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Free Speech Under Attack on Campuses

By Donald A. Downs

The recent Harvard University faculty vote of no confidence for university President Lawrence Summers and the call for the resignation of University of Colorado's Ward Churchill point to a return of censorship from both the right and the left on college campuses.

In January, Summers was asked at a closed meeting to pose some provocative thoughts about controversies in higher education. Obliging the request, Summers speculated on reasons why women might, in general, have less aptitude at higher levels of science and math than men. The reaction by the feminist left was swift and strong, culminating in the no confidence vote.

That the faculty of America's most renowned university considered the enforcement of a politically correct viewpoint more important than respect for free thought speaks volumes about the status of free speech and academic freedom in higher education.

Recent speeches by professor Ward Churchill, in which he accused Americans of being "murderers" for tolerating American foreign policy and compared the victims of the World Trade Center attacks to "little Eichmanns" who were somehow morally culpable for their fate, has also had significant fallout. The president of the University of Colorado has resigned, and Colorado officials are calling for Churchill to be fired.

When the University of Wisconsin at Whitewater decided not to revoke a previous invitation it extended to Churchill to speak—one of the few schools to take this stand—the Wisconsin Legislature debated a resolution that would have empowered the University of Wisconsin's board of regents to "timely dismiss" a professor whose ideas they deemed "dishonorable." That this power would destroy the very fabric of academic freedom escaped the champions of this measure.

These responses suggest that many individuals who should know better have not learned the lessons of the last fifteen years, when a different type of censorship began to spread across college campuses around the country: censorship in the name of "politically correct" leftist causes. Such censorship sent a chill across higher education, unfairly ruining many careers in

the process. The Churchill affair portends the return of a more traditional type of censorship: that purveyed by the right, coming from outside the university's gates.

Suddenly, academic freedom is besieged from both the left and the right.

And the politically correct censorship of the left remains. Consider the plight of economics professor Hans Hoppe at the University of Nevada in Las Vegas. Last November, Hoppe took a minute or two in a lecture to note that homosexuals might have different time horizons in making decisions about saving money because they tend not to have their own children. This remark offended a student, who proceeded to accuse Hoppe of "harassment" of homosexuals.

Whatever happened to taking the intellectual freedom route by talking to the professor or presenting a counterview in class?

An all-too-typical coercive investigation ensued. Fortunately for academic freedom, Hoppe is resisting the investigation and has marshaled support from proponents of academic freedom around the country.

All of these cases reflect the politically selective way some on the left have reacted to threats to free speech and academic freedom. Conservatives have borne the brunt of speech codes and have comprised the vast majority of speakers who have been censored in campus forums. Too many on the left have not spoken out against such censorship, probably because the other side's ox was being gored. Indeed, Churchill himself has obstructed Columbus Day parades, claiming that they represent "hate speech." He was no champion of free speech until his own speech came under attack.

But the last thing American campuses need is censorship from the right piling onto pre-existing censorship from the left. Universities will not regain the public trust they have squandered until they stand up and defend the principles of free speech and academic freedom for everyone, regardless of their politics.

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