

Campus Voices

Students and faculty
speak out on the free
exchange of ideas in
Pennsylvania colleges
and universities



If professors are restricted in what they can discuss with students, it would be a serious impediment to learning. People are faced with a variety of issues and viewpoints in academia as well as the real world, and it is important to discuss these with more experienced people.

**Laurel Ball, Student
University of Pittsburgh**

I am a longtime conservative working in the social sciences. I have never been academically abused, accused or threatened. Rather, I have experienced very open debate and discussion among my colleagues and students on this and other campuses.

**Professor John Anderson
Indiana University of Pennsylvania**



Introduction

Higher education prepares the next generation of leaders in Pennsylvania. It prepares students for the real world, making sure they're ready to participate fully as citizens and to contribute to the state of Pennsylvania. It trains them to think of innovative solutions to public policy problems, business problems, scientific questions and situations in their own communities. It instills them with civic values. It prepares them to deal with disagreement constructively, listening to and debating with those whose opinions differ from theirs.

These goals are stated in the mission of the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education:

At its core, the mission of the System is to increase the intellectual wealth of the Commonwealth, to prepare students at all levels for personal and professional success in their lives, and to contribute to the economic, social, and cultural development of Pennsylvania's communities, the Commonwealth, and the nation. Similarly, the core values that underlie plans, policies, and decisions of the System have remained consistent:

- **Stimulating intellectual growth by promoting teaching and learning as well as creativity and scholarship;**
- **Developing and energizing the personal commitment of students, faculty, and staff for contributive citizenship, global awareness, and social responsibility;**
- **Promoting diversity as a key element in the intellectual and interpersonal development of members of the University and extended communities;**
- **Applying the knowledge and experience gathered within the universities to enhance the social and economic well-being of the Commonwealth;**
- **Practicing effective stewardship of public funds, private contributions, and tuition**

revenues in pursuing the System's public mission; and

- **Advocating for the unique role of public higher education in contributing to the life of the Commonwealth and responding to its needs.**

"Leading the Way"

*Approved by the Board of Governors
July, 2004¹*

These are important goals, and at their heart is a free exchange of ideas on campus. Students confronted with new ideas, controversial problems and creative solutions learn in a way that develops ingenuity and leadership, which can be applied to the problems that plague Pennsylvania's businesses and governments. Unfettered debate is essential, and policies that actually restrict free speech or that discourage the full spectrum of new, creative and challenging ideas have no place in successful Pennsylvania classrooms.

Faculty must feel able to bring up new and sometimes controversial topics and ideas in order to challenge students to learn, analyze, debate and think for themselves. Students need an education that challenges them to become critical thinkers, to become people who come up with new ideas and analyses.

Free Exchange on Campus is a broad coalition of student, faculty and free speech organizations committed to advocating for the rights of students and faculty to hear and express a full range of ideas unencumbered by political or ideological interference and restriction. This spring, we spoke with students and faculty across Pennsylvania to discover how some of our best teachers teach, and how some of our brightest students study. We found that students learn best and faculty teach best when they have access to a full free exchange of ideas. What follows is a sampling of the responses we received.

¹ www.passhe.edu/content/?/about/mission

Student Voices

Students need a variety of learning experiences. When asked, they do not identify one favorite type of class or professor, which makes sense given the variety of subjects and teaching styles in higher education.

Students want to be challenged. They say they learn the most from faculty who challenge them to think, motivate them to work hard and push them to defend their conclusions.

Students are not threatened by ideas with which they disagree. They do not complain about political bias. They say that when a professor takes a position in class, that teaching style helps them learn.

Arguments and controversy are what develop students' minds. What's most valuable in college is not specific facts but critical thinking.

Winnefred Ann Frolik, University of Pittsburgh

My favorite classes usually become my favorite classes because of the professor. Professors have engaged my critical thinking by showing me different perspectives and choosing methods of learning that I can relate to. My favorite professors try to understand the student and use this understanding to teach their classes most effectively. [My favorite] classes always make me see things in a different way than before the class started. I find that these classes ignite interest even after the semester is over.

Amy Raffel, Penn State

They tend to play devil's advocate. They take whatever side that isn't being argued by students in order to challenge our modes of thinking and our reasoning skills, as well as to help strengthen our ability to effectively state and argue a case. They also mediate debates between students to help us learn how to accept different points of view without necessarily agreeing with them.

