

Protect the Free Exchange of Ideas on Campus

Student Free Speech Activist
Toolkit

FREE EXCHANGE
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Background:

What are opponents of the free exchange of ideas 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. More specifically, they will 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 either intimidate students into agreeing with them or give bad grades to students that disagree with them.

The proponents of these proposals will then 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 paying for it to campus safety to figuring out what to do after college in the “real world,” but there is simply no evidence that there is a problem of political bias in higher education.

Certainly, there are studies that argue faculty are more likely to be a democrat than republican—but what does that have to do with their teaching? The quick answer—nothing. Do republicans and democrats teach Shakespeare, organic chemistry or the civil war differently? Are students so incapable, impressionable and immature that having a deep discussion of philosophy or current events, or even hearing the occasional joke, will “indoctrinate” them? Are professors really so irresponsible that they are assigning failing grades to students that back a different presidential candidate than they do? Of course not.

In fact, having rich discussions, learning how to pick apart and how to respond to arguments, learning how to defend your position—are all valuable and necessary skills to learn. Moreover, students in higher education are quite capable adults, a tough group to “indoctrinate” even if you were trying. Finally, even in the rare cases where the rare professor does behave inappropriately, there are already policies and protections on campus for students—from grievance procedures to mechanisms to dispute an unfair grade.

Simply put, while students do face a lot of real problems, political bias in college is not one of them.

What is the “intellectual diversity” bill?

Similar to David Horowitz’s “academic bill of rights,” is a template proposal that would restrict how faculty members are able to teach and create an atmosphere where universities feel they have to censor potentially controversial content in classrooms. Rather than responding to a real problem or helping students, as their language tries to suggest they will do, these proposals are an attempt by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) and their allies to stop discussions of views that do not square with their political agenda.

Unfortunately, these proposals are being taken seriously in far too many places. Already, more than 28 states have considered adopting some version of these bills. Worse yet, the story of higher education the “intellectual diversity” bill’s backers are telling 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.

We are working to make sure that does not happen.

Fighting back—Organizing to stop restrictive proposals in your area:

To stop this, we need to fight back with a creative and media savvy strategy that will expose these bills for what they are and show that ordinary students see it for what it is: a major threat to free speech and to their education. You can launch this on your campus:

Tactics to stop restrictions on your campus and in your state:

1. **Share your story with the media** — Don't let the opponents of a free exchange of ideas on campus be the only ones talking to the press. Send your campus and city papers Letters to the Editor about why academic freedom is important to you. Get student leaders on your campus to write Opinion Editorials to the paper as well. Share your personal concerns: talk about how this would affect you and your friends. Contact reporters who cover the issue to make sure they know that there is another side to this controversy, and an equally organized response. (*See the appendix for sample letters and op-eds.*)
2. **Get your professors and administrators involved** — these bills directly affect your professors and their ability to teach freely and honestly. Ask them to sign onto the coalition to stop these damaging proposals. (*See the appendix for a sample coalition letter.*)
3. **Get your student government involved** — Your student government is the most obvious mouthpiece for students at your school. Urge your campus leaders to pass resolutions opposing restrictions on your education. (*See the appendix for a sample student government resolution.*)

Talking Points—so-called “Intellectual Diversity” Bills/Proposals

Main message:

The so-called “intellectual diversity” bill is a politically motivated attack on the free exchange of ideas on campus. Moreover, proponents of this bill are 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. It's this freedom that 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 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. Over the past ten years, college costs have skyrocketed. State governments have cut college budgets, causing tuition increases. Federal grant aid is stagnant. As a result, more students and more families are forced to take out larger loans to pay for the student’s 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 American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA), the main proponent of these restrictive proposals makes no attempt to hide their 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 makes no 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.

Sadly, the people pushing for this "Intellectual Diversity" bill will stop that free exchange—watering down our education. It's 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.

I want a classroom where I can really learn and a college that challenges me. Not only would this bill spoil that, but I see no evidence of a problem to solve. It's time to move on and focus on issues that really affect us, like tuition or campus safety.

