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Merit at Columbia

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What a juxtaposition — the same week that Columbia University is celebrating merit in the form of the Nobel prize in economics awarded to Professor Edmund "Ned" Phelps, Columbia's Teachers College is coming under justified criticism for deriding merit, favoring instead a kind of left-wing indoctrination. If that sounds like an overstatement, we invite you to check out the "conceptual framework" for Teachers College that is available for download at the Teachers College Web site. It states, "Social inequalities are often produced and perpetuated through systematic discrimination and justified by societal ideology of merit, social mobility, and individual responsibility (Strum & Guinier,[*] 1996). Traditionally organized schools help to reproduce social inequalities while giving the illusion that such inequalities are natural and fair."

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The "conceptual framework" goes on to assert that "educators must recognize ways in which taken-for-granted notions regarding the legitimacy of the social order are flawed, see change agency as a moral imperative, and have skills to act as agents of change."

The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education recently sent a letter to Columbia's president, Lee Bollinger, objecting to what FIRE calls an ideological "litmus test"for education students. While the current iteration of the Conceptual Framework is new, Columbia has been riding this hobby horse for decades, as a contributing editor at City Journal, Sol Stern, notes in that magazine's Summer 2006 issue.

By the 1980s, one Maxine Greene had set up shop as a professor there and, according to Mr. Stern, was instructing new teachers that when educating impressionable youths they should portray "homelessness as a consequence of the private dealings of landlords, an arms buildup as a consequence of corporate decisions, racial exclusion as a consequence of a private property-holder's choice." One of Ms. Greene's star pupils was William Ayers, formerly of the terrorist Weather Underground and now a social justice evangelist at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

As Mr. Stern recounts, in 1997 Mr. Ayers and Ms. Greene launched a series of books on social justice education to be published by the Teachers College Press. One member of the editorial board is Rashid Khalidi, the Edward Said Professor of Arab Studies at Columbia.

Perhaps the most damning quote in Mr. Stern's article comes from a book in this series titled "Teaching Science for Social Justice," in which Angela Calabrese Barton writes: "Science pedagogy framed around social justice concerns can become a medium to transform individuals, schools, communities, the environment, and science itself, in ways that promote equity and social justice. Creating a science education that is transformative implies not only how science is a political activity but also the ways in which students might see and use science and science education in ways transformative of the institutional and interpersonal power structures that play a role in their lives."

It would all be comical — Mr. Stern also quotes Ms. Barton as writing, "The marriages between capitalism and education and capitalism and science have created a foundation for science education that emphasizes corporate values at the expense of social justice and human dignity" — if quality teaching weren't so important. By teaching teachers to teach neo-Marxist claptrap, the college is condemning students, and especially poor, inner-city students, to just the kind of lack of true opportunity they bemoan. No amount of social justice

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Not all departments at Teachers College are riddled with these views, and not all Teachers College graduates buy into it. That's scant consolation. FIRE's chief concern is that the Teachers College Conceptual Framework will ultimately stifle dissent from future education students who might see through the sham.

The problem extends beyond that issue, however, in New York and beyond. Every new instructor minted by Teachers College who uses these ideas in our schools will rob New York students of opportunities for a better future. The flap over indoctrination at Teachers College comes the same day as the news that fewer than half the eighth graders in the city's public schools passed a state math test. It's a juxtaposition as jarring as that of the Nobel prize and the derision of merit. How are the city's schools to produce the next Nobel laureate if their teachers are taught that merit is an "ideology" that exists to justify discrimination? Truth is, no one would mind so much about teachers' views about the "legitimacy of the social order," or lack of it, if the teachers were producing students who can pass the math test.

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* *Lani Guinier, whom Senator Leahy judged too controversial to gain confirmation to President Clinton's Justice Department; now a professor at Harvard Law School, she is a brilliant individual with some intriguing ideas, but these, by our lights, are not among them. The framework misspells Susan Sturm's last name.*

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