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THINK LIKE US - OR ELSE

June 4, 2007 -- COLUMBIA University's Teachers College is one of America's most prestigious education schools. For many students, it's proba bly the best - but not if you don't buy the school's definition of "social justice."

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Teachers College evaluates students in part on the basis of so-called "dispositions," defined as "observable behaviors" that "involve the use of certain skills." One "disposition" is the student's "Respect for Diversity and Commitment to Social Justice."

This warps the discussion of whether a student might make a good teacher into whether that student has the "correct" personal, religious or political beliefs. Evaluating students' aptitude for teaching based on their commitment to "social justice" necessarily means that only one definition of "social justice" counts: Teachers College's definition, which demands that students recognize how "the legitimacy of the social order [is] flawed."

School materials call adherence to the college's definition of "social justice" a "critical" part of student performance. The definition requires students to accept, for example, that belief in the importance of "merit, social mobility and individual responsibility" is a merely a justification for "social inequalities." That is, a student who considers individual responsibility to be good would be a "bad" teacher.

Potentially great teachers with different opinions on what "social justice" means - devout Christians, Orthodox Jews or Randian atheists, for example - might be deemed insufficiently "correct" to graduate.

Unfortunately, reliance on politically loaded grading criteria to assess student performance isn't limited to Teachers College - it's a national problem. Until June 2006, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education required education schools seeking accreditation to consider "dispositions" like "a candidate's commitment to social justice" when evaluating students. NCATE has since dropped the requirement under criticism that it constituted a political litmus test.

Students whose understanding of "social justice" doesn't match that of their instructors have faced punishment across the country.

* Washington State University student Ed Swan received negative evaluations after telling a professor he was a conservative Christian, opposed gun control and believed that "white privilege and male privilege do not exist." He also had to attend mandatory diversity training and sign a "contract" agreeing to abide by the views of his professors or face expulsion.

* Le Moyne College in Syracuse expelled Scott McConnell after he stated in a writing assignment that he supported corporeal punishment and opposed "multicultural education."

Social-work students have faced similar problems.

* Emily Rooker, a student at Missouri State University, was required to send a signed letter to the Missouri Legislature supporting homosexual foster parenting and adoption. When she refused, faculty members attacked her for violating the school's policies.

* A prof at Rhode Island College told conservative student Bill Felkner that he'd get a lower grade if he refused to lobby the state Legislature on behalf of "progressive social change."

* At Brooklyn College School of Education, Professor K.C. Johnson was threatened with an official school investigation after publicly speaking out against the use of "dispositions."

Under pressure, Teachers College President Susan Fuhrman has claimed that the school doesn't evaluate students on their beliefs. However, she also recently indicated that Teachers College might change its written policies to match what she insists are its neutral practices.

If Teachers College really does believe that good teachers can come from all backgrounds and beliefs, it must change its policies. Until then, it

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