

# 'Academic Bill of Rights' questionable



WHEN I was a graduate student a professor handed back an early draft of my dissertation – a treatment of

how Quakers influenced the beginnings of public schooling in 19th century Philadelphia – and exclaimed: “You’re religious! What else is wrong with your thinking?”

I immediately understood that my beliefs and his Marxist interpretation were at odds and that if I wanted a doctorate I would have to compromise my position.

While I was disillusioned by the politics of academia, I realized that I was not the first graduate student who had to play them. “Academic freedom” was subject to the professor’s definition, especially if he had tenure.

David Horowitz, a conservative commentator and author of “The Professors: The 101 Most Dangerous Academics in America,” aims to change those politics with his “Academic Bill of Rights,” a proposal to address concerns about liberal bias on college and university campuses.

Pennsylvania is one of more than 20 states to entertain the proposal by passing, in July 2005, resolution 177, which established a House Select Committee to “examine the academic atmosphere and the degree to which faculty have the opportunity to instruct students have the opportunity to learn in an environment conducive to the pursuit of knowledge and truth at state-related and state-owned” colleges and universities in the commonwealth.

Investigative hearings have already been conducted at the University of Pittsburgh, Temple, and Millersville. The find-

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## OPINION

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ings will be compiled into a report that will either reject or recommend some type of reform by the end of this June.

The “Academic Bill of Rights” is a double-edged sword. To be sure, there are those professors, like my dissertation adviser, who impose their views on students and wield their authority in the form of grades. Not only do they kill the spirit of intellectual engagement, they are also limiting freedom of speech in their classrooms.

Unfortunately, many of these professors have tenure, but student grievance procedures already exist to ensure the propriety of their conduct. So what’s the purpose of an “Academic Bill of Rights”?

There’s a sneaking suspicion that political partisanship – not academic freedom – is at the root of this ideological battle and that Horowitz’s proposal threatens to kill the academic freedom he insists it is protecting.

In other words, if the free speech of conservative students and their professors is to be preserved by stifling that of the liberal ones, then aren’t Horowitz and his supporters just as guilty of the intellectual McCarthyism as the liberals they accuse?

Conservatives defend their argument about the imposition of liberal bias on impressionable students by citing the 2001 Brookings Institute survey that revealed that Democratic faculty outnumber Republicans by 4-1 in economics and history, 5-1 in political science, and 47-1 in sociology.

They’ve also secured anec-

dotal support from students who share their conservative bias, the supposed “victims” of “liberal indoctrination. But these examples are hardly an accurate barometer of higher education in the commonwealth.

The 200,000-plus students who attend the state’s colleges and universities are more sophisticated thinkers than the conservative lawmakers would have us believe.

Few, if any, would accept blindly the views of their professors as infallible and can certainly distinguish between the substantive content of a course and the opinion of their instructor.

Nor do the conservatives give much credit to the integrity of the teaching profession. Most college professors are decent people who chose their career because they were inspired to teach young minds. In doing their jobs, professors are teaching critical thinking skills – how to formulate an argument, to question the stereotypes of society, to analyze a text – not trying to change the beliefs or political orientation of their students.

The “Academic Bill of Rights” has some frightening implications. If the state legislature decides to mandate rules and regulations on free speech in higher education, it will be violating the First Amendment. The action would be reminiscent of the kind of national brainwashing imposed by the Nazis on the German people during World War II.

If Horowitz and his supporters want that, perhaps they need to take a refresher course in history 101.

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