late for Ms. Siegfried, in Alaska, who is now studying to be an aviation technician. She says her education textbooks "had a lot of politically charged statements — from abortion to affirmative action — and they always took the same political slant."

"I'm really skeptical about the future of public education," she says, "if they're not going to let anyone in who questions the system."

DEFINING DISPOSITIONS

Excerpts from "conceptual frameworks" created by three education schools:

University of Alabama

"The College of Education regards color-blind approaches to educational service that ignore the race, gender, sexuality, disability, and class of students as inadequate for addressing contemporary inequities and recognizes several levels at which it prepares its students to celebrate diversity, respect difference, and promote social justice. ... The College of Education is

committed to preparing individuals to promote social justice, to be change agents, and to recognize individual and institutionalized racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism. It includes educating individuals to break silences about these issues, propose solutions, provide leadership, and develop anti-racist, anti-homophobic, anti-sexist community and alliances."

University of Alaska at Fairbanks

"The problem is that teachers often do not reflect on the impact that race has on all students, both white and nonwhite. Teachers often profess 'colorblindness' which is at worst patronizing and at best naïve, because race and culture profoundly affect what is known and how it is known. You cannot erase race or ignore how it produces a caste-like system in the United States. Thus, we must encourage teachers to examine how racial and cultural 'others' negotiate American school systems, and how they perform their identities utilizing various strategies and tactics of both resistance and acceptance in order to fit into the everyday life of schools. Most importantly, all teachers, counselors, and administrators need to constantly examine the status and power that comes with being white. ... We encourage teachers to understand education as a site of historical, political, economic, and social struggle, and to understand the interrelatedness of race, identity, and the curriculum, especially the role of white privilege."

Brooklyn College

"We educate teacher candidates and other school personnel about issues of social injustice such as institutionalized racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism; and invite them to develop strategies and practices that challenge biases against non-English speakers, immigrants, and those with special needs. Thus, we strive not to reproduce the social, economic, political, and cultural inequities in society, but to explicitly build collaborations. These efforts will help to ensure input from all stakeholders and to generate opportunities for everyone to be co-owners, thus shifting the balance of power in ways that create a truly democratic society."

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