


Teach Me, but Don't Disagree with Me

Polarized politics is combining with the black-and-white thinking that prevails among many traditional-age college students and the often strong opinions of educators to produce a climate of frustration and discord on some American college campuses. What can be done to create a respectful environment where students feel their perspectives will be heard?

BY JODI FISLER AND JOHN D. FOUBERT

 ON THE WEB SITE of Students for Academic Freedom (SAF), an organization committed to fighting political indoctrination in higher education, a complaint center allows students to report instances of ideological bias. One student submitted the following:

Earlier this year I received notification that I would have to read “Nickel and Dime” for the incoming freshman orientation at [my college] in the fall. . . . I decided to do a little research on the book and its author Babs Ehrenreich [sic]. I soon found out that the book was full of anti-capitalistic views and “Marxist rants.” . . . My parents and I are now questioning the agenda of the college. . . . This left-wing academia wants to indoctrinate my fellow students and I before we even enter college. I guess I’m in for a lot of frustration and liberal indoctrination the next four years.

As one of hundreds of students protesting the alleged liberal indoctrination of higher education, the author of this quote represents a growing chorus of concern. With SAF chapters at more than 180 campuses nationwide and legislation about students’ academic freedom under discussion in several states and in the U.S. Congress, it is clear that educators face a growing challenge from this community of discontent. Some students, like the one quoted, object to a perceived politically liberal slant of their institution. Others complain about individual professors interjecting what the students consider irrelevant political commentary into their classes, presenting only one perspective on a controversial issue, or penalizing students for expressing conservative viewpoints. Whether or not the accusations are justified, they offer a view into some students’ perspectives on the college experience. They also reflect larger trends in education and in the political and cultural attitudes of the country. Educators can react to this challenge either by ignoring it or adapting their practice to refocus attention on learning.

Claims of ideological indoctrination on college campuses are hardly new. Conservative icon William F. Buckley, Jr., launched his career in 1951 with a sharp critique of what he, as an undergraduate at Yale, perceived to be attempts by socialist and atheist professors to indoctrinate students. In recent decades, the stereotype of politically and socially liberal college faculty and administrators has, for many, taken on the status of indisputable fact. Like many stereotypes, this one is rooted in an element of truth. Data collected through the Higher Education Research Institute and assembled in its report “The American College Teacher: National Norms for 2001–2002” and by other researchers indicate that faculty attitudes do, in fact, lean to the political left. Conservative activist David Horowitz has pointed to these data as evidence that colleges need stronger policies to protect the academic freedom of students with more conservative views. To ensure that all students have access to a range of viewpoints, Horowitz has passionately promoted his own “Academic Bill of Rights,” a nonpartisan document that outlines eight principles designed to protect the values of free inquiry and free speech. The document can be found on the SAF Web site at <http://www.studentsforacademicfreedom.org/abor.html>. Legislation based on Horowitz’s document has been introduced in at least sixteen states, as well as in the federal Higher Education Reauthorization Act. Opponents contend that such bills are dangerous because they open the door to government oversight of college affairs and threaten the very principles they claim to defend. Many opponents also question the need for new policies, rejecting the notion that educators are either unable or unwilling to engage students in spirited dialogue involving perspectives with which they personally disagree.

An individual educator’s approach to the task of educating students is undoubtedly influenced by personal values—professional, social, political, and moral. Even if overt expressions of opinion are avoided, they can be expressed in subtle ways. How much time will the residence life advisor spend on sexual identity issues during student staff training? Will the U.S. history professor base an introductory survey course on the “great

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men” perspective, or will narratives of ordinary people be central to the assigned readings? What issues are covered and how they are taught can convey a great deal about their personal importance to the teacher. The weight an issue is given can lead to accusations of indoctrination if students or parents find the teacher’s values objectionable.

WHAT IS COLLEGE FOR?

AS WITH MANY CONFLICTS between groups with apparently differing perspectives, it helps to consider the context of the conflict—in this case, higher education. A majority of educators would likely agree that one purpose of higher education is to prepare students for life after graduation, although the definition of preparation will vary from school to school. Vocational and technical institutions may restrict their purpose to preparing students for life in a specified workplace, whereas a tribal college may define it as instruction in the culture and governance of the tribe. Liberal arts colleges have traditionally prepared students for life by exposing them to a variety of disciplines and perspectives and engaging them in a critical search for answers to great questions about the nature of humanity and the qualities of a good life.