Sample LTE #2-students aren't stupid

In arguing for their so-called "intellectual diversity" bill, politicians and their allies claim to be protecting students from indoctrination and intimidation. Not only is that not happening, but it doesn't make sense. Are they of this bill trying to claim I won't be able to understand organic chemistry because a professor makes a joke about politics? That I'll be so intimidated by a professor telling me who they vote for that I'll drop English 101? That I'll become an atheist simply because my Geography professor is?

Students are a lot smarter than this gives us credit for. And that's why state after state has been unable to find evidence of this supposed problem—there isn't one to find. I came to this university because I wanted an education, not fact regurgitation. That means getting into debates, learning a lot about many topics, and learning how to deal with someone who disagrees with me.

Let's stop dealing with non-problems and start dealing with real ones, like making sure college is affordable.

Sample LTE#3-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 Resolution opposing the so-called “intellectual diversity” bill

Whereas higher education should challenge students to think critically, debate and explore ideas they are not familiar with;

Whereas a free exchange of ideas between students and faculty is the key to learning on a college campus;

Whereas restrictions on what content is taught in the classroom, what subjects are open to debate and what ideas we as students can be exposed to would hamper the education students receive at [university x];

Whereas around the country there have been numerous politically motivated attempts to restrict the free exchange of ideas that is critical to education, often referred to as the so-called “intellectual diversity” bill;

Whereas proponents of these proposals have not been able to show that there is a problem to solve;

Whereas students need elected officials and administrators to focus on issues that impact many students like XXXX;

Now, therefore, be it resolved that the Student Government Association of [university x] opposes any future attempt to institute the so-called “intellectual diversity” bill and similar proposals;

Be it further resolved that the Student Government Association of [university x] calls upon [administration] to maintain [university x] as an open marketplace of ideas where free expression is exercised and where diverse views are expressed and debate of those ideas is encouraged.

Statement in Support of the Free Exchange of Ideas on Campus—Student version

There is nothing more essential to learning than the free exchange of ideas between faculty and students. It's this freedom that sponsors new ideas, fosters debate and exposes students to frames and theories they have never encountered.

Unfortunately, opponents of this mission like the American Council of Trustees and Alumni and David Horowitz are pushing proposals that would restrict on-campus debate and free speech by placing restrictions on what is taught in college classrooms. They would rather that new ideas not challenge the status quo and that students are not challenged to explore ideas and theories with which they may be unfamiliar or even disagree. Their proposal, the so-called "intellectual diversity" bill, seeks to remove from universities the thing that makes them so successful, the free exchange of ideas.

I have not had a problem with political bias in my education and feel that the academic environment at my institution is both open and challenging. I do not want restrictions on what I can learn like the so-called "Intellectual Diversity" Bill.

Name _____ Campus _____

Email _____ Phone _____

Additionally, please let the legislature know more about your experience on campus:

- 1. Talk a bit more about your favorite classes. How do your professors engage the class and encourage critical thinking?**

- 2. What is the most pressing issue you face regarding your education?**

- 3. Why are you concerned about restrictions on what your professors are able to teach and discuss with students?**

Statement in Support of the Free Exchange of Ideas on Campus—Faculty version

There is nothing more essential to learning than the free exchange of ideas between faculty and students. It's this freedom that sponsors new ideas, fosters debate and exposes students to frames and theories they have never encountered.

Unfortunately, opponents of this mission like the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) David Horowitz are pushing proposals that would restrict on-campus debate and free speech by placing restrictions on what is taught in college classrooms. They would rather that new ideas not challenge the status quo and that students are not challenged to explore ideas and theories with which they may be unfamiliar or even disagree. Their proposal, the so-called "intellectual diversity" bill, seeks to remove from universities the thing that makes them so successful, the free exchange of ideas.

I do not see a problem with political bias in higher education and feel that the academic environment at my institution is open and challenging to students. I do not want policies that restrict the free exchange of ideas in classrooms.

Name _____ Campus _____

Email _____ Phone _____

Additionally, please let the legislature know more about your teaching on campus:

- 1. In your teaching, how do you encourage critical thinking, debate and discussion?**

- 2. What is the most pressing issue you face regarding higher education?**

- 3. Why are you opposed to proposals that would restrict the free exchange of ideas?**