

# A Question of Balance



# CONSERVATIVES AT PENN STATE AND ON CAMPUSES ACROSS THE NATION SAY THEY'RE OUTNUMBERED, IGNORED AND BELITTLED. AND THEY'RE FIGHTING BACK.

**S**hauna Moser opens every meeting of the Young Americans for Freedom, a group of conservative Penn State students, with the same question: “What did they do this week?” “They” are faculty members at Penn State, and what follows her question ranges from no responses to a handful of complaints about faculty who have, in the minds of YAF members, infringed on the rights of conservative students. Among the gripes over the past year or so: Students being assigned Barbara Ehrenreich’s book *Nickel and Dimed* (about the plight of the working poor) in English 30 over, say, Plato. A faculty member in a science class reminding students in the run-up to the 2004 presidential election to remember to vote—and to vote for Democratic candidate John Kerry. And perhaps the most well-publicized of all the claims: the alleged showing of

Michael Moore’s controversial political documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11* in a biology class.

Moser is fiercely intelligent and highly political. When discussing Milton Friedman, the University of Chicago economist who has long been a cornerstone of conservative economic theory, she gushes, “I *love* Milton Friedman,” the way you would expect a college student to respond to hearing the name Ani DiFranco or John Mayer. Moser is president of YAF, one of two prominent groups for conservative students at the University. In recent years, members of YAF and the other

conservative group, the College Republicans, have attracted attention on campus and in the *Daily Collegian* by charging that Penn State is a school dominated by liberal “groupthink,” unwelcoming of politically conservative viewpoints. Just last November, YAF held a protest outside Old Main, setting up a cardboard replica of the Berlin Wall, meant to illustrate the ideological divide between Penn State and the real world. Last April, YAF planted 100 miniature flags—two-thirds of them blue, less than a third red—on the HUB lawn to show the political affiliations of University

By Dan Morrell  
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Park faculty. According to YAF, voter registration information obtained from the county courthouse shows that 68 percent of University Park faculty are registered Democrats and 30 percent are registered Republicans. A month earlier, Undergraduate Student Government senator Vicky Cangelosi, who is president of the College Republicans, persuaded the USG Senate to adopt a "Student Bill of Rights" that aims to prevent students from being discriminated against because of their political views.

The efforts of conservative students at Penn State mirror a larger national trend, in which students on the

right-hand side of the political aisle increasingly are alleging that higher education leans too far to the left. They argue that in classroom discussions about issues ranging from economic theory to U.S. policy in Iraq to global warming to stem-cell research, faculty members preach liberal viewpoints and allow little if any dissent. Some students say they've been harassed, intimidated, or unfairly graded as a result of their conservative views.

Nationwide, the conservative students seem to be gaining momentum—and allies. Conservative activist David Horowitz, founder and chair of the national group Students for Academic Freedom, has persuaded

more than a dozen states to introduce legislation based on his Academic Bill of Rights, designed to protect students from ideological intimidation. Closer to home, Pennsylvania's House of Representatives passed a resolution last July calling for hearings to assess the climate at the state's publicly funded colleges and universities, including Penn State.

The central question in the debate is this: Do the charges of widespread political bias in higher education have merit? Or are the claims simply overblown—a bunch of unverified allegations strung together to manufacture an epidemic?

**T**he conservative battle against liberal bias in academia has gone on for decades.

In 1950, Friedrich August von Hayek, economist and author of an essential conservative tome, *The Road to Serfdom*, wrote in *The University of Chicago Law Review* about the attitudes he was encountering on campuses, noting that "every scholar can probably name several instances from his field of men who have undeservedly achieved a popular reputation as great scientists sole-



