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The Academic Bill of Rights—An Idea Whose Time Has Come

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Over 200 years after the ratification of the U.S. Constitution, some conservative activists are calling for a new Bill of Rights to guarantee academic freedom. The proposed "Academic Bill of Rights" is designed to redress wrongs inflicted in ideological battle—and it's important.

Led by David Horowitz, a former 60's radical turned cultural commentator, Students for Academic Freedom is spearheading the effort to get state legislatures to adopt the Academic Bill of Rights as a mandate for public institutions. Conservatives are rightly outraged at the imbalance of liberal and conservative professors on today's university campuses. As is now well documented, the imbalance between Democratic and Republican registered professors is so extreme as to defy imagination. At Duke University, for example, only one out of 36 professors in the History department is a registered Republican. While university administrators deny that this pattern reflects any bias against conservatives, spending just a couple of hours on these elite university campuses will dispel that myth.

The text of the Academic Bill of Rights demands a genuine openness of the university community. As the document explains, "academic freedom is most likely to thrive in an environment of intellectual diversity that protects and fosters independence of thought and speech." That language comes right out of the argument found in the General Report of the Committee on Academic Freedom and Tenure of the American Association of University Professors. In reality, many campuses are devoid of the intellectual diversity that marks a genuine academic experience. In the name of "diversity" the elite academic institutions have opened the door of debate in only one direction—toward an ambitious embrace of every radical and leftist ideology. Notably missing from most university campuses is a vigorous presentation and defense of Western civilization, conservative political views, and classical understandings of literature. Instead, the postmodern academy represents a carnival of competing ideologies, united mainly in their opposition to the received Western culture.

The Academic Bill of Rights goes on to demand genuine openness in the university context and intentional diversity in matters of hiring. "Academic freedom consists in protecting the intellectual independence of professors, researchers, and students in the pursuit of knowledge and the expression of ideas from interference by legislators or authorities within the institution itself. This means that no political, ideological or religious orthodoxy will be imposed on professors and researchers through the hiring or tenure or termination process, or through any other administrative means by the academic institution. Nor shall legislatures impose any such orthodoxy through their control of the university budget."

One might think that genuine liberals would jump at such a proposal. After all, nothing in this statement could be construed so as to prevent the hiring of liberal professors. Nevertheless, the academic guild has responded with a vengeance.

The American Association of University Professors [AAUP] released a statement condemning the Academic Bill of Rights as an imposition of conservative ideology. "Based upon data purporting to show that Democrats greatly outnumber Republicans in faculty positions, and citing official statements and principles of the American Association of University Professors, advocates of the Academic Bill of Rights would require universities to maintain political pluralism and diversity," the statement declared. "This requirement is said to enforce the principle that 'no political, ideological or religious orthodoxy should be opposed on professors and researchers through the hiring or tenure or termination

process'." Nevertheless, the AAUP argued that the Academic Bill of Rights "is an improper and dangerous method" of achieving neutrality in the hiring process.

Amazingly enough, the AAUP had the audacity to claim that its current mechanisms "protect the principle, and they work very well." As the statement continued, "not only is the Academic Bill of Rights redundant, but, ironically, it also infringes academic freedom in the very act of purporting to protect it."

The AAUP's use of this language betrays its real fear of genuine academic debate. First of all, when the AAUP statement asserts that conservatives have presented data "purporting" to show that Democrats are more favored in university positions than Republicans, the group insinuates that the data is actually open to interpretation. The AAUP knows full well that the documentation is absolutely accurate. The liberal group has worked very hard to keep it that way. The AAUP's main concern is to protect its own dominance in the academic community and to shut down any efforts by conservatives to demand that academic freedom be genuinely free.

The AAUP stretches credulity to the breaking point when it asserts that current hiring practices "protect" the principle of ideological neutrality in hiring. This can only be true if "neutrality" is understood to mean an openness only to liberal options. Just look at who gets hired on elite university campuses.

The academic guild has been caught with its hand in the cookie jar, and it now insists that only fellow liberal academics can judge whether the status quo is fair and neutral. The AAUP claims that behind the very idea of academic freedom is the understanding "that decisions concerning the quality of scholarship and teaching are to be made by reference to the standards of the academic profession, as interpreted and applied by the community of scholars who are qualified by expertise and training to establish such standards." In other words, the AAUP claims that only liberal academics are competent to judge whether liberal academics are playing fair. According to the group, no one who is not already a member of the academic guild is in any position to judge the fairness of academic standards and hiring policies for professors.

Adding insult to injury, the AAUP goes on to claim, "The danger of such guidelines is that they invite diversity to be measured by political standards that diverge from the academic criteria of the scholarly profession." Diversity measured by political standards? Who could even conceive such a thing?

Conservatives willingly bear many insults from the academic left, but the one insult that conservatives cannot allow is the suggestion that it is conservatives who have politicized the academic environment. Remember the 1960's? In reality, the radicals of the 60's remained in the university culture, got their Ph.D. degrees, and then were awarded with tenure. Their worldviews are largely hostile to that of Middle America and the conservative mainstream. They are the new academic elite and they have won dominance in the academic world. They are by no means inclined now to surrender what they know is a posture of tremendous strength and influence in the culture.

Despite liberal opposition, the Academic Bill of Rights is making headway in some legislatures. The Colorado State Legislature considered adopting the Academic Bill of Rights as a legislative proposal, but the state's universities adopted a version of the document in order to head off opposition. In March, the Georgia Senate adopted a non-binding resolution remarkably similar to the Academic Bill of Rights.

At the national level, Representative Jack Kingston [R-GA] has introduced the Academic Bill of Rights as a non-binding resolution in the House of Representatives. Horowitz denies that he is trying to coerce universities to hire a politically correct faculty. He told The New York Times, "I am using the legislative resolutions as an inducement to have universities look into this. I have no intentions of going to Congress to impose a politically correct faculty on a university."

The controversy over the Academic Bill of Rights has already opened an important debate. Harvey Mansfield, a respected professor at Harvard University, pointed to the essence of the problem. "We have 60 members in the department of government," he said. "Maybe three are Republicans. How could that be just by chance? How could that be fair? How could it be that the smartest people are all liberals? Many liberals simply don't care for the kind of work conservatives do."

In that statement, Professor Mansfield pointed to the reality of the academic hiring process. When he said that liberals

“simply don’t care for the kind of work conservatives do,” he was speaking from vast experience in the academic hiring process.

In the postmodern academy, liberals tend to pursue research and writing projects that are, in one of the academy’s current code words, “transgressive.” That is, these professors consider Western civilization to be a problem they will solve by postmodern analysis. They will transgress moral and cultural boundaries in order to press the limits.

Conservatives, on the other hand, tend to pursue academic projects that are more traditional in nature. The bias against conservatives reaches down to the kind of research projects search committees consider important.

Put bluntly, a young academic who had written her dissertation on, “Will or Wilma?: A Re-envisioning of Shakespeare as an Elizabethan Transvestite,” is almost certain to get tenure at a leading university. A conservative writing a dissertation of a more conventional nature, such as an investigation into the actual text or meaning of Shakespeare’s writings, is considered out of date and uninteresting.

Increasingly, students are demanding a redress of ideological grievances. As Stephen Miller, Duke University freshman, told *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, “Our institutions of higher education have become institutions of indoctrination. That’s a frightening trend.”

Mr. Miller knows indoctrination when he sees it. For him, and for an entire generation of today’s university students, the Academic Bill of Rights is an idea whose time has come.

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