

Academic Freedom, Institutional Integrity, and Teacher Education

By Jack L. Nelson

These are times of threat and turmoil for society and for teacher education, yet we seem always to be in those times. Each decade and each generation require renewed energy to be vigilant in the pursuit of freedom through education and action. We can easily forget larger scale issues in the battles close at hand, battles that can sap our energies and dim our confidence. Battles must be fought, but basic purposes should not be ignored. Our social purposes include the expansion of justice, equality, and freedom; sabre-rattling and tough talk about exorcising evil should not obscure them. Our educational purposes necessarily include the protection and development of academic freedom — cornerstone of education in democracy; bureaucracy and politics should not obscure it. Teacher education, of all fields of study, must retain a focus on the important.

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To Start with a Summary

Three interdependent themes link academic freedom to teacher education in American society:

1. Academic freedom is most deserving of protection in a democracy, yet it is among the most fragile and vulnerable of freedoms in times of stress;

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2. Academic freedom is the fundamental purpose for education;
3. Academic freedom is the most significant of all teacher education activities.

Institutional integrity, a long-standing academic tradition that provides for faculty determination of curriculum and courses, rests on academic freedom. New efforts by external forces to standardize and sterilize the teacher education curriculum threaten academic freedom and institutional integrity, thereby threatening education and the democracy.

Elaborating the Summary

Freedom to examine and criticize is an essential component of our democratic culture. A legitimate democracy requires a knowledgeable citizenry, but citizens cannot be knowledgeable if ideas are unnecessarily restricted, censored, or demeaned. Schooling is a primary avenue to knowledgeable citizens. The freedom of teachers and students to examine and criticize is, thus, the most deserving freedom to protect. But it is also the most subject to attack.

John Dewey (1936) clearly stated this relationship: "Since freedom of mind and freedom of expression are the root of all freedom, to deny freedom in education is a crime against democracy."

That relationship between academic/intellectual freedom and democracy, however, has not been fully appreciated in American society, and is always under some strain. Bigots, moralists, absolutists, demagogues, and extremists on all sides of the political, religious, or economic spectrum would have schools teach the monolithic views they espouse. They would censor or restrict the teaching or study of anything they consider controversial. Even otherwise thoughtful people sometimes get caught up in emotional appeals to restrict intellectual freedom. In calmer times and in more enlightened places, these challenges to teacher and student freedom can be addressed in settings that provide reasoned discussion within a context that values democratic education. All too often, however, the politics of campuses, communities, states, and the nation complicate the free exchange of ideas.

In some communities the bigots win and get books removed, teachers fired, and courses sterilized; the big chill settles on the campus or district and teacher self-censorship becomes standard procedure. This unfortunate practice still goes on in many colleges and school districts; just check current issues of the *Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom* of the American Library Association (ALA) and recent records of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). The broad chilling effect on institutions and the self-censorship of individual teachers are restrictions on academic freedom that are more difficult to track and are, thus, more insidious.

In other more enlightened communities, however, the bigots are fought off and

academic freedom and democracy are protected. There are success stories, as reports of the AAUP, ACLU, and ALA note. We should all teach in such districts and such colleges. And we should hope that our students become teachers in such places.

Stress and Threat

In times of national stress, such as now, challenges to teacher and student freedom reach new and more imposing dimensions. It is no longer individual bigots or small clusters of them pressing for restrictive education. The pressure also comes from more broadly-based and often well-meaning publics. When national values are threatened, there is a strong tendency to limit controversial topics and there is a corollary effort to mandate a unilateral view that is not subject to critique. Teachers cannot properly deal with controversy without intellectual freedom.