Shannon Wagner, Temple University

In my favorite class, linguistics, our professor regularly regales us with anecdotes inspired by the subject matter, which keep us engaged. She often opens the lecture for comments and questions, challenging us to think critically. If she had to constantly worry about "liberal bias" in her stories, the entire atmosphere would be disrupted.

Anil Venkatesh, University of Pennsylvania

Professors encourage participation by relating material to current events and issues. This leads to the class applying their skills of critical thought to these issues and events, raising both their intellect and knowledge of current events.

Zachary Yeates, University of Pennsylvania

Faculty Voices

Faculty teaching styles are not one-size-fits-all. Professors exhibit a lot of variety in how they engage students and teach them to become critical thinkers. Some faculty intentionally play devil's advocate to force students to consider new perspectives and questions. Others incorporate real-world examples to make classes more relevant for their students. Many teach subjects that force students to disagree, and they use debate to get students to consider new angles and perspectives.

In my Mass Communication Law and Ethics class, I present situations or cases—often taken from the news—for students to consider. They divide into groups of about four to six to discuss and apply communication laws and ethical decision-making methods. Each group reports its findings to the class. Lively discussions ensue.

Professor Livezey, Cheyney University

In the sciences, which I teach, there is both information to learn—about what scientists have discovered over the past few hundred years—and also a mental habit of rigorous inquiry to develop. Students need to understand the importance of not being too attached to any one perspective or point of view, as it can actually interfere with productive inquiry. This is what I think, and it's what I teach. Scientists should not, and we DO NOT push our personal views unless they are representative of our disciplines on scientific grounds.

Professor William Towne, Kutztown University

I encourage students to find out what a writer is saying and why s/he is saying it. I encourage them to evaluate their sources (are they qualified to write on their topics?).

Professor Karen Schermerhorn, Community College of Philadelphia

I sometimes take unpopular positions on purpose and regardless of my personal opinion in order to stimulate discussion. Our students are remarkably passive and often prefer to say what they think unfamiliar faculty need to hear. I try hard to present all sides of issues discussed.

Professor Carl Carnein, Lock Haven University

Faculty Voices

(continued)

As a sociologist, the material covered in class is necessarily political. We discuss the way society is structured, differential access to resources, social problems and possible solutions, etc... Among other courses, I teach Contemporary Social Problems and Health Policy, two classes that must constantly bring politics into course discussion. In my courses, students learn to engage in critical thinking, to evaluate evidence from a range of credible sources, and to articulate, support and defend their opinion. Students are always encouraged to share their opinions, and, on topics of their choice, they are encouraged to go beyond their initial opinions and assess the literature and evidence on any given topic.

In my introduction to sociology course, students are assigned a research paper in which they must select a sociological phenomenon to explain (e.g., rising obesity rates, rising divorce rates), research *two* potential explanations only one of which is to be sociological in nature, and write a paper in which they (a) provide their best evidence for each of the explanations, (b) evaluate this evidence, and (c) develop an argument about the best way to explain their chosen phenomenon. This paper structure helps them see that there are always competing explanations and teaches them skills in examining empirical evidence to assess these competing explanations.

Professor Allison Carey, Shippensburg University

I encourage the examination of diverse opinions and sources in my political science courses. For example, in my "Media Paper" I request that students explore journals of opinion such as *National Review* and *Weekly Standard* (Conservative) as well as *Nation* and *New Republic* (more liberal). I do not censor opinions, but I insist that all political discourse be courteous and free of violence.

**Professor Thomas Kolsky, Montgomery County
Community College**

Why We Oppose the So-called “Academic Bill of Rights”

The rich variety of responses we received about teaching and learning led our coalition and the students and faculty we talked with to oppose the so-called “Academic Bill of Rights” and other such legislative initiatives.

Most students did not know that legislatures were considering such proposals. But once presented with the proposals, they joined the faculty we spoke with in opposition to restrictions on what can be taught in the classroom.

Student reactions were far more consistent. Students worried that they would miss out on course content if their professors felt they couldn’t discuss certain subjects. Some also worried their classes would be less interesting. A number of students were even insulted by the notion that there were some ideas too dangerous for them to be exposed to.

Faculty were likewise opposed. They too worried that course content would suffer and students would walk away from college knowing less about the world around them. They were also concerned they wouldn’t be able to train students to be critical thinkers if they couldn’t challenge them to defend positions because that questioning would be seen as indoctrination.