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ly because they hold what the intellectuals regard as 'progressive' political views." The issue became even more prominent nationally two years later with *God and Man at Yale*, penned by conservative icon William F. Buckley. Criticizing what he saw as a pronounced secular bent at his alma mater, Buckley wrote that the better part of the sociology department, for instance, saw "religion as nothing more than a cultural 'phenomenon' caused by human ingenuity to serve as an opiate to make life seem more meaningful and to promise—falsely, of course—an afterlife." Twenty-two years later, Milton Friedman argued in his 1971 introduction to the German reprint of *The Road to Serfdom* that colleges and universities were bastions of leftist ideals: "Why is it that intellectual classes everywhere almost automatically range themselves on the side of [socialism] ... and denigrate and revile capitalism?" Although both Friedman and Hayek received the Nobel Prize in economics (Hayek in 1974, Friedman in 1976), they were considered the underdogs then, the same way conservative students and faculty see themselves today: lonely voices fighting against the liberal institution of academia.

Today there seems to be little doubt that the faculty at most of the nation's colleges and universities do tilt more to the left than the right. UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute surveyed faculty at public universities nationwide in 2001 and found that 54 percent of professors described their politics as "liberal" or "far left," while 31 percent said they were "middle of the road," and only 14 percent considered themselves to be "conservative" or "far right." More recently, a trio of political science professors at George Mason, Smith College, and the University of Toronto analyzed data from 1,643 faculty members at 183 U.S. colleges and universities; the findings, reported last March, showed that 72 percent of professors deemed themselves liberal while only 15 percent described themselves as conservative.

While the latter study was funded by the Randolph Foundation, which has donated hundreds of thousands of dollars to various right-leaning groups, few liberals would dispute the point that the academy's personal politics often are indeed left-of-center. But, the argument goes, does that necessarily mean that instructors introduce their personal political views into the classroom?

Pennsylvania state representative Gibson Armstrong says that, yes, sometimes they do. Armstrong, a Republican from Lancaster County, says he first started hearing claims of bias in Pennsylvania's state-owned and state-related universities from his constituents in the fall of 2004. To date he says he has collected 50 complaints, including some from students at Penn State. (Some of Armstrong's colleagues on the Democratic side of the aisle question his numbers, saying they have never once heard a complaint from a student.) Armstrong serves on the House Appropriations Committee, so he brought up his concerns to Penn State President Graham Spanier during the University's budget hearings last March, reading off the list of alleged incidents he had collected from Penn State students. Among the items on the list were purported classroom comments by an anthropology professor that "American revolutionaries are just like al Qaeda" and "the United States is a third-world country," and jokes from a Dickinson School of Law professor about a blue vs. red state intelligence gap that included references to "rednecks" and "uneducated hicks," and concluded with the punch line "Thanks for f\*\*\*ing up my country." The list contains few details and no names of the students or faculty who were involved, making it difficult to verify the claims.

Three months later, Armstrong introduced House Resolution 177, which asserted that "students and faculty should be protected from the imposition of ideological orthodoxy" and that students should be "graded based on

academic merit, without regard for ideological views.” HR177 also created a select committee to investigate claims of academic bias at Pennsylvania’s state-related universities—Penn State, Pitt, Temple, and Lincoln—and the 14 state-owned universities. The House approved the resolution in July by a 111-87 vote (the measure did not require Senate concurrence or the governor’s signature). The select committee was charged with holding hearings to determine whether a problem exists and, if necessary, recommending corrective legislation. Though similar bills have been introduced in a number of other states, Pennsylvania became the first to actually pass such a resolution.

One observer who cheered the news of HR177’s adoption was David Horowitz, the conservative activist who founded Students for Academic Freedom. Horowitz, who also is president of the Center for the Study of Popular Culture in Los Angeles, declared “Victory in Pennsylvania” on his Web site, [frontpagemag.com](http://frontpagemag.com), the morning after resolution HR177 passed. Horowitz—a prominent figure in the radical left in the 1960s who has since turned conservative—has excoriated a number of courses and faculty members at various U.S. schools, including Penn State, on his Web site. One

## The Ivory Tower Battles

Penn State isn’t the only school facing battles over political ideology in the classroom. Here’s a look at some cases involving academic freedom at other colleges and universities across the nation.