A prime example is the McCarthy period, when state laws censored teachers from presenting information on socialism or communism, and pre-collegiate and collegiate level teachers were fired for being outspoken. The American Legion, the John Birch Society, and individual extremists attacked progressivism, the school curriculum, textbooks, teacher education, and individual teachers. The American Legion produced its own American history textbook that it tried to require in all schools; the Birch Society pressured schools to establish Freedom shrines in libraries to display patriotic material and Birch leaflets; and individual writers like E. Merrill Root, without evidence, identified specific teachers by name as fellow travelers and many were fired without academic cause or due process. The University of Washington was the first to do so; Rutgers and other universities followed, with the AAUP censuring university administrations. Loyalty oaths for teachers were common until the landmark Supreme Court case, *Keyashian v. Regents of New York* in 1967 — a decision that includes an eloquent statement of the compelling grounds for academic freedom. My favorite history teacher when I was in high school ran for congress as a United World Federalist, and the school district fired him. In the 1950s, I supervised student teachers in a California district where the Board of Education banned any teaching materials which contained the word Russia until the Board could approve; this obnoxious prior restraint was successfully resisted by teachers stopping their teaching.

In the past few years, we have seen a Colorado teacher fired for showing a Bertold Bertolucci film, *1900*, in class, because it touched on the controversial topic of anarchy, social studies textbooks banned in Alabama because they contained secular humanism ideas, and the teaching of creationism imposed by a state board on science classes in Kansas. A national campaign elected stealth candidates to local school boards — they were called stealth candidates because they were instructed to not reveal their restrictive views until after they were elected. The stealth agenda includes the abolition of sex education, mandating so-called Christian views,

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slavish devotion to patriotic themes, and restricting teacher freedom to deal with controversial matter.

About two years ago, an Arkansas state legislature committee endorsed a bill prohibiting state money to buy any teaching materials that present scientific theories as fact and requiring teachers to make students note any false information or theory in textbooks. In addition to infringing on education in science, the bill has application to historical, economic, political, and philosophical theories that determine what we consider facts in social studies, English, and other subjects. The Arkansas bill would eliminate such materials and make teachers monitor students and mark all such theories in texts. Virtually nothing would be left, since most of what we teach as social facts (Columbus discovered America in 1492, literary quality, manifest destiny, price is the result of supply and demand) are actually interpretations based on theory.

Standardization, a Current Threat

Another current and disturbing threat to academic freedom emerges from educational reform efforts to establish national, state, and local subject matter standards, and the excessive standardized testing that results. These have reconfigured schools into training camps where deviation from established information and ideas is unacceptable. Unfortunately for education, the standards do not include critical thinking or consideration of controversy and the tests do not provide for divergent but legitimate answers. There is no controversy because the standards and the tests offer only one measureable view. The movement in California to impose standardized teacher education flows from the same orientation, discounting academic freedom for teacher educators and institutional integrity for their institutions.

A particularly distasteful example of how the standards movement acts as a restraint on academic freedom was evident in the development of national standards for American History this past decade. Historians at the University of California, Los Angeles produced a set of American history standards that included content that was somewhat more honest and more diverse than traditionalists prefer. Right-wing criticism of the standards appeared and, sadly for academic freedom, those same UCLA historians capitulated to right-wing critics of the original standards. Lynn Cheney, for example, complained publicly that the draft standards were not sufficiently patriotic or traditional. The historians withdrew the original standards and rewrote them to conform to the right wing view, avoiding controversy and setting back academic freedom. That extraordinary example served to restrict the study of history throughout the United States because it set national standards. And it chilled the school atmosphere for teachers and students who recognize the potential problem they would have if influential academic historians can be so readily manipulated. This is a prime example of how the standards movement restricts academic freedom and sends signals to teachers to limit good teaching of

controversial topics. Teacher education can suffer the same fate under standardization, with democratic society losing. If students preparing to teach are not encouraged to examine and challenge ideas, how can they be expected to do that for their own students?

The deprofessionalization of teaching that accompanies the standards movement has serious repercussions not only within but beyond the classroom. The narrow and conservative context of the standards debate leads to serious concerns about the protection of academic freedom for teachers and students and the threat that these standards might pose to the essential purposes of education in a democratic society. If not in schools, where will students be able to examine controversial topics and engage in democratic citizenship in a reasoned setting? But the public argument about standards, tragically, has been focussed on the amount or type of testing, not on the insidious limits the standards and the tests pose for intellectual freedom in a democracy.

