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Academic Freedom: The Right-Wing Campaign Against Women's Studies Turns A Treasured Ideal On Its Head

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Academic Freedom

The right-wing campaign against women's studies turns a treasured ideal on its head

BY MARTHÀ MCCAUGHEY

WITHIN A MONTH OF THE horrifying mass murder at Virginia Tech last spring, Phyllis Schlafly was busy on her Eagle Forum blog, blaming left-wing professors.

"Why was [shooter Seung-Hui Cho] consumed with hate, resentment and bitterness?" Schlafly asked. She then pointed to a course taught by Bernice Hausman, a feminist professor in English and former director of women's studies, whose class syllabus Schlafly found online: "One of the assignments...[was] to 'choose one day in which they dress and comport themselves in a manner either more masculine or more feminine than they would normally.'"

"It sounds like just the thing," Schlafly declared, "to confuse an already mixed-up kid."

Professor Hausman never taught Cho, however. Her theory course was for graduate students. But why let facts get in the way of a good diatribe? Schlafly concluded by asking "why taxpayers are paying professors at Virginia Tech to teach worthless and psychologically destructive courses."

Schlafly's vicious attack is just one of many far-right shots fired over the bow of academe. Targeting the "leftist university" as part of a broader political and cultural project to restore America's "traditional" values, ultràconservative activists condemn women's studies, ethnic studies, LGBT studies and other scholarship

that questions dominant Western culture. Criticisms of this scholarship as "ideological" are not new. Nor are they entirely rational. But they are now particularly well organized.

Women's studies programs, and even individual feminist scholars, have always had to cope with professors, students, alumni and others engaged in anti-feminist intellectual harassment. On my campus, an alum sends a yearly letter to the dean and other high-ups declaring his horror at our annual Queer Film Series, each time closing his missive, "Heterosexually yours."

But women's studies is also under fire today by well-funded watch groups, which hold conferences, host blogs and disseminate slick "research" that many scholars consider shoddy. They call on their members to join in letter-writing campaigns, litigation procedures and legislation designed to undermine the academic programs they find threatening.

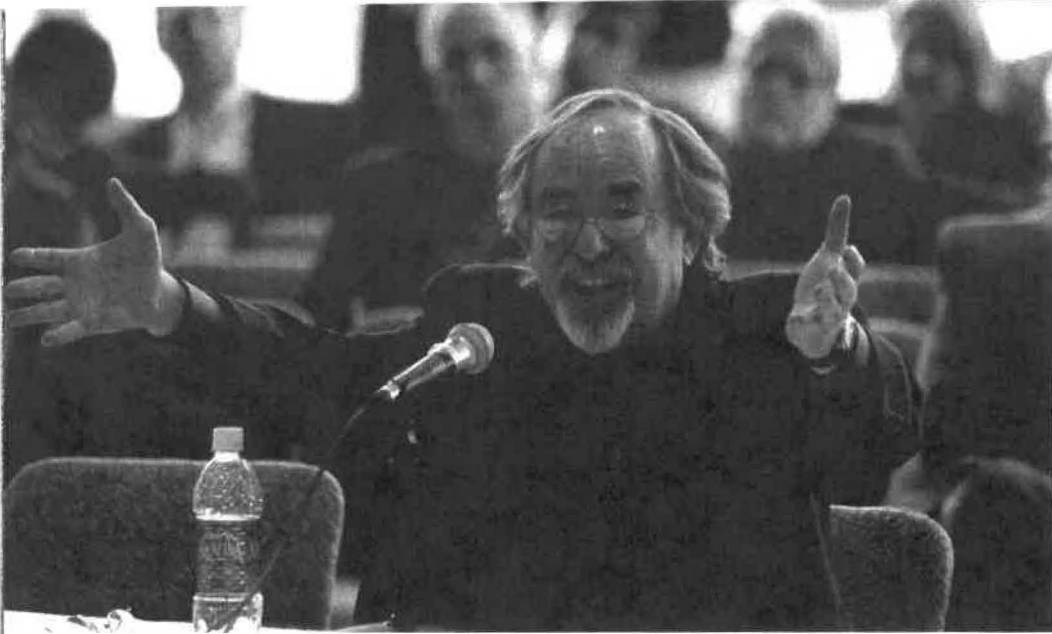
David Horowitz is one of the best-known and well-connected of these organizers. The David Horowitz Freedom Center has sponsored the Academic Bill of Rights legislation in 20 states over the past five years, dangerously offering to "protect" higher education by putting curricular "balance" in the control of government officials rather than the faculty whose scholarly expertise currently determines what gets taught. Horowitz sees women's studies as a powerful example of imbalanced indoctrination masquerading as scholarship.