► **SEPTEMBER 2003:** Steve Hinkle, a student at California Polytechnic State University, files a lawsuit against the university, arguing that campus officials unjustly punished him for posting a flier promoting a speech by conservative black author Mason Weaver. Cal Poly settles in May 2004, expunging its disciplinary action against Hinkle from the record while releasing a statement denying “any claims of wrongdoing or violation of law.”

► **SEPTEMBER 2004:** Filmmaker and Bucknell University grad Evan Coyne Maloney releases *Brainwashing 101*, a Michael Moore-style documentary about political correctness and liberal indoctrination on campuses. He screens the film on college campuses and garners national attention from radio hosts Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity. He follows the next year with *Brainwashing 201: The Second Semester*, and has plans for an early 2006 release of the feature-length *Indoctrinate U*.

► **JANUARY 2005:** Ward Churchill, a professor of ethnic studies at the University of Colorado, sparks national controversy with an essay comparing some World Trade Center workers killed in the 9/11 attacks to Nazi bureaucrat Adolf Eichmann. The university orders an investigation to determine whether there is legitimate cause for firing Churchill. In March 2005, President Betsy Hoffman resigns, due in part to scrutiny over her ability to effec-

tively guide the university through the ongoing scandal. Churchill later steps down from his position as department chair but continues to teach at the university.

► **MAY 2005:** Professor Timothy Shortell’s election to chair of the sociology department at CUNY’s Brooklyn College incites uproar. Protestors cite Shortell’s writings in an online journal that refer to religious adherents as “moral retards” and “an ugly, violent lot”; Shortell defends himself, arguing that his political views are isolated from his professional role. Following intervention by college president Christoph Kimmich, Shortell ends his term before taking office but remains on the college’s faculty.

► **JUNE 2005:** William C. Bradford, Indiana University associate professor of law, makes headlines when he publicly accuses two left-leaning colleagues of voting consistently to deny his application for tenure based on his support for the invasion of Iraq. One of the colleagues, Florence Roisman, files a charge of academic misconduct against Bradford, who meets the charge with an Equal Employment Opportunity Commission complaint. After months of the case wallowing in bureaucratic limbo—and in light of the discovery that he falsified some of his military decorations—Bradford resigns from his position, effective Jan. 1, 2006. —PK

article on the site castigates Penn State sociology lecturer Sam Richards for his Sociology 119 lecture notes (posted on Richards' class Web site), where Richards' "Marxist prejudices shine forth," according to the article. "Conspicuously lacking from his class lectures and teachings," the article says, "is any context (i.e., the existence of the Cold War), details (i.e., Soviet aggression), or any other data that might undermine the anti-American agenda." Another frontpagemag.com article, titled "Penn State's Green Peaceniks," attacks Penn State's Peace and Conflict Studies minor for being solely concerned with "environmentalist advocacy" and professing "anti-military ideals."

For the past several years, Horowitz has championed what he calls an Academic Bill of Rights, which states that students shouldn't be subjected to political indoctrination in the classroom; faculty shouldn't be hired or fired on the basis of political beliefs; and campuses should encourage the "civil exchange of ideas." Most of the provisions in the bill of rights are virtually identical to principles that have long been endorsed by a leading faculty-rights group, the American Association of University Professors. But the bill of rights' critics, including the AAUP, argue that trying to enforce such behavior through legislation is a short walk away from legislating exactly what can and can't be taught in the classroom. Moreover, they contend that Horowitz's bill of rights also contains a few deceptions.

Chief among Horowitz's critics at Penn State is English professor Michael Bérubé, who teaches literature and cultural studies, maintains a heavily-trafficked online blog (michaelberube.com) that often deals with American politics, and has authored articles in progressive magazines like *Harper's Magazine* and *The Nation*. Horowitz asked Bérubé to vet the Academic Bill of Rights in an attempt to get some liberal support, but Bérubé eventually declined. He is particularly con-

cerned about the stipulation in the bill of rights that mandates that "curricula and reading lists in the humanities and social sciences should reflect the uncertainty and unsettled character of all human knowledge."