Terrorism and the Threat to Freedoms

Since the attacks of September 11th, we have a new period of national stress, and can expect more threats to academic freedom — threats that must be challenged to protect our democracy. Teachers, more than most, realize that the terrorists will have won a major battle if the United States reacts by imposing stringent limits on our freedoms — similar to those terrorists impose on their followers. Wartime not only brings out the best in people, it can bring out the worst — evidence the Alien and Sedition Acts, Japanese Internment in World War II, and the McCarthy Period.

The USA Patriot Act, the anti-terrorism bill that was recently rushed through Congress and signed by President Bush, contains some ominous signals for teacher and student freedom. This bill moves toward making legitimate political dissent a terrorist act, creating a new crime called “domestic terrorism,” i.e., engaging in acts of political protest that are dangerous to human life. We might all agree that clear and present danger to life deserves restriction (as in crying FIRE in a crowded theater), but we already have that concept embedded in our laws. This new law does not clarify how the danger is determined and who gets to decide which protests are potentially dangerous. With this law what might have happened during protests of the VietNam War, or the globalism protests at World Trade organization meetings, or civil rights demonstrations in the 1950s and 60s? We already have criminal laws that can be applied when protestors are destructive or inappropriately threaten others. The new law seems to equate protest acts with terrorist acts, and it undermines constitutional protections for political association by making it a crime to allow a terrorist (as defined in the law) to stay in your house. Will teacher education courses prepare teachers to examine protest movements despite the risk of being labelled terrorist sympathizers? Will teacher educators and teachers engage in protest themselves, or offer a place to stay for friends who do protest?

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This new USA Patriot Act, using a title that confuses with language symbolism hiding its liberty-restricting parts, also gives much broader power to conduct searches without notice — secret searches that deny 4th Amendment rights. And the law identifies “cyberterrorism,” making hacking a possible terrorist act. The McCarthy Period found terms like communist, fellow traveller, un-American, pinko, and socialist useful in condemning people to loss of job and blacklisting and worse; now we have terrorist.

Should this new law and its various criticisms be discussed in teacher education classes? Obviously, I think so; teachers should be critically aware of the dimensions of the law and the changes it entails. Proponent and opponent positions should be examined. Will the discussion be full and critical? I hope so, but my research shows that teachers are reluctant to delve into controversial issues when there has been an incident restricting academic freedom. Instead, a pattern of self-censorship emerges. Will the California teacher education standardization regulations be critically examined in teacher education courses?

Consider other newly developing and often well-meaning efforts to use the schools for patriotic purposes without critical examination — and the pressure exerted on teachers to be politically correct but educationally incorrect. Patriotism can be a threat to freedom, as Merrill McPeak, Chief of Staff for the US Air Force, 1990-1994, wrote in an editorial last year, summarizing: “An orderly society without freedom is totalitarian.” Can and will the war on terrorism be fully examined in classes? Can the renewed calls for mandating uncritical patriotic gestures and religious rectitude be examined, instead of merely conducted? Should students preparing to be teachers engage these topics?

Under the banner title, “Attacking Terrorism,” a newspaper published a story about a man who is campaigning to establish God Bless America Week. The possibility of such a week should certainly frighten terrorists; it is reminiscent of the Nancy Reagan call to “Just say no” as a way to stop drug dealers in their tracks and make us victorious in the War on Drugs. Schools are a likely focus for just such efforts as God Bless America Week and other sunshine patriotic rituals, just as schools are easy targets for trying to mandate Bible reading and prayer sessions or so-called character education that prohibits diverse thinking — on the premise that schools should not examine issues, but should produce monolithic thinkers. Does the new state teacher education regulation offer the same?

