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The Pernicious Politicization of Academia: Fact or Fiction?

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From Internet chat rooms to legislative hearing rooms, there are heated discussions concerning the state of higher education. Many believe academia's fundamental values are being undermined. They see sociopolitical agendas driving the discourse - supplanting, suppressing, and excluding alternative views. They see hypocrisy, double standards, hostility, and intolerance thriving in an environment where freshman orientations are morphed into re-education camps, required programs into compulsory "chapel," lecterns into soapboxes, classrooms into political action centers, textbooks into propaganda, and forums into diatribes. They see students too fearful to complain or file grievances. They see faculty intent on protecting their own, and administrators too weak to enforce their own conduct codes and policies.

Many within the academic community, however, vehemently disagree. Professor Joan Scott (who serves on the American Association of University Professors' Committee of Academic Freedom and Tenure) recently wrote *"None of these claims is based on serious evidence.... On the questions of whether campus environments are open and students are free to express themselves, inquiry after inquiry has shown that there is no problem."*¹

Well, there is a problem; and, yes, there is evidence. While most in academia carry out their responsibilities in a professional manner, far too many use their positions to indoctrinate rather than educate. Although there is recent evidence suggesting the "indoctrination" may not actually change many students' views,² it most certainly short changes their education by short circuiting the stated goals of higher education.

There are some in academia who claim all education is political. While this notion is certainly debatable, the concern here is what we might call *pernicious* politicization - one that undermines the very mission of the university and violates accepted standards of academic freedom and professional conduct. And it does not matter where this form of politicization

falls along the sociopolitical spectrum. Unprofessionalism is unprofessionalism.

Politics, activism, and the academy are long-time bedfellows, but what is happening today is strikingly different. I was an undergraduate at the University of California, Santa Barbara during the height of the Vietnam War. The campus was in utter turmoil; political and racial tensions ran high. There were protests, sit-ins, bomb scares, the Bank of America was burned down, and the National Guard was called in to restore order. I took classes in nearly every department, and not once did my professors hijack their courses. When they stepped into the classroom, they were professional educators. They stayed with the syllabus; their courses reflected the advertised course description. Although many professors nationwide were passionate about their social or political views and were active in teach-ins and protests (as was their right) – with a few exceptions, these activities were on their own time and dime. They knew the boundary.

Over the past few decades, however, that boundary line has been blurred - or in some cases totally obliterated by the ideologically inflamed who carry out their mission with an evangelical fervor that would match any big-tent revivalist. Such is the zeal of a UCLA Education Professor who claims, "*I believe in a militant form of advocacy. Pedagogy is a form of political advocacy.*"³ There is nothing wrong with exposing students to controversial or even radical views, but militant advocacy, narrow-mindedness, intolerance, and outright hostility are incompatible with scholarly analysis, open inquiry, and freedom of thought and expression.

Let's look at some of the evidence.

Numerous articles have been published that expose the often-mandatory thought reform of college orientations and diversity training. Films, readings, speakers, and "games" are orchestrated to convert students to a particular way of thinking. If students question the official ideology, they risk being scorned, humiliated, ostracized, or attacked.

In the "I'm a Racist" game,⁴ students get re-educated to the point where they either publicly admit "I am a racist"—or face scorn. There are "fishbowl" games for race, gender, and sexual orientation. In the race fishbowl, for example, students sit in a large circle, and only "students of color" can move to the center where they share their experiences. White students must remain silent – excluded from giving their own comments or even responding. A student who was required to participate wrote, "*Some 'students of color' made violently racist statements about white people... I found this to be not only tasteless but racist against whites. I am a 'person of color'; I am talking from the point of view of a minority looking at disgust by how the white people were treated. ...Imagine if there was a fishbowl where only white*

people could talk... would this, too, be considered 'constructive criticism'?" ⁵
[Note: Such "games" are often used in orientations, trainings, and classrooms. More examples of "privilege exercises" can be found at <http://research.umbc.edu/~korenman/wmst/privilege1.html>.]