Most educators would also likely agree that one purpose of higher education is to help students learn. Educators both in and outside the classroom help students learn facts; help them learn to write, to reason, and to question; help them learn how to live and work with people like and unlike themselves; and help them learn to manage their time and create balance between work and leisure. By the time students earn their degree, the hope is that they will have developed as scholars and as people. This is a tall order, made all the more challenging by an ever-changing educational landscape, increasing financial pressures, and increasing demands on educators from parents, students, and others to improve their service and prove its effectiveness. Students and parents, as well as state and national governments, want to know that a college education is worth the high price tag. Some students have little patience for learning experiences that appear to waste their time, let alone those that challenge views and values they did not come to college to change.

A greater understanding among educators of the cognitive development of students is essential as the debate over alleged liberal indoctrination unfolds. As students advance their understanding of knowledge, shifting their focus from right answers to reasoned arguments, they learn a more mature approach to relating intellectually to others. Students’ perspectives on pro-

fessors and administrators may hinge, at least in part, on how well educators help them become more intellectually mature and on how well educators communicate with their students in the process.

HOW STUDENTS AND EDUCATORS CONNECT

STUDENTS' LEVEL OF COGNITIVE development is central to the meaning they ascribe to events around them. When they enter college, many students view the world in absolute terms. From this perspective, there are right and wrong answers and the job of an educator is to tell them which are which and test them to make sure they have learned the right answers. As they continue through college, students begin to think in more complex ways and view knowledge as more uncertain and contextual. The weight students place on the opinion of an authority figure decreases, and the weight they place on their own reasoned opinion increases as they cognitively mature. Within a single class, residence hall, or student committee, an educator can find examples of different levels of cognitive complexity and widely varying views of the preferred role of the professor. The astute educator recognizes where students are in their cognitive development process and facilitates movement toward more advanced stages accordingly. Facilitating this movement is another common goal of college, but like most growth, it is usually accompanied by some degree of disequilibrium, especially if students are stretched too far beyond where their minds are ready to go.

At some point in their college career, most students reach a stage where they see all opinions as more or less equal. They believe they have as much right to their opinion as educators have to theirs, and they may feel frustrated if they do not see their opinion represented or respected. Diversity training offers a good example. Many colleges now include a diversity awareness session in their student orientation program. White students frequently complain about these programs and conservative students are particularly frustrated by them because they (the students) do not accept the fundamental notions of privilege and power that underlie many of these programs. If the program is content-heavy and time is short, sufficient opportunities may not be available to explore objections that students may have to the underlying assumptions of the workshop. To a student who holds an alternative opinion on some fundamental aspect of the program, an educator's failure to represent that opinion or to invite a discussion about alternative perspectives might be seen as an effort to indoctrinate students and stifle dissent.

The typically low level of preparation that college educators receive in how to teach effectively is a complicating factor. Managing a successful debate on a controversial issue is both a skill and an art. For some, it may come naturally, but for many it can be overwhelming. Turning a heated discussion into a mutually productive learning experience also requires a good deal of tact and the ability to recognize the underlying source of disagreement. Knowing something about how students develop in their thinking is particularly useful in such situations. By understanding how students arrive at their conclusions, it becomes easier to see why they react to what they hear and to craft responses that will make sense to them. Many student affairs educators have been exposed to student development theory during their academic coursework or professional development, but they may not have learned how to apply these theories to the programs they offer. Faculty and graduate students who might be interested in learning to teach with student development in mind are given few incentives, especially if the tenure decisions at their school are based primarily on scholarly output not related to teaching.

Of course, personalities play a role here, too. No matter how much one knows about levels of reasoning, it can be very unpleasant to engage in a debate with someone who has a hot temper or who disagrees in a disagreeable fashion. Even if all sides are committed to an open and civil exchange of ideas, the opinions, values, and biases brought to the discussion can exert an unintended influence. Educators can be just as passionate as students about what they believe, and many may feel that sharing their personal opinions can make a significant contribution to the educational process. However, one person's passion is another's browbeating. Whether passions are kept in check or not, one should at least be aware of the ways in which students might perceive fervor. Understanding variations in students' cognitive and emotional maturity levels allows for adjustments in style and increases the likelihood that learning will occur.

