

Protect the Free Exchange of Ideas on Campus

Free Speech Activist Toolkit

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Prevent restrictions on the free exchange of ideas on your campus:

Higher education and the free exchange of ideas

The free exchange of ideas is fundamental to the mission of higher education. It creates new ideas, challenges students to become critical thinkers and citizens and allows higher education to fulfill both the functions of education and serving the broader community. In order for colleges and universities to have this free exchange of ideas, professors must be free to research and publish their findings, teach all information and analysis relevant to their course and engage students in all of their observations and questions and act as citizens on issues they feel strongly about. Students must be able to take courses in a wide variety of subject matter, including topics often considered controversial, create learning opportunities outside the classroom and act on their convictions.

The campaign against the free exchange of ideas

Across the country, colleges and universities are being attacked—precisely because they allow and encourage a free exchange of ideas. Organizations like Lynn Cheney’s American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) and ultra-right David Horowitz’s “Students for Academic Freedom” are pushing for restrictions on what can be taught and how faculty members are able to teach.

Whether by attacking individual faculty members for publishing research that is “too controversial,” attacking departments like Women’s Studies and African-American Studies for “teaching ideology” or trying to pass legislation that would force a false balance in teaching, they’re working to create an atmosphere where universities feel they have to censor potentially controversial content.

What opponents of a free exchange of ideas are saying about higher education?

Proponents of the so-called “intellectual diversity” bill, “academic bill of restrictions” and similar proposals claim that there is a tremendous problem with political bias in higher education. They claim that faculty are dominantly to the left of the political spectrum, that they only teach the “liberal” side of an issue or subject and that they intimidate students into agreeing with them or give bad grades to students that disagree with them. Further, they argue that in light of the problem they have found, someone must stand up and protect the students from these out of control faculty members, and propose the “intellectual diversity” bill, “academic bill of rights” or a similar proposal as the means to protect students.

But, is there *REALLY* a problem with political bias in higher education?

There certainly are major problems that students face in college—from cost to campus safety—but there is simply no evidence that there is a problem of political bias in higher education.

What does being a Democrat or Republican have to do with teaching? Does political party change how you teach Shakespeare, chemistry or the Civil War? Are students so incapable and impressionable that having a discussion of philosophy or current events, or hearing the occasional joke, will “indoctrinate” them? Are professors really so partisan they’re failing students that back a different presidential candidate than they do? Of course not.

In fact, having a free exchange of ideas—even the controversial ones—is integral to learning. Students are capable adults, a tough group to “indoctrinate” even if you were trying. And, even in the rare cases where a professor does behave inappropriately, there are already policies and protections on campus for students—from grievance procedures to mechanisms to dispute an unfair grade.

Could their campaign come to your state or campus?

Already, more than 30 states have considered adopting some version of these bills. In states like Wisconsin, legislators have threatened to gut funding for parts of departments they dislike and across the country, professors have been attacked for their research and statements outside the classroom. Worse yet, the message that there is a crisis of political bias is covered in the media all the time—leading to a climate where more and more faculty are intimidated into self-censorship and more campuses feel they have to freeze out free speech on campus.

How to respond

Advocates for higher education—students, faculty, administrators and others—need to send a clear signal to state leaders and the media that this sort of attack on the quality of education is not acceptable on their campus or in their state. To send that message, faculty and student senates or governments need to affirm the principles they want to see in higher education, build support for those principles among others in the state and on campus and take those statements to key legislators, higher education reporters and others in the state.

Sample Campaign Plan

Problem:

Across the country, using a variety of strategies and tactics, groups like ACTA, and Horowitz are trying to dismantle the free exchange of ideas that is vital to higher education. Specifically, they're trying to create an environment where the following are not able to occur:

- Faculty aren't able to research and publish findings on cutting edge questions and problems—especially findings that relate to social issues and foreign policy;
- Faculty aren't able to teach all relevant information and use all teaching methods;
- Students aren't able to explore all subject areas;
- Students and faculty aren't able to act as citizens on issues they care deeply about (i.e. advocate for their positions outside their professional duties);
- Students are less able to create opportunities to act on their beliefs and create out of classroom educational opportunities.

