

ideological declarations that would be far more appropriately determined by individual student conscience and critical reasoning. Instead, students are expected to recognize that dedication to “social justice” entails a commitment to, and belief in, a particular political and cultural worldview: that “social inequalities are often produced and perpetuated through systematic discrimination and justified by societal ideology of merit, social mobility, and individual responsibility.”

This rigid imposition of “correct thinking” should be anathema to any institution devoted to learning—particularly one under the distinguished umbrella of Columbia University—because it replaces the process of intellectual discovery with the imposition of dogmatic political orthodoxy. Additionally, it inhibits dissenting student discourse and scholarship dealing with controversial topics. Teachers are not meant to wage ideological war against their students. By prolonging this practice, your institution is disregarding its moral and contractual obligations to students.

Furthermore, dictating political beliefs opposes the principles and statements of the AAUP. In the *Joint Statement on Rights and Freedoms of Students* (1967), the AAUP advised that “students should be encouraged to develop the capacity for critical judgment and to engage in a sustained and independent search for truth. ... [they] should be free to take reasoned exception to the data or views offered in any course of study and to reserve judgment about matters of opinion.” In 2000, the AAUP reaffirmed the necessity of these fundamental rights in its *Statement on Graduate Students*: “Graduate programs in universities exist for the discovery and transmission of knowledge, the education of students, the training of future faculty, and the general well-being of society. Free inquiry and free expression are indispensable to the attainment of these goals.”

Of course, professors may profess, and even openly advocate, the political views espoused in the Conceptual Framework. It is categorically different, however, to *require* students to hold certain arguments as unquestionable truths in order to succeed. Surely, some students at Teachers College believe that “societal ideologies of merit, social mobility and individual responsibility” are not inherently negative. Interestingly, the Framework itself acknowledges such students as problematic, lamenting that many “teachers do not see the invisible yet profound social forces at work that bring about inequality.”

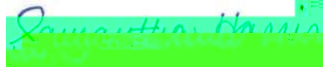
According to the Framework, students who dissent “*must* recognize ways in which taken-for-granted notions regarding the legitimacy of the social order are flawed, see change agency as a moral imperative, and have skills to act as agents of change.” (Emphasis added.) Scrutinizing a student’s personal beliefs regarding “invisible social forces” and “flawed social orders” is a formula for excluding those with genuine dissenting views, and emphasizing that students *must* adopt certain beliefs is simply incompatible with universities in a free society. By imposing value conformity, a school will stifle intellectual innovation, critical dialogue, meaningful discourse, and true scholarship. This is true no matter what the ideology in question. FIRE would oppose with equal fervor classroom guidelines that demanded commitment to Christianity or to atheism for a degree in theology; to the free market or to socialism for a degree in economics; or to internationalism or to patriotism for a degree in political science at any institution that claimed to value free speech and thought. While we fully support the rights of Teachers College and

similar private institutions to create and enforce their own academic and professional standards, Columbia—like all institutions—must live up to its public promises and ideals. The Teachers College student handbook insists upon “the greatest degree of freedom of inquiry, teaching, learning and expression for all its members.” In order for students to enjoy this promised freedom, however, their progress cannot depend on their acceptance of certain politicized viewpoints.

Although the U.S. Constitution does not bind private universities like Columbia to guarantee freedom of expression to students,

We hope that you will seriously consider revising your policy. We thank you for your time and look forward to your response by October 6, 2006.

Sincerely,



Samantha K. Harris
Director of Legal and Public Advocacy

cc:

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