The Socratic Method is often turned into a Socratic mugging—reserved only for those who dare challenge the politically-correct dogma. Failing to toe the ideological line can have serious consequences. At the University of Michigan, for example, students are required to take a psychology course if they want to become an RA (Residence Assistant) in the dorms. Here is one student's experience in the course:

*I spent the first half of the class avoiding trouble by keeping my mouth shut. We read many articles on victimization, oppression, etc. of minorities. But I had no choice when an activity called for full participation; we had to go around and talk about at least one way in which we have been/are oppressed. When my turn came up, and I answered that I have never been oppressed, the instructor corrected me, saying that I must have been, as I'm female. I persisted, saying that being female has never been anything short of blessing for me. The instructor was relentless, insisting that I was necessarily oppressed at one point in my life. The instructor asked to speak with me after class. He was visibly shaken and angry. He told me that my classroom behavior was disruptive in the least (although I was never voluntarily disagreeing), and that I would be kicked out of class and would thereby lose my job and my housing for the next year unless I learned to be more cooperative.*⁶

Thanks to her instructor, she now has an example of oppression to share.

When students sign up for forensic science, molecular and cell biology, business communication, experimental psychology, computer science, or any other course - that is what they should get - not war, not partisan politics. According to accepted standards of professorial conduct, off-topic soap boxing is wrong, yet it happens in classroom after classroom. Students testify about it, write articles about it, and post about it on the Internet. Professors encourage it - even brag about it.

Students taking a course in art history at the University of Massachusetts had class time allocated to writing a letter of protest to their representatives regarding possible budget cuts, and they were encouraged to join a protest. The professor made it clear which political party was to blame, and voter registration cards were passed out during class.⁷ What was this - a political rally or an art history class?

University of Maryland students taking "Art and Archaeology of Ancient America" had to sit through lecture after lecture hearing about Middle East

oppression and terrorism. A student justly complains that, "...because the professor chose to use this class to impose his political views upon us (as opposed to teaching the subject matter), we barely made it through the first book of two that we were supposed to cover." ⁸

In a Radford University course, students were offered extra credit to attend a "Kucinich for Peace Rally" and an anti-war protest. They were required either to attend a seminar on World Government (one of the professor's special interests) or to read 66 pages of "What Uncle Sam Really Wants" by Noam Chomsky. Lectures were peppered with denigrating remarks against the president and U.S. military personnel. By the way, this was a Philosophy of Religions course!

A complaint about this course was posted on NoIndoctrination.org, where the student wrote, "He [the professor] has every right to attempt to push his socialistic ideals on the body politic, but has no right to use the money I and the state pay him to push his political views in the classroom. It is an abuse of his professorial authority to attempt to tell us how to vote...." ⁹ It is interesting to note that the professor's six-paragraph rebuttal (also posted on NoIndoctrination.org) fails to address the inappropriateness of his off-topic political assignments or denigrating comments. Instead, the professor writes that the student who posted his concerns must be one who "thinks that only certain views should be expressed in class: neo-fascist, right wing, black and white views." ¹⁰ Why does the professor assume that only those who hold "neo-fascist" views could object to the manner in which this "Philosophy of Religions" course deviated from the advertised course description?

A French professor at Connecticut College wrote in *The New York Times* that some of her students were disgruntled when she deviated from the syllabus. "But," she admits, "each year, frankly, I feel increasingly compelled to look beyond my syllabuses and to devote myself more to teaching 'wakeful' political literacy...Students need to be able to mine the implications, for example, of a 'Family Time Flexibility Act' ... They need to look critically at a presidential address that divides the world into opposing halves labeled 'with us' and 'with the terrorists.'" ¹¹ It is doubtful the French Department hired this professor for her expertise in the "Family Time Flexibility Act" or "terrorism."

Professors encourage their colleagues to turn their classrooms into activist centers. Two English professors from LaGuardia Community College and an Art Professor from Bates College, for example, collaborated on an article to "... help radical teachers... connect historical practice and contemporary anti-war work in an activist way in the classroom."¹²

We find programs and courses that serve as activist recruitment centers. Labor Studies programs exist primarily to promote organized labor – rather than to analyze labor issues. Students are recruited to organize campaigns to

unionize workers, and they are mobilized to be street-corner activists. Santa Monica businessman Marvin Zeidler, co-owner of the Broadway Deli in Santa Monica, was shocked to learn that those out on street corners agitating in favor of a local living-wage law were fulfilling university requirements. "I had no idea they used students," said Zeidler. "As a taxpayer in California, I am funding the UC system. This is not the kind of activity I want to fund."¹³ Economist Howard Dickman, author of *Industrial Democracy in America*, makes the following observation: "Imagine a business school that taught union-busting skills in its human resource classes and helped local businesses fight unions as part of a class project."¹⁴

Schools of Social Work can also have requirements that promote a particular social or political agenda.¹⁵ A glance at the Rhode Island College School of Social Work's Policy and Organization Internship Requirements, for example, demonstrates the need for students to advance "progressive" positions.¹⁶

Ethnic Studies courses often exploit students to promote particular social or political agendas. An ethnic studies professor who teaches at Cal State Northridge and Pasadena City College declares, "...*the role of students and teachers in ethnic studies is to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable.*"¹⁷ A University of Pennsylvania Asian-American Studies professor encouraged her students to attend a two-day rally organized by the Day Without an Immigrant Coalition. The professor admits, "*We've also invited community folks to come and talk about immigration ... I've been getting my classes mobilized.*"¹⁸ Even if the students agree with the agenda, this is still exploitation and a misuse of the classroom.

