

Problems of Advocacy and Indoctrination: The Role of Faculty in Political Education

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One of the ironies of considering the relation of faculty to the political education of college students is the mismatch between external and internal perceptions of their role. External groups, fed by books such as Roger Kimball's *Tenured Radicals* and David Horowitz's *Indoctrination U*, believe that faculty have taken over large parts of the college curriculum and redirected it away from academic study to the political indoctrination of students. But from the perspective of insiders trying to promote programs aimed at civic education, faculty members' resistance and indifference is often seen as one of the biggest barriers to their success. Their experience is often the opposite from that painted in popular books — professors take a narrow “disciplinary” approach to their teaching and are unwilling to consider aims that are not purely intellectual. Can both these perspectives be true?

It is not difficult to identify prominent “public intellectuals” who are well known for the intersection of their scholarship and political advocacy. And there are college professors who forthrightly present their classrooms as arenas for political persuasion. In addition, certain fields of study, such as women's studies, do aim to engage their students in a critique of dominant social relations and social structures. Although they would not view themselves as engaged in political indoctrination, scholars in these fields view their teaching and research as inescapably political.

But there are academics who take the opposite position. Stanley Fish, a former literature professor at Duke University and former dean at University of Illinois-Chicago, is the best-known critic of colleges' efforts to engage their students in politics. In an essay entitled “Aim Low,” published in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in 2003, Fish argued that civic education is not an appropriate part of higher education. He said that the intellectual aims of higher education — training students to think critically and teaching them an academic discipline — should consume all of faculty members' attention in the classroom. “You have no chance at all, short of discipleship — that is itself suspect and dangerous — of determining what student's behaviors and values will be in those aspects of their life that are not, in the strict sense of the word, academic,” intoned Fish. “You might just make them into good researchers, you can't make them into good people, and you shouldn't try.” According to Fish, political education would result in failure, or worse, indoctrination.¹

Other professors, while not as virulent in their opposition as Fish, feel uncomfortable mixing politics with their teaching. A recent reflection piece in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, by Laurie Fendrich, addressed professors' political relationships with students. Fendrich contrasted her own experience as a college student in the 1960s, when she often debated political issues with her peers and her professors, with her behavior as a

¹ Stanley Fish, “Aim Low: Confusing Democratic Values with Academic Ones Can Easily Damage the Quality of Education,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 16, 2003, Volume 49, Issue 36, Page C5.

college professor. Although she is still actively engaged in political campaigns and causes, she keeps her political activity completely separate from her classroom and her interaction with students. Fendrich does not wear political apparel when she is at her college, and when students ask her about her political views, she demurs to avoid saying which candidates she supports or what positions she takes on political issues. Fendrich came to this position reluctantly, deciding that the power imbalance between students and faculty makes it inappropriate for her to be upfront about her political positions. While not sharing Fish's righteousness about his rejection of political education, Fendrich agrees with his fears about indoctrination.²

Many of the readers who commented on Fendrich's essay applauded her position. The stereotype of tenured radicals using their classrooms as political platforms clearly does not fit these readers, who, according to a recent survey, represent the majority of American professors. Neil Gross and Salon Simmons conducted a nationally representative survey of professor's political views. They asked faculty to agree or disagree with the following statement:

When politically controversial issues arise in the classroom, college or university professors should keep their personal opinions to themselves.

Fifty-five percent agreed with this statement and forty-five percent disagreed. If they had asked professors if they felt comfortable expressing their own views, I suspect the percentage agreeing would be higher. But while the majority of professors do not want their colleagues discussing politics in their courses, a large minority tolerates or endorses the practice. Faculty members are genuinely divided on this question.³

If we believe that political education involves direct discussion of contemporary issues and tries to inculcate a disposition to political involvement, then faculty's reluctance to engage with students on political issues presents a real barrier. It's hard to imagine building support for a robust program of direct political education in this context. Professors, then, as a group, are ambivalent toward efforts to enhance the civic mission of higher education. But how do we explain their reluctance to insert themselves in political issues? And if there is a professional norm against such behavior, why is it so weak?

Answers to these questions can be found in the history of academic freedom. Early definitions of academic freedom proscribed faculty political expression, particularly in the classroom. But these proscriptions were challenged in the 1960s as academic freedom was redefined as freedom of political expression and ideals of political neutrality came under sharp scrutiny. This challenge shattered consensus regarding faculty political

² Laurie Fendrich, "The Personal is Political," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, The Chronicle Review, February 14, 2008, <http://chronicle.com/review/brainstorm/fendrich/the-political-is-personal>, retrieved June 6, 2008.