"The reason I think that is open to such mischief," says Bérubé, "is that Minnesota, Ohio, Florida, Georgia—all

of the places where it was put up for debate by the state legislature—the people who jumped all over it were the Creationists." In other words, Bérubé fears that outside special interest groups, such as those pushing "intelligent design," could exploit that portion of the bill of rights to force their way onto campus. Besides, he says, insisting on the inclusion of multiple scholarly viewpoints in every classroom is the height of micromanagement: "You don't want each individual profes-



sor and individual department to be in the position of having to present a smorgasbord of every possible position on everything about American literature, or political history, or so forth." This would especially hurt academic programs known to espouse a certain kind of intellectual character, says Bérubé, pointing to the University of Chicago, Milton Friedman's stomping grounds, which is famous for its study of free-market capitalism. "Some departments do not want to house the full range of dissent," says Bérubé. "Chicago shouldn't be compelled to hire a bunch of Marxists."

If Bérubé has a polar opposite at Penn State, it's David Warren Saxe, longtime faculty member in the College of Education. Saxe has written many op-eds in the *Centre Daily Times* over the years, opposing, for example, Penn State's diversity plan in the late 1990s, equating the plan's focus on multiculturalism to Soviet enforcement of "what to think, who to obey, and how to act." He has portrayed himself as a lone conservative provocateur in a sea of liberals and works in fitting settings: Inside his office, his desk is hidden behind a mass of file cabinets topped with He-Man figurines—

seemingly defending his foxhole of conservatism.

Saxe supports HR177, referring to it in an op-ed in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* last November as part of a “worthy, necessary, and constant struggle.” In contrast to Bérubé, he thinks that colleges and universities could stand to re-balance their faculty ranks by hiring more conservatives. As Saxe tells it, there is an unspoken model called “replication theory,” where professors take on graduate students and simply reproduce their theories in the form of their apprentices. But Saxe says he has no like-minded colleagues in his department (Curriculum and Instruction) today, and he doesn’t see what would draw conservative students to grad school these days. Asks Saxe: “Who wants to be a pioneer?”

A common criticism of the academic freedom movement is that the problem of liberal bias in the classroom is simply not as widespread as the rhetoric would lead one to believe. After Rep. Armstrong’s resolution passed in Harrisburg last July, creating a committee to examine the issue at Pennsylvania’s public institutions of higher education, the committee asked Penn State to submit a list of all of the complaints it had received in the past five years that dealt with the issues of academic freedom. In a university of more than 80,000 students, during a period when more than 177,000 courses were taught, only 13 complaints had been filed, causing some to wonder whether Armstrong’s resolution—at least in Penn State’s case—wasn’t simply an overreaction. “This is not a case where we should be killing an ant with a sledgehammer,” President Spanier told the *Philadelphia Inquirer* in July.

Interestingly, at least three of the 13 complaints seem to show students accusing their professors of being too conservative, rather than too liberal. One was a student in a social sciences course at Penn State Abington contending that a political science professor was “conservative, militaristic, and a war-monger.” Another student, taking a class in the College of Education at University Park, was upset by a professor’s discussion of “conversion therapy” as a way to alter sexual orientation. A third complained that in a Health and Human Development class at University Park, “an instructor was limiting discussion to a conservative viewpoint on family structure.”

What is most noticeably missing from the list is the now-infamous claim about *Fahrenheit 9/11*.

The allegation—that a professor showed Michael Moore’s anti-Bush administration documentary in a biology class—first came up in Penn State’s budget hearing last March, when Armstrong raised it with Spanier. David Horowitz has repeated the claim on his Web site and in *USA Today* as well. But no one—including the national Students for Academic Freedom, which mentions the claim on a list it maintains of reported infractions throughout the country—has been able to verify that it actually happened or locate a student who was in the class where it took place.