Another example comes from UC Berkeley, where in Spring 2006 "Ethnic Studies 198: The Prop. 209 Project" was taught. In 1996 California voters passed Prop 209, which prevents the state (including UC) from giving preferential treatment based on race, sex, or ethnicity, but UC Berkeley's chancellor has been publicly pushing an anti-209 agenda. In this course students analyzed data to "*craft a political strategy for a successful 'pro-diversity' initiative in the State.*"¹⁹ Student interested in taking the course filled out an application that included the following: "*Please describe any technical skills that would be useful in a political campaign.*"²⁰ The findings of the course were to be presented to the chancellor, administrators and other stakeholders. Imagine the outcry and protests if there were a course to craft an anti-immigration initiative or to craft a political strategy to overturn *Roe v Wade*? While the double standard is glaring – it misses the point: UC's "Policy on Course Content" states that courses must "*remain aloof from politics...*"²¹ Using a course to analyze politics is one thing. Using a course to craft a political strategy and campaign that advances the chancellor's (and others') political agenda is quite another. But who is minding the store?

The same question should be asked about UC Santa Barbara's School of Education, which emailed a letter to all its faculty and staff asking them to consider various classroom options concerning the War in Iraq: *"Devote a class to discussing the situation; excuse students from class to attend an anti-war event or teach-in; provide extra credit for students attending and writing a report on such an event; cancel class for an event."*²² This begs the question: Is the entire department so monolithic in view and so politicized that it is just assumed no one would find such classroom options outrageous or unprofessional? Taxpayers and tuition payers pay these professors to teach their courses as announced – not to use them, abuse them, or cancel them to suit their own political ends.

Perhaps such politicization should not be all that surprising given the recent publicity concerning the sociopolitical litmus tests (or "dispositions") required of students in schools of education.²³ An example comes from the University of Alabama's College of Education. Its "Conceptual Framework" states that *"The College of Education is committed to preparing individuals to promote social justice, to be change agents, and to recognize individual and institutionalized racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism."*²⁴ Being "change agents" to promote "social justice" sounds admirable, but as columnist Linda Seebach explains, *"...people come to different conclusions on questions of social justice, and their conclusions are as rigidly aligned with their political views as iron filings constrained by a powerful magnet. And in university departments, which tend toward ideological uniformity, all the filings point the same way."*²⁵ "Social justice" is, in actuality, a political term. When it becomes part of a mission statement or course syllabus, it serves as a requirement - a requirement of conformity to a particular commitment of social justice.

Women's Studies Departments are notorious for embracing particular ideologies and advocating political activism. On the Women's Studies LISTSERV, we find *"Suggestions for how to deal with conservative students"* and *"Teaching about Abortion to Conservative Students."*²⁶ A Bowling Green State University professor makes the comment, *"So perhaps those [conservative] students will vote pro-choice in the future, or at least not fight against choice."*²⁷ It would be equally reprehensible to use the classroom to advance a pro-life agenda. But over and over we see students being used as political pawns – manipulated, not educated.

A liberal arts curriculum should encompass an understanding of the best arguments from a variety of viewpoints. But all too often, this responsibility is undermined by ideological intolerance. An English professor at Montclair State University claims, *"'Conservatism' champions racism, exploitation, and imperialist war. It's the enemy of 90% of the human race. We need LESS of it, not more. Sure, it should be 'represented' in classes — but only for the sake of exposure and refutation."*²⁸ When a UC professor was asked about the use

of one-sided reading material dealing with controversial topics in her required writing program, she noted that she was *“not interested in including ‘right-wing’ readings, both out of intellectual distaste and because the arguments are not usefully developed.”*²⁹