³ Neil Gross and Salon Simmons, "The Social and Political Views of American Professors," Working Paper, September 27, 2007, available at http://www.wjh.harvard.edu/~ngross/lounsberry_9-25.pdf, retrieved June 4, 2008.

behavior and spawned the divisions we experience today.

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The notion that academic freedom has inhibited faculty members from expressing their political views may seem counter-intuitive. Today, we generally assume that the primary purpose of academic freedom is to protect political expression and activity. But this is a relatively recent interpretation of academic freedom and one that is still contested. Traditionally academic freedom was understood to primarily protect research and teaching and professional authority within the institution. Only secondarily, and under limited conditions, did academic freedom protect political speech. These older ideas of academic freedom persist in weakened form, influencing a portion of the professoriate's understanding of what is and is not appropriate in the classroom.

In the decades around the turn of the 20th century, several universities fired social scientists who held views that were considered politically radical (see previous essay). These dismissals reignited debates about the meaning and scope of academic freedom. They attracted particular attention because they pitted university presidents who had been strong advocates of academic freedom a decade or two earlier when professors who supported evolution had been fired from religious colleges against former faculty allies. When charged with violating academic freedom (and being hypocrites), the university presidents involved in these cases denied that the professors were fired for their views on politically charged issues. Instead, they cited poor judgment and unprofessional behavior on the part of the faculty involved. In the debates that ensued two important distinctions emerged: the difference between professional and non-professional contexts and the distinction between the content of professors' ideas and the manner in which they express them.

These debates also transformed the notion of non-partisanship into the broader concept of institutional neutrality. Although critics of the firings tried to depict presidents as acting in the political and economic interests of their university's trustees, the charge of "partisan control" did not easily fit most of the turn-of-the-century academic freedom cases. Instead, university leaders took the offensive and argued that the best protection for academic freedom was institutional neutrality. Universities, they maintained, should not advocate particular positions. Instead, they should be neutral ground on which faculty and students could explore ideas freely.

Institutions would also benefit from neutrality. If proponents of a certain belief or cause knew that they could not take over a university and use it to promote their ends, they would be likely to leave universities alone. Conversely, if institutions did not stand for particular causes, people who opposed those causes would not be tempted to attack or harm universities. Universities would not become battlegrounds for advocates of particular positions. Neutrality, according to this logic, would simultaneously protect a university's autonomy as well as its members' freedom.

But the ideal of institutional neutrality also could be used to justify restricting faculty and students' freedom of speech and action. College and university officials have argued that faculty and student groups should refrain from advocating controversial causes lest they compromise the institution's neutrality. Many institutions, for example, have limited the kind of political activities that students could undertake on campus so that the institution would not be viewed as supporting their actions (see the next essay for more information). Universities have argued that faculty who support controversial issues might be viewed as "representing" the university. The most famous case of this sort occurred during World War I, when Columbia University fired psychology professor James McKeen Cattell for writing a letter opposing conscription. The university justified its decision because Cattell used stationery that identified him as a Columbia professor, thereby inappropriately representing the university. Institutional neutrality, while generally interpreted to mean that anyone can advocate anything within the university, has also been selectively used to prohibit political activity in order to protect institutions from association with unpopular causes.

The turn-of-the-century debates about academic freedom informed the first "official" statement about academic freedom in the United States — the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) 1915 Statement on Academic Freedom. Within the guidelines of institutional neutrality, the AAUP worked to establish principles to protect faculty's free speech. The AAUP argued strongly that faculty should have complete authority to speak in their area of academic expertise. In order to advance knowledge, faculty had to be free to explore new ideas, however unpopular. They must be protected from reprisals from boards of trustees and others who did not have the expertise to judge the quality of professors' views. The AAUP made it clear that this absolute freedom only applied to faculty who had demonstrated expertise in their area of research, expressing themselves in legitimate academic domains.⁴

The founders of the AAUP also believed that faculty should be allowed to engage in political activity. However, they acknowledged the tension between political activism and ideals of neutrality. "It is manifestly desirable that [academic] teachers have minds untrammelled by party loyalties, unexcited by party enthusiasms, and unbiased by personal political ambitions," noted the AAUP's 1915 Declaration of Principles. However, the AAUP also argued that the quality of American public life would suffer if scholars could play no role and the quality of the American professoriate would decline if faculty had to renounce their rights as citizens.⁵

Gradually, universities agreed that faculty should be free to participate in politics. They, however, must do so in a way that clearly delineated that they were not speaking as members of the faculty, and that they were not implicating the institutions at which they taught in the positions they expressed. Furthermore, universities expected that in their "extra-mural" activities, faculty should not do anything that demonstrated lack of "fitness" for their scholarly responsibilities. In its 1940 Statement of Principles on

⁴ American Association of University Professors, *Policy Documents and Reports*, (Washington: 1977).

