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## WHAT SHOULD PROFESSORS DO?†

Rita J. Simon††

It will be useful to introduce these suggestions about what professors can and should do, during this period of academic zealotry that has been initiated and organized from within the universities, by briefly describing the prevailing atmosphere in many American universities today.

A major effect of the current wave of zealotry is that it has sharply limited the range of discussion and debate that is likely to occur in university classrooms. Professors mostly, but students as well, are fearful of presenting views that are “far out” or “politically incorrect” on issues such as affirmative action, race relations, political candidates, immigration, sexual harassment, domestic violence, rape, homelessness, etc. A discussion of how the race issue was handled in the O.J. Simpson trial almost caused a riot in my graduate seminar. Clearly the range of discussion that occurs at both the graduate and undergraduate levels has narrowed and the issues are more limited.

Another change is the diminishment or absence of humor. Jokes, in and out of the classroom, have all but disappeared for fear that they might offend someone.

The fear of lawsuits on the part of professors, deans, and other university administrators has increased to the point where professors are warned about, or find themselves disinclined to make negative comments about a student’s work or to give less than a B as a grade on a paper or a semester’s work.

The general atmosphere and the interpersonal relations among faculty colleagues, especially when persons of different races and genders are involved, has changed such that compliments, teasing, and disagreements about ideas and political issues have almost disappeared. Behavior is much more formal, stilted, and lacking in zest and spontaneity. During faculty

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† This article is based on a speech given by Professor Simon at the Academic Freedom Symposium.

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meetings, a good deal of care is exercised about the views one expresses and the positions one adopts with an eye towards faculty appointments, promotions, and tenure decisions. Silence is more and more often deemed "golden" and glib assessments are made about the value of a general consensus that a professor "will add to the diversity of the department," and that of course is a positive objective. Hovering fairly closely over such discussions is the worry about lawsuits from faculty who have not been granted tenure, have not had their contracts renewed, have had their feelings hurt about an inappropriate remark, or even from candidates who have not been hired.

Most professors, certainly those who have done any reading on the subject, know that should they arouse the ire of a student, a colleague, or a prospective colleague, they can not depend upon their university to stand up and back them. History has clearly demonstrated that most university administrators urge compromise and usually capitulation. The dean or vice president will advise the professor to allow the student to take the exam over or rewrite the paper, apologize to his or her colleague, and admit guilt, or at least ignorance about "inappropriate" behavior. More than likely the university will insist that the professor enroll in a "sensitivity course" or some comparable type of training.

Rarely during previous periods of zealotry have universities confronted accusers and demanded solid evidence, or have they undertaken a full investigation of what happened, choosing instead to accept the accusers' accounts as factual. Unfortunately, history has also shown that professors cannot count on their colleagues to come forward and report behavior that they witnessed or conversations that they overheard that would clear the professor of the accusations or the charges. It is apparently easier to close one's door and finish grading exams, read students' papers, or finish analyzing the data and writing up the report. "Getting involved" can only hurt one's career and not really help one's colleague. These seem to be the sentiments that have guided most professors' behavior during times of trouble.

Given this scenario, what can and should professors do who care about ideas, students, scholarship, research, and the type of institution a university should be? The following are some suggestions.

Perhaps a bright spot that has emerged from this current period of zealotry is that professors have, or will become wary of using their classrooms as “soap boxes” for their own political views or to advocate their favorite political causes. They will be less likely to use class time to vent their opinions, prejudices and biases on any issue currently on their minds. They will be more likely to organize their lectures on the basis of scientific studies, research findings, and empirical data. They will be more sensitive about stating opposing positions accurately. They will clarify when they are expressing an opinion and emphasize that it is an opinion about which students may, and indeed are invited to differ, and when they are reporting research findings that meet scientific standards.

These same professors will spend more time emphasizing the importance of research. They will work harder at teaching their students to recognize the difference between real and bogus data, real data having been obtained by adhering to the rules of scientific method.

Perhaps more importantly they will not use their classrooms to hold therapy sessions or friendship hours. They will be more sensitive about maintaining their role as “professor” and “teacher” vis-a-vis students, and they will not confuse those roles with that of a therapist, surrogate parent, or friend. In more formal terms, professors should maintain a *gessellschaft*, not a *gemeinschaft* relationship with students. If a student comes to a professor for “emotional” help (he or she needs to talk about a personal problem), the professor should kindly, warmly, but firmly suggest the university counselling center or another “professional setting.” Being impersonal, or behaving with some formality does not mean behaving in a cold and negative manner. But it shows that one recognizes appropriate roles.

There are degrees to formality and impersonality. For example, a professor’s relationship with a graduate student who is also a research assistant with an established, good track record; or with a student who is doing a dissertation under a professor’s supervision; in those contexts a more *gemeinschaft* type of relationship is appropriate. It is important to remember that a student is not a son or daughter, or even a close friend.

As for colleagues, one might be offended at hiring or promoting persons on the basis of race, ethnicity, or gender; it should be clear and explicit that criteria for making such

decisions are based on the candidate's record of teaching, scholarship, and publications rather than on their political or ideological compatibility. Professors should study what the candidate or colleague has written, go over teaching evaluations, read letters of recommendations and then make explicit how they reached their decision.

Most of the time, loyalty and being willing to stand up for a colleague who is being harassed or threatened, is a virtue and one that should be encouraged. Also, it is useful to remember that becoming a target of zealotry could happen to anyone. History has shown that when students sense their professors are fearful or behaving ambiguously, the students' demands and sense of power increase.

At the very beginning, as soon as there is a glimmer of "trouble" from a student, colleague, or dean, professors should keep accurate and comprehensive written records of every encounter and every conversation that they have. Friends and supporters should be kept aware of what is going on at every stage. If work is attacked because it is politically incorrect, professors should respond to the attacks by referring to empirical research and data as much as possible. Getting involved in ad homonym attacks only makes matters worse. One should hope that evidence, and the manner in which it is presented, will gain the support of colleagues, and perhaps even of persons in the larger community who are not directly involved, but who recognize and want to support a person of integrity and decency.

Finally, remember and have faith that this wave of zealotry will pass. In the meantime, professors should behave, and urge their colleagues and students to behave, in such a manner that when they look back over this period, they will be able to do so with a sense of pride and recognition that we did not "sell out," we did not "fall apart," we acted on our principles, and we behaved with dignity.