

Oregon campuses need intellectual freedom

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Portland State University Professor Bruce Gilley writes that intellectual freedom on Oregon college campuses faces three main threats.

By Bruce Gilley

The draft overhaul of the federal Higher Education Act soon to come for a vote before the U.S. House of Representatives contains several provisions to protect and enhance intellectual freedom on college campuses. While most of the debate on the proposed legislation has centered on student aid, the intellectual freedom provisions are sorely needed, especially in Oregon. Representative Suzanne Bonamici, the Oregon member on the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, should break with the blanket opposition to the bill of her Democratic colleagues and support these provisions.

Intellectual freedom on Oregon college campuses faces three main threats. Most obvious is the rise of "hecklers vetoes" and "no-platforming" in which radical students and faculty prevent invited speakers from showing up on campus. These instances attract the most attention -- witness the full-press effort of university faculty, students and even administrators to thwart the appearance of fired Google engineer James Damore at Portland State in February -- but they are the least of the problems.

The main threat is the growth of highly biased and intolerant pedagogy in the classroom that prevents students who do not share the ideological inclinations of the faculty from passing their courses. Many programs and units at Oregon college campuses have become nothing but ideological satrapies without an iota of viewpoint diversity. Oregon State's newly-introduced mandatory training in "social justice" makes acceptance of radical viewpoints a condition to advance in one's studies.

A closely related threat is the administrative coercion being marshalled in so-called "diversity" offices. These were initially intended to implement state and federal law on prohibited discrimination, especially the Nixon administration's Title IX requirements on gender equality. But in the last decade they have ballooned into inquisitorial organs promoting positions well beyond anything in law and holding prosecutorial functions as well. They have in effect imposed "compelled speech" on campus with a threat of a "diversity investigation" against campus members who speak their minds against orthodoxies. While such sanctions invariably lose in law, bringing large settlements, they exert a chilling effect on intellectual freedom.

The protection of intellectual freedom on campus used to be the preserve of faculty. Yet the radicalization of faculty -- conservative or registered Republicans have virtually disappeared from Oregon college faculties today -- means that faculty today are more often the main threat to intellectual freedom. The disgraceful endorsement by the University of Oregon's faculty senate of student mobs who disrupted the president's annual address last October is the latest example. Since students have little sway, or time, to

devote to this issue, outside actors - parents, alumni, community partners and boards of trustees -- have become the main sources of accountability.

Yet their influence is limited. Development offices have become skilled in telling concerned alumni donors that everything happening on campus is normal and switching the conversation to next year's football team. Boards of trustees, meanwhile, which were supposed to act for the public good, are deeply compromised. The information they use comes from administrators themselves, and the perks and status of being on a board reduce incentives for board members to make themselves known.

The proposed new higher education legislation is not perfect, but it contains some useful provisions that would have a powerful corrective to these problems. The act requires universities and colleges to disclose any free speech policies and creates a new ombudsman for student free speech complaints. It prevents universities from banning student groups whose aims do not conform with college orthodoxies. And it reaffirms the obvious fact that federal agencies can recruit on campus like any other employer.

More generally, the proposed legislation would increase transparency and debate about intellectual freedom on campus. "The common good depends upon the free search for truth and its free exposition," the country's main faculty union asserts in its guiding policies. It's time for universities and colleges in Oregon to take that promise seriously again.

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