⁵ AAUP, "General Report on the Committee on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure (1915)" reprinted in *Freedom and Tenure in the Academy*, 404.

Academic Freedom and Tenure, the AAUP clearly articulated this position:

The college or university teacher is a citizen, a member of a learned profession, and an officer of an educational institution. When he speaks or writes as a citizen, he should be free from institutional censorship or discipline, but his special position in the community imposes special obligations. As a man of learning and an educational officer, he should remember that the public may judge his profession and his institution by his utterances. Hence he should at all times be accurate, should exercise appropriate restraint, should show respect for the opinions of others, and should make every effort to indicate that he is not an institutional spokesman.

This compromise reduced but did not eliminate the tension between academic freedom and freedom of speech. This became the fundamental position about academic freedom: professors' "scholarly speech" should be protected absolutely, their speech as "citizens" would be protected in a qualified way.⁶

Finally, the AAUP wanted to assure that faculty received "due process" if they believed that their academic freedom had been violated or if their institutions charged them with violations of professional conduct. Most importantly, they wanted faculty to control the process of review, to be self-governing. This added an additional layer to the meaning of academic freedom — it came to be associated with faculty control over the academic side of the university, including faculty hiring and review, the design of the curriculum, and the establishment and maintenance of academic standards. Shared governance, in which faculty had primary responsibility for academic affairs, became defined as the corporate dimension of academic freedom. Faculty's authority in this area, like their individual right to absolute freedom of speech within their academic discipline, was based on their expertise. Only those who had mastered the requisite intellectual discipline, faculty argued, could make decisions about what should be taught, how it should be taught, and who was qualified to teach it.⁷

By 1960 these basic principles of academic freedom were widely accepted: professors were autonomous in their area of expertise and free to teach and research as they judged best; professors could engage as citizens as long as they did not harm their institutions or threaten their professional reputation; and faculty had an important voice in academic decision-making. But there was also a growing unease among faculty about the restriction on their political rights. Anti-communism hit university faculties hard in the late 1940s and 1950s. Supporters of bans barring communists from teaching at universities argued that membership in the Communist Party, because it demanded complete allegiance to a set of principles, disqualified a person from an academic position. Members of the Communist Party, according to this logic, had abandoned their

⁶ AAUP, "General Report on the Committee on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure (1915)" reprinted in *Freedom and Tenure in the Academy*, 404; AAUP, "1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure" reprinted in *Freedom and Tenure in the Academy*, 407-8.

⁷ See for example, AAHE Task Force on Faculty Representation and Academic Negotiations, *Faculty Participation in Academic Governance* (Washington: 1967).

intellectual freedom and therefore could not exercise “academic freedom” in their teaching and research.

As more professors were fired, despite lack of any evidence that they had dogmatically advanced communist principles in their teaching or research, faculty began to question definitions of academic freedom that distinguished between the absolute freedom accorded academic discourse and the limitations placed on other speech. As the 1960s commenced, faculty became concerned about their political freedom and began to argue that the First Amendment right to free speech was an essential component of academic freedom. Several important court cases affirmed this position. As faculty became involved in the social protest movements of the 1960s, they tested this new definition and successfully stretched the limits of acceptable political activity. Academic freedom came to protect most political activity short of violence and treason.

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This push to redefine academic freedom to emphasize political rights coincided with rising criticism of the reigning forms of political education. As discussed in the previous essay, American colleges and universities had largely adopted indirect and consensual approach to political education. Both faculty and students challenged this form of education. The criticism was wide-ranging but fell into two broad camps: a moderate critique and a radical critique.

Moderates argued that universities needed to devote more of their resources to addressing contemporary social and political problems. They saw an inherent conservatism in universities’ hiring and review policies and in their curriculum. As a result, contemporary problems, such as race relations, got short shrift. They maintained that the university had an obligation to study contemporary political problems, to teach about them and to use their intellectual resources to solve them. These moderates, however, did not believe that the universities needed to be significantly restructured in order to accomplish this. They did not envision major changes in the standards or style of scholarship. They valued empirical research and believed that it could lead to sound, practical knowledge. They valued the ideal of expertise and believed that as experts they should have an authoritative voice in the classroom and in certain kinds of public arenas.

Radicals agreed with moderates that universities should focus attention on contemporary social problems, but they saw the academy’s failure in this area as a symptom of a deeper problem. Radicals challenged the ideal of neutrality and argued that this was a myth universities used to hide their true political allegiances to the status quo. They pointed out numerous ways in which universities took political positions, from undertaking military research to disempowering local communities. They argued that consensual political education deliberately excluded radical perspectives and taught students to uncritically trust centrist positions. They called for new kinds of scholarship and more egalitarian relationships with students. They equated expertise with elitism and called for looser boundaries between universities and the larger society.

