

# Richmond Times-Dispatch

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## At Tech, an ideological dispute over diversity

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A letter from Virginia Tech's president reaffirming the university's commitment to diversity has reignited an ideological dispute over political correctness on campus.

Tech officials last month backed away from a proposed policy that critics said tied promotion and tenure to participation in diversity initiatives. An array of mostly conservative organizations had lobbied against the guidelines, calling them an affront to academic freedom and a political litmus test for promotion.

Tech maintained the proposal had been mischaracterized by off-campus groups. But the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education said it took up the cause at the request of a tenure-track faculty member.

Hardus Odendaal, president of Tech's faculty senate, said some faculty members had been concerned about the proposed guidelines.

But he said he believes the situation was resolved in mid-April when Tech President Charles W. Steger ordered the diversity criterion removed from the review process.

That did not appease everyone for long, however.

On April 30, Steger and Provost Mark McNamee sent a letter to the university community affirming "our commitment to inclusive excellence as an organizational strategy, because we believe that our achievement of educational and institutional excellence is inextricably bound to our diversity and inclusion efforts."

Tech spokesman Larry Hincker said the letter "simply said we value a diverse community."

But those are fighting words for groups such as the National Association of Scholars, which says it opposes racial, gender and other group preferences.

Carey E. Stronach, president of the association's Virginia affiliate, this week wrote a letter to Steger saying critics of the guidelines thought he had heard their criticism of the proposed policy "and had sensibly intervened to stop it."

"Clearly we were mistaken," Stronach wrote. Steger's action "now appears to have been a tactical pause while your administration decided how to advance the same political goals under cover of more opaque language."

"Inclusive excellence," he wrote Steger, are code words for "rejecting rigorous intellectual standards" in favor of "racial favoritism and the privileging of identity groups."

Stronach, a retired physics professor at Virginia State University, said in an interview that he sees the diversity agenda as a threat to freedom of thought and academic standards.

That doesn't mean he is biased, he said.

His group "strongly endorses nondiscrimination and equal opportunity" in hiring and promotion, he said. But it believes in treating "individuals as individuals and not as members of some group."

Stronach said the Virginia Association of Scholars has about 300 members, most of whom are associated with colleges or universities and who represent a wide political spectrum.

He said he was a MoveOn volunteer who campaigned for Barack Obama, but is more conservative on education policies because he believes the diversity agenda has led to an acceptance of mediocrity on campus.

However, Hincker said university officials are perplexed by the association's letter, which "seems to churn a perceived problem that doesn't exist."

The policies are similar to diversity language that Tech students will encounter in the work place, he said.

"We don't believe that the notions of diversity and intellectual rigor are mutually exclusive," Hincker said by e-mail. "Our students will work in a global marketplace and a multiethnic society. It's a conundrum why this organization would find diversity objectionable."

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## Reader Reactions

Posted by ( datony ) on May 10, 2009 at 8:40 pm

first of all, how can u expect an 'equal opportunity' or 'equal outcome' if you arent treated equal to begin with? you fail to realize that a lot of these rules were set in place because of ignorance, prejudice individuals. and while no one looks alike, there are individuals that treat people as a whole instead of individuals. that is not a secret. and there is diversity in some places, places where people dont look at race, sexual orientation, gender, or political affiliation. everyone in the u.s. doesn't think like everyone in va lol, chesterfield county was LAUGHED at a few years ago when they adopted 'confederate week' lol

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Posted by ( jsfowler ) on May 10, 2009 at 10:51 am

As long as 'diversity' means fake categories like 'race', there will be none.

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Posted by ( VaGentleman ) on May 09, 2009 at 7:30 am

We already have "diversity." Look in the mirror; no one looks like you look. We already have "diversity." Look at your academic and vocational performance; if you don't like how you are graded or paid, get another job or burn the midnight oil more. All of these "diversity" programs and memorandums are simply ways for the professionally sensitive and under achieving to escape the consequences of their own conduct. They desire equal outcomes instead of equal opportunity.

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Posted by ( datony ) on May 09, 2009 at 2:03 am

one of the (retired)prof. in this article stated that "individuals should be treated as individuals and not as members of some group". But, because so many people have used race and gender as a means of discrimination, it is almost impossible for some to treat a person as an individual rather than see them as just a part of a group.

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