Not only does intolerance affect curriculum, it affects attitudes and behaviors towards colleagues and students. A SUNY-Albany philosophy professor asserts, *“Lefties are overrepresented in academia because on average, we’re just f-ing smarter.”*³⁰ A Penn State undergrad (whose columns in the campus paper express his views about such issues as speech codes and affirmative action) receives an email from an instructor with *“all these articles confirm your [sic] a racist mother fucker....”*³¹ From Ohio State we find, *“My instinct dictates that my primary allegiance in any classroom is to my colored students, my queer students, my working class students, the disenfranchised students, but then I immediately think of the colored Republican students and caution myself against assuming this essentialist position.”*³²

Textbooks and course readers are frequently skewed or contain outright distortions. *The American Sociologist* published a study of how economic issues are covered in thirty college social problems textbooks. The author states, *“Judging by the results, it is clear that students of social problems are consistently presented with a bleak view of the free market (a term rarely used without derision in the texts), with the most frequent vitriol reserved for corporations.... Given these deficiencies in textbooks, a great many students are likely to emerge from these courses unprepared to think critically and participate intelligently in public debates on social problems.”*³³

Let’s look at a top-selling textbook, *Cultural Anthropology*.³⁴ On page 216 there is a picture of two uniformed and helmeted football players in a congratulatory hug. The caption reads *“Homosexuality, in one form or another, is a widespread phenomenon in human societies. One of the few cultures that has tried to condemn it is the United States where, paradoxically, the immensely popular game of football is loaded with homosexual symbolism.”* On page 345 there is a picture of a courtroom with this caption: *“In Western society, someone who commits an offense against someone else is subject to a series of complex proceedings, in which the emphasis is on assigning and punishing guilt. In non-Western societies, by contrast, the emphasis is often on finding a solution that both parties can live with.”*

We are often asked why more students and faculty do not come forward to report abuses. While some are too lazy, others just choose to ignore it and move on. There are some who believe the politicization is so entrenched that it is beyond repair. A Penn State undergrad recently commented, *“We don’t report it because it’s way too much of a hassle and a waste of time...What are they going to do about it, slap him on the wrist?”*³⁵ Many do not know how or

where to file a complaint. Then there are those who fear reprisal – not an unfounded concern.

Michael Wiesner, an honors student at Foothill College, went to his dean to report his conservative professor's unprofessional and intolerant conduct. Soon thereafter, Michael received an email from this instructor (of which NoIndoctrination.org has a copy): *"Thank you for bringing this to the attention of the Dean.... I made a recording error on your final grade."* The professor changed his grade to an F. It took 3 months for Michael to get the F erased. The professor is still teaching.³⁶

John Delaney, a UC Riverside student, became so disgusted with an agenda-driven his ethnic studies course that he dropped it and wrote a guest column about the course in the campus paper – without naming the professor.³⁷ Anyone with different views could undoubtedly have submitted a rebuttal to the campus paper. Instead, a smear campaign was launched against John Delaney.³⁸ The ethnic studies professor took video pictures of John, which later showed up on large posters and sandwich boards around campus and in an alternative campus newspaper with captions labeling John a *"Neo-Nazi, White Supremacist."*³⁹ John was a Green Party member, married to a Latina. A university Fact Finder Report vindicated John and concluded the professor himself had spread the false hate-group charges, but a faculty committee protected its own by dismissing all of John's charges - leaving the professor in his tenure-track position. The university never had the decency to publicly clear John's name. Exposing the extremists can be risky.

Even faculty ask us to keep our correspondences private. They know what is occurring in academia - but they, like many students, are muzzled by fear. As one professor at a well-known liberal arts college explained, *"Please don't post this or my name because it will make me a pariah..."*⁴⁰

At a recent graduation ceremony the president of George Washington University pronounced, *"If anybody has a mortarboard, you can move your tassels from right to left, right to left, which is what I hope happened to your politics in the last four years."*⁴¹ When a university president publicly admits that the goal of higher education is to realign students' political thinking, when classroom instructors express overt prejudice towards those with different ideologies and admit to curricula with blatant politicized agendas, and when those with academic responsibilities fail to enforce the policies they claim to endorse, these all lead to one conclusion: pernicious politicization has infected the academy. The NoIndoctrination.org database and our research confirm this infection is widespread – from the community colleges to the Ivy Leagues.

Our colleges and universities (as well as the AAUP) should be in the forefront in insisting on classroom professionalism. But instead of fostering

professionalism and reining in those who abuse their positions of power and influence, they spend their time denigrating whistleblowers and claiming “*inquiry after inquiry has shown that there is no problem.*” Ignoring evidence, protecting one’s own, and sweeping abuses under the rug just will not do. If our institutions of higher learning expect to regain the public’s trust, they have to earn it. But first they must open their eyes.

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