Spanier, upon hearing of the allegation, asked the biology department to look into it. The department dug into the SRTEs, or Student Ratings of Teaching Effectiveness, from the previous spring and fall semesters at University Park to see if any students had mentioned the movie. “We know that some students would have taken offense and would have written it down,” says biology professor Richard Cyr, who was involved in the investigation. But there was no mention of it in the SRTEs. Then the department asked everyone who had taught any biology class at *any* Penn State location; again, negative results. The department is now contacting faculty who have taught any class with a biology-related prefix—such as BiSci 003 (Environmental Science)—but so far has turned up nothing. Young Americans for Freedom president Shauna Moser, who also made the assertion in an interview for this story, later did some additional checking and said that the movie was actually another Michael Moore film, *Bowling for Columbine*, and that it was in a sociology course, as reported to her by a former Penn State student.

Penn State has had a policy on academic freedom since 1950; HR64 (the “HR” stands for “human resources”) is intended not only to protect a faculty member’s right to be “free from institutional censorship”—the more traditional meaning of academic freedom—but also to ensure that faculty “show respect for the opinions of others.” Regarding classroom instruction, the policy states: “It is not the function of a faculty member in a democracy to indoctrinate his/her students with ready-made conclusions on controversial subjects. The faculty member is expected to train students to think for themselves.... Hence, in giving instruction upon controversial matters the faculty member is expected to be of a fair and judicial mind, and to set forth justly ... the divergent opinions of other investigators.”

Blannie Bowen, Penn State’s vice provost for academic affairs, notes that the initial procedure for a student to complain about perceived professorial misdeeds is a

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simple walk up the administrative food chain: If a student has a problem, he or she should first go to the professor and try to resolve it. If the results are unsatisfactory, then the student should take the next step up: the department or division head, or—for non-University Park students—the campus director of academic affairs or director of student affairs. If the problem still isn't resolved, then a formal written complaint can be filed. The University also has a provision for certain problems that arise under HR64 to be handled by the Faculty Senate Committee on Faculty Rights and Responsibilities.

The report that Penn State sent to the House select committee details the steps taken by various University departments in response to the complaints it had received. Each incident in the report is followed by sections outlining "Action Taken" and "How Was the Validity of the Complaint Determined?" These detail department heads meeting with faculty, setting up discussions between faculty and students, and, at times, even bringing concerned parents into the mix.

**T**he select committee created by HR177 held the first of its hearings Nov. 9–10 at the University of Pittsburgh. No students came forward with complaints of intolerance or harassment by liberal faculty, but the committee did hear from faculty on both sides of the issue. According to the Pittsburgh *Post-Gazette*, Stephen Balch, president of the conservative National Associa-

tion of Scholars, warned that the liberal majority is a self-perpetuating phenomenon, making conservative students and faculty feel unwelcome and thus unlikely to apply for faculty or grad school positions. Robert Moore, an assistant professor of sociology at St. Joseph's

University and president-elect of the Pennsylvania division of the American Association of University Professors, expressed skepticism that political intimidation on campus is as pervasive as critics say, pointing out that most of the evidence is anecdotal and hasn't been fact-checked. "I'm a social scientist," he told the *Post-Gazette* afterward. "I would like to see data."



The select committee plans to hold at least two more hearings in the spring, though at press time the dates and locations had not been finalized. Its work has been controversial—**Rep. Dan Surra '76 Edu** (D-Elk and Clearfield counties), who was appointed to serve on the committee, has called it "a colossal waste of taxpayers' money." An editorial in the York, Pa., *Dispatch* accused lawmakers of "meddling," saying HR177 is "nothing short of an attempt to impose a conservative orthodoxy on the state-run colleges and universities." But the legislators who are spearheading the effort say the investigation contains questions worth asking. "We've all heard anecdotal stories, so let's find out how much really exists," Rep. Ronald Miller (R-York County) told the *York Dispatch*. "Why sit around and guess at it?" The select committee is expected to report its findings by June 30, and the results will either make the picture clearer—or stir up a whole new round of debate. ▀