WHAT'S HAPPENING HERE?

AT TENTIVENESS to student cognitive development is a solidly established good educational practice, and current agitation by SAF and others merely offers an impetus to focus efforts in that area. The recent growth in vocal dissatisfaction with perceived liberal indoctrination by colleges and universities is explained, at least in part, by larger national trends. In 1998, Deborah Tannen wrote about "the argument culture" (p. 3) in the United States, a culture marked by habitually aggressive and adversarial dis-

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course. The growth of networked computer technology and electronic media has enabled the sound bite to take over as the preferred unit of expression. Complex arguments have to be reduced to memorable slogans that can be conveyed in ten seconds to meet the time constraints of news broadcasters and an increasingly divided public attention span. News commentaries often show two people on opposite sides of an issue shouting one another down or attempting to make the other look foolish. These displays have the unfortunate effects of giving the appearance that every issue has only two clearly delineated sides and of placing a high value on not considering anyone else's opinion (or your own, for that matter).

Many commentators have spoken lately about the increasing polarization of the United States. Whether this is the argument culture at work or the result of another cultural phenomenon, the rhetoric of our time does typically seem to describe the world in absolute and often political terms. An individual is either liberal or conservative; a state is either red or blue; a nation is either with us or against us. This dichotomous approach artificially reduces issues to two sides and assigns people to one category or another. Educators would probably agree that few issues are limited to only two sides and that part of the college experience is gaining exposure to a variety of perspectives and learning how to choose among them. However, new evidence suggests that more and more students are coming to college with their minds already made up. The Higher Education Research Institute reported in "The American Freshman" that students entering college in 2004 identified their political orientation as "far right" or "far left" in greater numbers than ever before. Those identifying themselves as "middle of the road" constituted less than half of all respondents—the lowest percentage in thirty years.

In addition, the political gains the Republican Party has made nationally over the past decade have likely empowered students with conservative views to be more vocal. Emotions ran high during the presidential

elections of 2000 and 2004 and may have led some educators to bring their political views to the fore in unprecedented ways. In a highly charged political climate, students hunting for evidence of bias will almost certainly find it. A perceived sense of entitlement among the generation of students referred to as *millennials* (defined by Neil Howe and William Strauss as those born between 1982 and 2000) may also encourage some to be more vocal when the education they experience does not meet their expectations. Displays of dissatisfaction may appear as a formal complaint to the professor or department chair or, perhaps more likely, as an entry on a Web log or Web site such as StudentsforAcademicFreedom.org.

One prominent fault line in the national political and cultural debate involves the concept of relativism and how it is defined and valued. Within education circles, the term *relativism* represents the most complex form of thinking. It is a way of constructing meaning that places knowledge in context and critically evaluates perspectives on the basis of the evidence. In the popular sense, however, relativism has come to imply an "anything goes" mentality in which nothing can be judged better or worse than anything else. Many people, including many educators, view relativism in the pop culture sense as detrimental to society. The goal of education is not to cultivate a sense of "anything goes" but to understand our own and others' perspectives and to make sure that when we commit to a certain perspective, we know why we are doing it. Whether the cultivation of relativism in an academic sense is a valuable use of students' time and their family's money is another question again, especially at a time when people look to colleges to provide real-world skills and a competitive edge that will land them a good job. It is easy for most people to see how computer skills, proficiency in a second language, or mastery of content within a given major will help a new graduate succeed in the job market. The value of critical thinking, however, may be harder for some people to grasp because it isn't typically measured with a grade that can be highlighted on a résumé. Some par-

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ents may also object to their children's learning any kind of thinking that will cause them to question the culture and cherished values of the family. Yet critical thinking is a real-world skill necessary for complex problem solving and collaboration with diverse others, so nurturing this skill has long been recognized as an important goal of higher education.

WHAT NOW?