For example, in a 2007 article in the *Weekly Standard*, Horowitz argued that the findings about sex differences in evolutionary psychology and neuroscience have settled the age-old nature-versus-nurture debate, thus discrediting women's studies scholars—whose work suggests that biological sex differences don't explain everything. He also alerted readers that the National Women's Studies Association "freely acknowledges" its roots in the women's movement.

Well, duh. It was the women's movement that pointed out how sexism was perpetuated, in part, by sexist knowledge assumed to be objective truth. Over the past 30 years, scholarly research in women's studies has then helped to understand, critique and correct the sexist bias in a wide variety of fields, from biology to religion.

That's a *good* thing, the advancement of knowledge. But the right-wing ~~Independent Women's~~ Forum believes that the bias lies with women's studies. In 2002, IWF released so-called research exposing women's studies for its putatively anti-male and anti-marriage bias. Written by senior fellow Christine Stolba, it was cheekily titled "Lying in a Room of One's Own." In contrast to Horowitz, IWF objected to women's studies because of the presumption that women have already achieved equality.

Stolba and Horowitz both think that freedom of speech and sanctity of



Conservative activist David Horowitz (left) campaigns against women's studies; Phyllis Schlafly (right) called a women's studies course "worthless" and "psychologically destructive."

conscience are under threat on campuses today, especially in women's studies programs. The far right insists that the many and varied professors in women's studies seek to indoctrinate rather than educate as if we all share one academic theory, or use the classroom inappropriately to campaign for Hillary Clinton. And so it's suddenly not the faculty but the students who need academic freedom, as protection from being browbeaten or brainwashed by a biased women's studies professor. We must either close up shop or offer "balance" in our teaching. Here we have the modus operandi of Horowitz and others attacking women's studies: They turn the notion of academic freedom on its head.

Does my course lack "intellectual diversity" because it does not give equal time to the viewpoint of the Eagle Forum? No, because the Eagle Forum is not a body of *scholarship*. By analogy, Judaic studies is not going to require that students read Holocaust denial theories as alternative points of view, and most evolutionary biologists don't waste valuable course time teaching theories of intelligent design. Should I be teaching the research in neuroscience that Horowitz finds so compelling? No, because I'm trained in sociology, not neuroscience. Then again, a course on sex differences taught by a neuroscientist could carry women's studies credit.

Advocating "neutrality" and "balance" in the classroom looks more like a pretext for snuffing out women's studies. These groups do not target religious studies programs that teach more courses on Christianity than on other religious traditions. They do not attack petroleum-engineering programs and energy technology courses for not giving enough lessons on biodiesel, wind or solar power.

Just in case the public isn't swayed by the ideological-bias argument, in 2005 the conservative Pope Center for Higher Education Policy issued a report declaring that women's studies programs suck up taxpayer dollars only to graduate very few majors. The report—also appropriating Virginia Woolf with its title "An Empty Room of One's Own"—was created after bombarding several North Carolina women's studies programs with Freedom of Information Act requests, ascertaining budget reports, course syllabi and textbook choices, and then improperly melding that with information from the Internet.

While it's true that relatively few college students today *major* in women's studies (just as relatively few major in philosophy or physics), women's studies courses are quite *popular*. On my campus, only one or two students graduate each year with a women's studies major, but annual enrollment totals around 900 in

women's studies courses—which are usually offered and funded by other academic departments. When it comes to use of university resources, women's studies is a cheap date.

College graduates who gained something from women's studies might wish to show support for the field by writing letters to their alma mater. But the most powerful and convincing way to defend women's studies against right-wing attacks is to defend academic freedom (and respect the rights of faculty who hold opposing views). No alumnus, whether pro- or anti-feminist, should be able to determine a college curriculum. No wealthy donor, foundation or other organization should be able to bribe university officials into changing curriculum.

The faculty governs the curriculum because such academic freedom ensures that scholarship benefits society. At this juncture, then, we would do well to insist that women's studies professors deserve a classroom of their own. ■

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