Teacher Education and Advocacy for Academic Freedom

If democracy’s defense requires educational freedom as Dewey and others have noted over a long time, then we should be very concerned about teaching and teacher education. Academic freedom does not happen on its own. Standardization and standardized testing present clear and present dangers to academic freedom because of the limits they impose on schooling, but teacher education programs and

the teachers they produce could be a means for mitigating the danger. Unfortunately, my recent experience at Rutgers University in developing a new teacher education program does not offer much hope. During a three-year effort, the Rutgers Graduate School of Education shifted from an early and broad-based agreement to develop a program with a strong concern for preparing reflective and critical thinking teachers who recognized the necessity of protecting academic freedom — to a later result: a much more highly structured, lock-step, and campus-standardized program that ignored critical thinking and intellectual freedom for faculty or students. In the long run, the program would not countenance legitimate disagreement and did not permit faculty members to select their own texts or design their own courses to fit a general pattern. If teacher education itself restricts teacher and student freedom, how can the teachers produced be expected to support that freedom? If professional socialization into teaching includes conditioning of students to accept serious restrictions on academic freedom, education suffers.

The education of teachers should be one of the most significant academic activities of any institution of higher learning. Preparing each generation to carry on and improve the best traditions of learning should be considered paramount to other important roles of higher education, e.g., preparing business executives, lawyers, medical practitioners, writers, economists, historians, etc. Teaching is the single profession uniting those in the colleges with those in pre-collegiate education. But teacher education, partly by its own doing, has a long and sordid history of attacks from within and outside the academy. That, however, should not deter us from raising the question of academic freedom and institutional integrity with our colleagues across the campus and in the schools and more liberal organizations. Many colleagues will recognize the threat to all if those they consider weakest can't be protected. If state edicts can standardize teacher education, without institutional protest, there is nothing to stop similar control of the general education program, history, English, and others. Now is a good time for teacher education to take leadership in enlisting the assistance of colleagues in other academic programs to address this matter.

Bertrand Russell published a 1928 essay on the threats of authority to freedom. In it Russell noted that teachers are the best hope in society for resisting interference with intellectual freedom — but he wondered if teachers had the preparation and courage to maintain the vigilance required. I think teacher educators must recognize their responsibilities to education and to democracy in the defense of such freedom, but we need to educate future teachers about this concept. That education does not happen in standardized, restrictive and fearful settings. It also does not happen when the profession does not provide support.

Academic freedom is not just a professional privilege; it is a professional obligation. Teachers have a compelling obligation to intellectual freedom, since the proper exercise of their professional positions depends upon it. Yet some teachers have no concept of academic freedom; some see no reason for academic freedom

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since they are happy to merely be conduits for sterile ideas promoted by those in authority; some teachers think they have academic freedom but would never try to exercise it — so they really don't have it; and some see academic freedom simply as a license to do whatever they want. None of these represents the best in the profession.

Academic freedom requires teachers who are competent — competent in the topic being taught and competent in the methodology being used. An incompetent teacher is not professional and does not deserve the protection of academic freedom. That freedom does not protect incompetents who are ignorant, stupid, willful, or bigoted in their zealotry. Thus, I do not contend that every teacher should have academic freedom simply because they have a teachers' license, just as I do not contend that every doctor or lawyer should be practicing their professions no matter their competence. Tenure laws exist primarily to provide a period of teaching time to determine teacher competence. And tenure's main purpose is to protect the academic freedom of teachers.

Competent teachers, thus, must have academic freedom for themselves and their students, and for the continued improvement of the democratic society. Times of stress put severe strain on this idea.

Justice William O. Douglas wrote a half century ago:

The real enemies of freedom are not confined to any nation; they are everywhere; they flourish where injustice, discrimination, ignorance, superstition, intolerance, and arbitrary power exists. We cannot afford to inveigh against them abroad, unless we are alert to guard against them at home.

In this period of stress, as in others, we need to continue our strong advocacy for freedoms necessary to democracy, education, and teaching as a profession.