THE COMPLAINTS reported on the Students for Academic Freedom Web site suggest that there may be some cases of political grandstanding in college classrooms or of other behavior that may violate the generally accepted standards of academic freedom and professional ethics established by the American Association of University Professors. Even taking into account the fact that the SAF Web site presents only the students' accounts of each incident, it is still reasonable to assume that some educators may at least occasionally overstep the bounds of professional conduct. The debate over academic freedom policies is fueled in part by the question of how often this really happens and whether the number of legitimate cases warrants all the fuss. News reports, opinion pieces, and conversations with colleagues suggest that many faculty and administrators regard David Horowitz's accusations of a "negative and coercive learning environment" [as explained on the Mission and Strategy page of the SAF Web site] with considerable scorn. When asked by a student about the Academic Bill of Rights, one professor reportedly said that he would resign his position if the college ever adopted such a measure. Although many educators believe that concerns about political bias are overblown, most would probably agree that dealing with the issue within higher education circles is preferable to having it play out in the political process of state and national legislatures. So how should educators deal with an issue that they may not even recognize as a real problem? We suggest four approaches:

Engage in self-reflection. On an individual level, every faculty or staff member should take a close look at his or her own biases, assumptions, and values. We all have them, and they usually come out in one way or another. For example, an administrator may react differently to an unauthorized anti-war demonstration than to an unauthorized anti-abortion demonstration. Allocation of funds for speakers or student organizations may be subtly influenced by the political leanings of those who approve the budget. A residence hall advisor may ask one resident assistant to remove a Confederate flag sticker from his door, while the political cartoons on another resident assistant's door go unnoticed. By being aware of our biases, we are more likely to recognize situations in which our biases come into play and to be deliberate in dealing with them. Anyone responsible for developing a program or course should think carefully about the messages communicated by its structure as well as its content. Having an obvious point of view is not necessarily a bad thing, as long as we are mindful of how we express opinions and what the consequences might be for students at various phases of development.

Similarly, there should be conversations at the institutional level about implicit and explicit values and goals. How important is it to develop critical thinking as opposed to content mastery or professional skills? Should faculty be teachers or researchers first and foremost? Are faculty and staff rewarded for doing what the institution says it values? Do admissions criteria reflect the mission of the college? What about the values implicit in policies, practices, and governance structures? Thinking carefully about these questions can increase the likelihood that practices will be consistent with values. It may be too much to expect all students to agree with those values, but at least the values can be articulated if a complaint of institutional bias arises.

Strive for transparency. Being open can go a long way toward building trust with students and helping them buy into the goals of the institution. This works at

the institutional level as well as at the personal level. If a college aims to instill certain values in students, those values should be made clear to prospective students as well as those already on campus. Students at religious colleges, for example, probably would not be surprised to find courses and programs based on a religious ideology on their campus. If they did not agree with the values of the college, presumably they would not have enrolled. It is probably fair to say that even public colleges are based on certain values (commitment to civic engagement, for instance), but how explicit are they? Mission statements, publicity literature, and new student orientation should include information about the values of the institution so that students can enter college with a clear set of informed expectations.

Faculty and staff should also be clear about expectations, criteria for evaluation, and the process they intend to use to help students achieve the goals of courses and programs. If an educator intends to play devil's advocate in order to help students think more carefully about the positions they take, students should be made aware of that approach; otherwise, they may feel that their opinions are being discounted or that the educator is trying to change their opinions rather than make them think more critically about what they believe. Institutions should also take care to deliver on what is promised. If a program on Muslim culture is advertised but the entire event focuses on terrorism, students may be justifiably upset. Similarly, a course that focuses exclusively on protest music of the 1960s should not be billed as a survey of twentieth-century music. It is natural for educators to teach courses from whichever perspective they deem most appropriate, but students should at least be aware of what they can expect, and the content should bear a reasonable resemblance to the course or program description. Involving students in developing cocurricular programs and academic course content may help students feel more invested in their own learning and increase the likelihood that perspectives important to them will be included.

Institutions should also make sure that faculty and staff members are aware of existing standards of professional conduct. Using class time to air lengthy grievances about one's personal life would generally be

considered inappropriate behavior. The same can be said of using class time to air political opinions that have no bearing on the course. Such conduct may not necessarily constitute a violation of students' academic freedom, but it is a poor use of class time, it may distract students from the actual purpose of the class, and it may make students feel needlessly uncomfortable, all of which could have a negative impact on their learning.