Solution:

The attacks on the free exchange of ideas come in many forms—from direct legislation to attacks on individual faculty and student groups to loss of funding. In order to beat them all back, we'll need a large group of faculty and student advocates/activists speaking out on this issue. In places where organizations like ACTA and Horowitz have not yet launched an attack on the free exchange of ideas, students and faculty should announce the principles they do stand for, build support for those principles and take that support to the media and to allies in the legislature—ensuring that they're ready to respond to any attempt to restrict the free exchange of ideas on campus.

Goal:

Decision-makers understand that campuses in your state will oppose any efforts to restrict the free exchange of ideas on campus. Key allies agree to fight any proposals.

Strategy/context:

Have the overwhelming voice of campus—expressed both by faculty and student senate resolutions and by signing on additional supporters (student organizations, individual faculty members)—argue publically for a real free exchange of ideas on campus.

Tactics:

1. Pass resolution in campus senate's (faculty or university senate, student senate or student government) supporting a free exchange of ideas.
2. Build support for that resolution—20 additional faculty and 20% of your student organizations sign on in support of the resolution.
3. Announce that support and resolution to people off campus:
 - a. Hold a press conference or send out a release—get on campus media outlets and local newspaper to cover the announcement.
 - b. Meet with likely champions (Provost or college/university president, legislators often supportive of higher education) to let them know what the sense of campus is and affirm that they'll fight to preserve that if necessary.

Talking Points—opposing attacks on a free exchange of ideas

Main message:

This [insert name for the attack here—attack on my professor, “intellectual diversity bill”, etc.] is a politically motivated attack on the free exchange of ideas on campus. There is not a problem with political bias on our campus and this proposal is distracting us from the real problems in higher education--that fewer and fewer Americans lack access to get the education they need to succeed.

For real learning to happen, higher education needs to include a free exchange of ideas.

Freedom and open debate are the core of what makes learning at a college campus possible. This freedom sponsors new ideas, fosters debate, exposes students to frames and theories they have never encountered and challenges core beliefs. It is hard to imagine universities successfully challenging their students and their communities without the freedom to say, think and debate anything and everything.

The so-called “Intellectual Diversity” bill and other proposals would stifle that freedom. It would force year in, year out scrutiny from politicians into what is being taught, and how it is being taught— a sure recipe for a climate where faculty members feel they have to favor “balance” and “sensitivity” over scholarship and real learning. It will force universities to restrict and regulate the views discussed in classrooms and the views of speakers. The best way to ensure a wide variety of opinions and ideas is to have classrooms and quads as free from restrictions as possible. Let the marketplace of ideas, not political correctness, rule the campus.

Instead of trying to restrict what students can learn, we should focus on the real issues that college student’s face, like paying for an education

Over the past ten years, college costs have skyrocketed. State governments have cut college budgets and federal grant aid is stagnant. As a result, more students and families are forced to take out larger loans to pay for education. Over the past decade, debt levels for graduating seniors with student loans more than doubled. We may not agree on which problem is the most dire, but it’s a sure bet that students would be better served by our leaders and campus administrators focusing on the real issues.

There is not a problem with political bias in higher education.

Proponents of these proposals, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) and David Horowitz claim to be defending students from “indoctrination” and one-sided teaching, but present precious little evidence for their claims. Both have touted studies of voter registration and party identification but have yet to explain how this affects teaching. According to Horowitz, “We did this [voter registration study] not to establish a principle for balancing faculties or even because we believed that these categories provided a useful intellectual standard.”

Furthermore, in those cases where a professor does behave inappropriately, there are standards and a process for dealing with it already in place. Universities all have ways for students to dispute grades they feel are unfair and complain about the conduct of professors and all have protections to make sure that political views are not considered in hiring and promotion.

The “intellectual diversity” bills are an attempt by anti-free speech advocates on the right to silence political debate on campus and advance their own political agenda.

