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Detente With David Horowitz

David Horowitz isn't mentioned by name in a two-page statement being released today by 26 higher education organizations. But the statement, on "academic rights and responsibilities," is a response to Horowitz's "Academic Bill of Rights," which many professors view as an assault on their rights.

Organizers of the statement being issued today say that it was an effort to state publicly that academe is not monolithic ideologically and that colleges can — without the government — deal with professors (a distinct few, according to most academic leaders) who punish students for their views. Organizers hoped the statement would deflate the movement in state legislatures and Congress to enact the Academic Bill of Rights. Horowitz called the statement "a major victory" for his campaign and said that it opened up the possibility that he would work directly with colleges on remaining differences of opinion, rather than seeking legislation.

Congressional Republicans — some of whom had been expected to push the Horowitz legislation — also praised the statement. And the praise from Republicans and Horowitz pleased many college leaders, who have been frustrated by the way their institutions have been portrayed by Horowitz and some lawmakers as leftist and intolerant.

The statement issued today focuses on "intellectual pluralism and academic freedom," and offers five "overarching principles" for colleges:

- Diversity of institutions is a "central feature and strength" of American higher education, and the individual missions of colleges, defined by the colleges themselves, "should set the tone for the academic activities undertaken."
- Colleges should welcome "intellectual pluralism" and promote an environment where the debates fostered by such pluralism take place with a spirit of "openness, tolerance and civility."
- Grades should be based "solely on considerations that are intellectually relevant to the subject matter under consideration," and students and faculty members should be free from being punished for their political views. Any who feel that they have been discriminated against in this regard should have a "clear institutional process" for a grievance.
- The validity of ideas should be judged by "the intellectual standards of relevant academic and professional disciplines," without any presumption that all ideas have equal merit.
- Government must respect colleges' "independence," creating a special obligation for colleges to assure academic freedom for all.

There are similar themes in the statement and in the "Academic Bill of Rights," which has been pushed by Horowitz, a one-time radical turned conservative, in numerous state legislatures and in Congress. Many professors, however, believe that the language in the bill would make professors vulnerable to student complaints any time controversial material was covered and would require colleges to seek ideological balance on topics where most professors think that

such balance is absurd (did the Holocaust happen? is evolution real?). While Horowitz has repeatedly denied that is his goal, some of his legislative supporters have said that they see the bill as a step toward changing the way evolution is taught in higher education.

In contrast, the statement from the academic groups stipulates that colleges, not the government, should decide on the curriculum and the extent to which departments should seek a diversity of thought.

David Ward, president of the American Council on Education, which led the efforts to draft the statement, said the idea was to embrace part of Horowitz's message, but not all of it. "What was happening was that individuals who were critics of higher education were making, to my mind, perfectly reasonable statements that universities should be places of intellectual pluralism, civility and fairness," Ward said. "I might quibble about details, but I found myself saying, 'They have a point.' "

Ward said that while there were "striking similarities" between the association's statement and the Academic Bill of Rights, it was important to note the way the associations protected faculty and institutional rights. "These are principles, and the idea is that campus should refine them," he said.

Issues of ideological bias, Ward said, are not rampant in American higher education. But he said that the debate over the Academic Bill of Rights did draw attention to the fact that many colleges haven't outlined what a student should do if he or she feels that they are being discriminated against because of their political views. "Some of our institutions don't have procedures in place, and they should," he said.

The groups backing the statement includes those whose members are institutions, presidents, deans and professors.

One of the college leaders who played a key role in developing the statement — and selling it to conservatives — was Robert C. Andringa, president of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities. Andringa said he believed that problems with political intolerance are far fewer than Horowitz has charged. And he said that Horowitz's legislation was wrong because "it is inappropriate for legislative bodies to get involved in academic freedom issues."

The statement is important, Andringa said, "in that it shows that the higher education community recognized the political and public interest in the issue." He said that the debate had become a public relations problem that was hurting higher education.

"This is the kind of thing that translates into lower appropriations in states, and less of a commitment by lawmakers to higher education, so we have to take it seriously," Andringa said. In an e-mail interview, Horowitz called the statement by the academic groups "a major victory" and said that it created "an opportunity to open a dialogue with educators that had not been possible before."

Horowitz suggested that the statement might make it possible for him and his supporters to stop pushing the Academic Bill of Rights. But he also made clear that was not yet a done deal. "Until the rights are codified by the universities themselves as student rights (professors have these

rights written into their contracts) and the grievance machinery is set up,” he said, legislation might be needed. “That depends on the university systems. The door has now been opened for discussions. If the discussions lead to a situation in which the universities are dealing with these problems in a satisfactory manner, then there will be no further need for legislation. At the moment however all this remains to be seen.”

Not everyone thinks Horowitz is a clear winner. Michael Bérubé, a professor of English at Pennsylvania State University, said “there’s no question he put this issue on the agenda.” But Bérubé said that the statement from college groups embraces only “the innocuous parts” of Horowitz’s proposals while rejecting “the truly obnoxious aspect,” a move to have legislators “be empowered to investigate individual teachers and reading lists.”

These days, Bérubé said, Horowitz’s audience is “the kind of people who’ll believe anything about universities — or about the United Nations, or PBS, or NPR. “

— [Scott Jaschik](#)