Overall, students and faculty thought their classrooms and campuses should be free from restrictions and saw these freedoms as critical to higher education.

Because some of the things that will be restricted are really important in the fact that they encourage critical thinking as well as present topics to use in writing assignments.

Matt Baum, Community College of Allegheny County

[I am] concerned because if the professors aren’t able to discuss certain issues then eventually class discussion would become incredibly boring.

Lindsey Brummert, Harrisburg Area Community College

If the professors are limited in what they teach, how then can they teach to the best of their ability. Students are not simply vacuous imbeciles, accepting everything they are told. They are intelligent individuals with the capability of thinking critically about even their professors’ beliefs.

Zachary Yeates, University of Pennsylvania

We don’t need our hands to be held for the rest of our lives. We are capable of using our discretion and our intellect in a way that benefits our education and betters our lives. By advocating and promoting the [Academic Bill of Rights], politicians and supports are, in fact, supporting bias. They are supporting the closing of minds and the end of the exchange of ideas. This bill will only hurt us and our abilities to function in the “real world” where bias is rampant; we will be hindered in our ability to understand different points of view, as well as in our ability to communicate and problem solve. College is the time and the place where we as young adults are supposed to figure out who we are so we can find our niche in the world. The [Academic Bill of Rights] will only hurt our potential.

Shannon Wagner, Temple University

If professors are restricted in what they can discuss with students, it would be a serious impediment to learning. People are faced with a variety of issues and viewpoints in academia as well as the real world, and it is important to discuss these with more experienced people.

Laurel Ball, University of Pittsburgh

Why We Oppose the So-called “Academic Bill of Rights”

(continued)

As a professor of political science, I stress open debate and discussion on current issues in both domestic and foreign politics. I encourage a discussion of ALL political viewpoints and I purposely play the role of devil’s advocate, voicing an opinion to the opposite of the perceived classroom majority opinion. For example, if the majority of the students express views opposed to the Iraq war, I will seek to stimulate arguments in support of the war. This maintains an atmosphere of open discussion and expression on all issues.

Professor Paula Holoviak, Kutztown University

It rips the heart out of my subject area, which is health education. We must be able to read and discuss freely topics that are “hot”—i.e., birth control, abortion, environmental health, safety, violence, etc.

Professor Rebecca Leas, Clarion University

It shuts doors to any open-ended discussions and airing of ideas. Government intervention is invasive and not usually successful. For example, should I stop teaching western European church art and architecture because someone may be offended? Do I ignore an integral part of the history? Do you want me to begin preparing alternative curricula for students who object to my course content?

Dr. Karen Weaver Coleman, Reading Area Community College

Faculty cannot and should not pretend not to have ideas and opinions of their own. Faculty spend years in higher education developing their expertise, and students want to hear their expert opinions. These opinions enrich discussion and illustrate for students how arguments are articulated. As role models, faculty also nurture students to develop their own arguments and perspectives. Shutting down the exchange of opinions can simply not foster a student’s intellectual development. So, in summary, I believe the threat of [the Academic Bill of Rights] is far greater than the supposed and undocumented threat of faculty bias.

Professor Allison Carey, Shippensburg University

The Real Issues

If neither students nor faculty believe political bias is a problem that begs the question: what *are* the problems on campus? There were no universal answers, but a few stand out.

Students were most concerned about college finances. They were concerned with high tuition, paying for textbooks and other costs. Some were also concerned with problems the legislature cannot fix, like finding a major.

Faculty had a number of concerns. Many were also concerned with finances, either because they worried about students being able to pay for college or because of the time students' jobs take away from their course work. Many were also concerned with high school preparation for college and making sure that Pennsylvania institutions maintain high academic standards.

The need for more economic support for our students. Many struggle to maintain high academic standards while working fulltime to support their families.

Robert Millar, Reading Area Community College

Funding constraints. Although the state system schools are relatively affordable in comparison to private colleges, people in Central Pennsylvania still have a hard time affording higher education. The majority of our students work while attending college, and many of them seem to be working in full-time aide positions. These students cannot dedicate the proper amount of time and energy to their schooling, as they struggle to support themselves and attend school. We desperately need to be making college financially accessible to all students. Also due to financial constraints, we feel a constant pressure to increase class size. Increasing class size reduces the likelihood of active class participation, service learning, debate, and class exercises, and increases the likelihood of lecture.