The main proponent of these attacks, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) makes no attempt to hide its political agenda. According to T. Kenneth Cribb, president of the Intercollegiate Studies Institute (parent organization to ACTA): "But we should add a major new component to our strategy: the conservative movement is now mature enough to sustain a counteroffensive on that last Leftist redoubt, the college campus... "

Likewise, other proponents of restrictions on the classroom like David Horowitz do not attempt to hide his political agenda – he wants to undermine “liberal” professors and students and replace them with his conservative ideology and political cronies. In his essay about the campus blacklist, Horowitz uses a personal story to justify the need for an Academic Bill of Restrictions. In 2003, prior to a Horowitz speaking engagement at Columbia University, a professor sent out an email encouraging some students to protest his appearance. An infuriated Horowitz demanded that the professor apologize and the university issue a statement deploring her actions, simply because this professor chose to speak out against the ideas and policies advocated by Horowitz.

Sample Letters to the Editor

Sample LTE #1-general

For me, the key to learning is the free exchange of ideas between students and faculty. I love the debate that sponsors new ideas, pisses someone off, or challenges something I've never thought of before.

Across the country, opponents of this mission have tried to pass bills and attack individual faculty members in an effort to water down our education. These attacks are a politically motivated attempt to curb what we can learn on campus. Rather than promoting a free marketplace of ideas, these bills would force campus to care more about having "balance" than having all of the most relevant information in our classes. That may score political points, but it's a recipe for an education that doesn't educate.

Our university is one of the most impressive the country and we don't need someone else's agenda harming our education.

Sample LTE#2-your story

One of the largest problems with these proposals is that they would make professors pay more attention to "balance" in the classroom and avoiding offending students than actually teaching the subject. Some of the proposals even go so far as to encourage students who don't like a professor's opinions to drag them through the mud, potentially getting the university to censure them. This would easily scare other professors into restricting what they teach and what is open for discussion in class to avoid a witch-hunt. ***Insert your personal story: use your personal story—say a class you had where you learned from a professor because they presented a controversial idea or because the topic opened the class to lively discussion.***

Sample Student Government or Faculty Senate Resolution in support of a free exchange of ideas on campus

Whereas, the free exchange of ideas is fundamental to the mission of higher education;

Whereas, it is this freedom that creates new ideas and analysis, that challenges students to become critical thinkers and citizens and that allows institutions of higher education to fulfill both their functions of education and serving the broader community;

Whereas, in order for institutions of higher education to truly have this free exchange of ideas, the policies impacting campus and climate surrounding higher education must allow the following to be true:

- Faculty members must be able to research and publish their findings without outside interference,
- Faculty members must be able to teach all information and analysis relevant to their course and engage students in all of their observations and questions,
- Students should be able to take courses in a wide variety of subject matter, including topics often considered controversial,
- Both faculty members and students must be able to act as citizens on issues they feel strongly about,
- Students must be able to create additional learning opportunities outside the classroom setting;

Be it therefore resolved that we urge all state leaders to do what is in their power to ensure that our great institutions of higher education retain this fundamental free exchange of ideas. To this end, we urge all state leaders to reject proposals and legislative measures that would restrict that free exchange of ideas or would contribute to an environment of self-censorship.

Statement in support of a free exchange of ideas on campus (to sign supporters onto)

The free exchange of ideas is fundamental to the mission of higher education. It is this freedom that creates new ideas and analysis, that challenges students to become critical thinkers and citizens and that allows institutions of higher education to fulfill both their functions of education and serving the broader community.

In order for institutions of higher education to truly have this free exchange of ideas, the policies affecting campus and climate surrounding higher education must allow the following to be true:

- Faculty members must be able to research and publish their findings without outside interference;
- Faculty members must be able to teach all information and analysis relevant to their course and engage students in all of their observations and questions;
- Students should be able to take courses in a wide variety of subject matter, including topics often considered controversial;
- Both faculty members and students must be able to act as citizens on issues they feel strongly about;
- Students must be able to create additional learning opportunities outside the classroom setting.

We, the undersigned, urge all state leaders to do what is in their power to ensure that our great institutions of higher education retain this fundamental free exchange of ideas. To this end, we urge all state leaders to reject proposals and legislative measures that would restrict that free exchange of ideas or would contribute to an environment of self-censorship.

Name _____

Organization _____

Phone _____

Email _____

Address _____