Most institutions have policies on academic freedom and grading bias (and if they don't, they should). These policies should be readily available to students, faculty, and staff. A line in a syllabus quoting the policy or directing students to the page in the student handbook where it can be found lets students know that protocols are in place to deal with concerns should they arise. Some charges of grading bias may be legitimate, but if students don't think they would receive support from the institution in making such claims, they are likely to walk away feeling bitter and disillusioned.

Allocate resources. Many students enter college simply because it is the next step on the educational ladder. They may have heard that college is supposed to teach them how to think, but they may not really understand what that means. Orientation or College 101 programs can help introduce students to the learning process and the aims of the institution, explaining to students the ways in which they can expect to be challenged. Providing such orientation also contributes to transparency by telling students up front that they will encounter opinions they don't like, they will probably encounter people they don't like, they will probably feel like someone is trying to make them question their opinions—and that is all good. College is, after all, a training ground for life, and students will need to be able to deal with potentially objectionable ideas and people when they graduate. Orientation programs could be offered every year at increasing levels of complexity, giving students in upper-division classes the opportunity to reflect on what they have experienced and how it has influenced their development.

Resources should also be made available to help faculty and staff improve their skills in fostering students' learning and development. The truth is, not everyone is a born teacher. Most educators could benefit from pro-

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professional development opportunities that address learning styles or new classroom technologies or students' concerns about academic freedom. At some schools, this takes the form of a teaching resource center. Some institutions offer faculty mentoring programs to help young professors learn from the experience of more seasoned colleagues. Professional development or mentoring programs should be encouraged for administrative staff as well.

Promote courage and civility. In some cases, accusations of ideological discrimination have less to do with the substance of a remark than the manner of its delivery. Faculty and staff should model high standards for appropriate discourse and respect for others. This is not to suggest that everyone should walk around on tiptoe, avoiding anything that might cause offense to someone else. Quite the contrary. Students and educators alike should understand the difference between scholarly debate and personal attack. Controversial issues will generate passionate expressions of values and opinions. When views on sensitive topics differ, all sides must try to set aside hurt feelings and deal with issues on a substantive level. It requires courage—as well as advanced levels of thinking—to engage with people who disagree with us and whose opinions seem to threaten dearly held principles. In the interest of intellectual growth, both educators and students should have the courage to have their views challenged without getting defensive. Conflict creates a gold mine of teachable moments. Faculty and staff serve as role models for students. How we react to having our own views questioned can send a strong message.

College should also be thought of as a place where students are learning and testing their interpersonal skills. For students who have grown up in the argument culture, their only model—that of oppositional dialogue—may rely on humiliation and shouting. It is the educator's job to teach them that they live in a world with many kinds of people with differing views and personalities, yet it is possible to disagree both passionately and respectfully and even learn something from those with whom one may disagree. We must also communicate that it is worthwhile to continue engaging with others on tough questions even though it may not be comfortable. Educators must recognize that students will make mistakes (just as we do) as they try to navigate the boundaries of civil discourse. We should simultaneously attempt to educate those who cause offense and those who are offended. This is no small task, and

there are no easy formulas for how to go about it. Educators can be models for dealing fairly and respectfully with students and faculty whose views differ from their own. When conflicts of ideology arise between groups of students, an instructor might facilitate a discussion among the students involved, and perhaps engage them in planning a campuswide event aimed at exploring the issue further. Students can be encouraged to turn their hurt feelings into some form of positive action, such as writing letters to the campus newspaper or organizing a public awareness rally, for example.

PERHAPS a good place for institutions to start applying these suggestions is in their interactions with proponents of the Academic Bill of Rights. Enflaming passions with political rhetoric will not move the debate forward. By approaching this issue with sensitivity to students' concerns and a willingness to look critically at practices that may have contributed to the controversy, educators may be able to convert some of the heat into light. It is a good opportunity to demonstrate a capacity for being challenged, to take a reasoned stand after weighing the evidence, and to maintain a respectful attitude toward all concerned. In the face of their critics, college educators can prove they are worthy of the esteem and independence they have enjoyed for so long.

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