These two different visions of reform came out very clearly in the debates over the new fields of study that emerged from the political movements of the 1960s such as black studies, women's studies, peace studies and environmental studies. In many of these fields, proponents of moderate and radical versions competed with one another to establish new programs within their institutions. The history of black studies illustrates this competition most clearly.

The idea of black studies began to germinate in the mid-1960s. There had been a long tradition of scholarship on race and the African-American experience but this had not found prominent place within the mainstream American academy. But the successes of the civil rights movement and the growth in numbers of black students at historically white institutions in the early 1960s created a demand for more courses and research on black issues. A scattered course on black history or on African-American literature or on the black family or on race and American politics began to appear in history departments, English departments, sociology departments and political science departments. At the same time, students frustrated with the limited attention to race in the regular curriculum began to offer classes in their own alternative institutions that had been created mid-decade.

As racial conflicts intensified, however, these early efforts seemed inadequate. In campus protests following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., students demanded the creation of black studies departments. Moderates agreed that universities should devote more of their resources to the study of race and African-American experiences, and supported the demand for new black studies programs. They looked to area studies programs created in the 1940s and '50s as logical models for black studies. They envisioned scholars from different disciplines coming together to study race from their own perspectives and to create an educational program that would provide students with a comprehensive understanding of race in the United States. They viewed the graduates of these programs as the next generation of professionals who would lead efforts to address the problems of race in this country. They assumed that the faculty in these programs would conduct research and would provide expertise needed for successful policy reforms.

However, student protesters frequently sought a different kind of program. At many institutions, the black power movement influenced how students conceived of these programs. They sought departments that could serve as to be a base for a new black intellectual and artistic life and challenge the racist assumptions deeply embedded in "Western" culture. They wanted programs led by black intellectuals (even if they did not have traditional academic credentials) with close ties to local black communities. They envisioned departments as working with communities in a cooperative rather than a paternalistic fashion. Instead of university researchers "solving" the problems of black communities, they wanted community members to educate university people about black culture and to take the lead in a partnership to create powerful black communities. Similarly, they wanted to replace traditional authority structures within the university and operate as autonomous units governed cooperatively by faculty and students.

At many institutions, the real struggle was not about whether to establish a black studies program but rather about what kind of program to create. At Harvard, for example, a faculty committee proposed a program modeled after area studies but student activists rejected their proposal. They demanded a program governed jointly by students and faculty, with an activist orientation and strong ties to the local community. Under pressure of a massive student strike, the faculty agreed to student demands. However, a few years later, the faculty set up a committee to review the program. That committee recommended significant changes that would bring the program into line with traditional academic norms. The department struggled with few faculty and slim resources until the 1990s when President Neil Rudenstine devoted considerable effort and money to rebuild it. Except for the fairy tale ending, the Harvard story was not atypical.

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Despite the claims of pundits like David Horowitz, radicals have not taken over the academy through the creation of programs like black studies. Does this mean that nothing changed as a result of the campus protests? Not at all. Colleges and universities have not been taken over by political activists, but those institutions have become more pluralistic. The creation of black studies programs and other programs that were created in response to the social movement of the 1960s and 1970s introduced much more direct political content into the college curriculum. Students who are interested in a wide range of contemporary social and political issues can find courses on those subjects. Through those courses, they can meet students with similar interests as well. Although these courses are likely to be primarily academic in orientation, students might be introduced to local organizations engaged in these issues or be encouraged to engage in service activities related to them. They might, or might not, be taught by a professor who is a political activist or a person with activist sympathies. If students seek out professors who are openly politically active, they will be able to find them on many campuses.

Old norms limiting faculty members' political advocacy have weakened but have not disappeared. No new consensus on faculty political advocacy has emerged. While academic freedom has been redefined to protect controversial speech, faculty members remain deeply divided about what constitutes professional behavior in regards to politics. This creates a tremendous challenge for proponents of political education. In order to make headway in the area of political engagement for students, we need to address a number of questions. Is it possible for faculty to engage in direct political education without engaging in inappropriate advocacy and indoctrination? What forms of direct political education are consistent with the values of liberal arts education? Should professional norms change, and if so, what are the new norms? Does a pluralistic approach to political education mean that college faculty should be selected to represent a range of political views? If so, what would this mean for faculty hiring? Is this position consistent academic freedom? Without building some common understanding on these issues, faculty members will, for good reasons, continue to resist new programs for civic education.