Professor Allison Carey, Shippensburg University

Morale is very low at Clarion, both with students and professors, because programs we have worked years to develop are slowly being stripped away because of financial pressures. For example, for years I taught Developmental MATH at our campus to students who had been admitted but who tested at that level of MATH proficiency. Suddenly we are short of faculty so the non-credit course is just cancelled—students who have been admitted are told to “sink or swim.” Then we put them in MATH 050 (elementary algebra) in a classroom with 200 other weak students and hire an adjunct faculty member with no training in teaching developmental students to lecture to them. It’s preposterous. I might add that I am not usually a negative person. On the contrary, I am known to be very positive, despite trying circumstances. However, it is difficult to deal with students who need extra help and have no time to be helpful. This attitude is catching. I am still endeavoring to be uplifting and motivating, but it is more and more difficult.

Clarion University, Professor Karen Bingham

The Real Issues

(continued)

Since I currently teach mostly undergraduate students, I find that students come to college lacking a lot of grammatical, punctuation and critical skills, necessary to compete in higher education. As faculty members, our job is to prepare students for the “trials and tribulations” of the outside world, and we only have 4 or 5 years to do it. And high on the list is critical thinking! To sharpen the critical mind, we must engage our students to think clearly, write concisely, and reason effectively.

Professor Itzi Meztli, Slippery Rock University

I think it is students’ lack of preparation and basic literacy in areas like math and reading and writing skills. Even though they score well on standardized tests many of the students have problems with basic analysis and composition. I find myself remediating students even at the senior level.

Professor Roberta Snow, West Chester University

It is outrageous that we subsidize industry and cannot do the same for education to a level which allows all students a choice of where to go. Duke costs \$41,000 a year including room and board. I have a good job, with (thank god) full benefits, in a library and I only make \$27,000/year maybe. In what universe is this disparity rational?

Maggie McGinn, Temple University

Managing to get a masters degree while holding a full-time job—it keeps me busy.

Winnefred Ann Frolik, University of Pittsburgh

The price! Government officials always talk about how important education is, but at the same time, they continually make cut-backs to education programs and universities. My parents couldn’t even afford to send me to a community college, so if I wasn’t working full time and going to school only part time, I would never be able to afford a university education.

Kristie Klavin, Penn State University

Conclusion

The bottom line is this: A free exchange of ideas is critical to higher education. Not only is there no evidence that proposals like the so-called “Academic Bill of Rights” are necessary, but there is ample evidence that they would interfere with education. Students and faculty alike believe these proposals would harm the ability of students to learn. Moreover, while not in universal agreement over what the most important issues facing higher education are, they all are concerned with the access, quality and affordability of the college education Pennsylvania provides. Opportunity, not restrictions, is what all our students need to succeed.

First, the problem, as a legitimately generalizable notion, appears to exist more speculatively and politically than factually. Attention has been given to outlying cases, and we are made to believe that an extensive problem exists, when in fact it does not. Investigative hearings have substantiated this statement. I can only conclude that problem extent is minimal, or stated scientifically, insignificant. Second, hearings have shown that appropriate safeguards exist for countering inappropriate deviations. Third the “Academic Bill of Rights” seems more like an “Academic Bill of Control.” Historically, whenever governments have directed educational content and style, they have done so for political power, gain, and control. Results often prove socially detrimental. We have seen book burning in the streets. The aftermath was despicable. Communism, fascism and various dictatorial regimes have worked to control ideology and therefore frequently intervene in education. A healthy republic, on the other hand, debates and communicates openly. While the leaders of the “Academic Bill of Rights” claims its purpose rests in ensuring unbiased dialogue, it is obviously wrought with political agenda and aversive technique. As a bill, in its own right, it can only result in government control. We do not need government controlled thinking.

I am a longtime conservative working in the social sciences. I have never been academically abused, accused or threatened. Rather, I have experienced very open debate and discussion among my colleagues and students on this and other campuses

**Professor John Anderson, Indiana University of
Pennsylvania**

Because this is Sam’s [Richards] focus, he stirs debate and forces students to re-evaluate their preconceived notions, whether they are conservative or liberal. That’s what Sam’s about: building discussion, using debate for learning, opening new doors in the classroom, allowing any student to talk WHENEVER they want (and this is in a 500 person classroom!). Sam simply wouldn’t try to brainwash or indoctrinate a student because doing so would run counter to his goal, which is having a student think and solve problems on their own.

Alex Smith, Penn State University

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