



**POLICY  
MATTERS**

## Reviving the Culture Wars on Campus

### Context

As primary contributors to the “marketplace of ideas,” colleges and universities serve as natural foci for contention between the worldviews of the left and right. Campus debate has become especially heated in recent years, fueled by two bitterly fought presidential campaigns: divisions over the war in Iraq and the prominence of moral issues such as reproductive rights and same-sex marriage. Amid the debate, conservative groups such as the Students for Academic Freedom (SAF) are crying foul, arguing that pervasive liberalism in academe creates a hostile environment for the expression of their views and promotes indoctrination and discrimination, rather than education. Their proposed remedy for what they believe to be systemic—and pernicious—imbalance centers around the legislation of an Academic Bill of Rights.

In its basic form, the Academic Bill of Rights contains a handful of mandates, including: non-discrimination with respect to viewpoint in the hiring, advancement, and dismissal of faculty; non-discrimination with respect to viewpoint against students in the assessment of their academic work; and acknowledgement of accepted and dissenting theories in the humanities and social sciences.

Additionally, the bill cites the American Association of University Professors’ (AAUP) 1915 *General Report of the Committee on Academic Freedom and Tenure* and its 1967 *Joint Statement on Rights and Freedoms of Students* in its rationale. The measure made its legislative debut in 2004, with limited success. In 2005 it is attracting more attention and debate.

Proponents describe the Academic Bill of Rights as a necessary safeguard for minority viewpoints in the classroom and throughout the campus, while critics blast it as a Trojan Horse for a right-wing agenda. While viewpoint bias and harassment claims should alert state college and university leaders to potential flaws in culture and policy, the proposed redress for those claims may be even more flawed.

### Observations

**The Academic Bill of Rights has quickly ignited and spread a grassroots movement.** Founded in 2003, SAF now has chapters on 150 campuses nationwide, a significant share of them at state colleges and universities. The Academic Bill of Rights has been introduced in 13 state legislatures and the U.S. Congress



## The credibility of the claims cited to support adoption of the Academic Bill of Rights has come under scrutiny.

A prime example of this emerges in the case of the University of Northern Colorado student failed for refusing to write an essay on “Why George Bush Is a War Criminal,” frequently cited by SAF leader Horowitz in media interviews and testimony before state legislatures. Investigation of the case, however, revealed that: a) the student failed the exam in dispute because she did not comply with requirements on answer length, not because of the content of her answer; b) the exam question in dispute was more nuanced than represented, and was not required for completion of the exam; and c) the course instructor was a registered Republican who discussed several schools of thought related to war crimes, including one that labeled George Washington a war criminal. Nevertheless, Horowitz continues to relate the account without revision indicating that Academic Bill of Rights proponents may be more interested in scoring political points than in factual accuracy.

## Conclusion

As the rhetoric over academic freedom and free speech on campuses escalates, policymakers and higher education leaders must remain focused on ensuring that colleges and universities are places of free and fair exchange, safe *for* important but controversial debates. The Academic Bill of Rights, as currently articulated and promoted, would leave institutions even more divided and would keep students and faculty safe *from* controversial but important debates.

## Resources

**American Association of University Professors (AAUP).** One of the leading groups representing faculty in the United States, AAUP presents an opposing viewpoint on the Academic Bill of Rights.

[aaup.org/Issues/ABOR/Political%20intrusion1.htm](http://aaup.org/Issues/ABOR/Political%20intrusion1.htm)

**American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC).** An organization representing conservative state lawmakers, ALEC has developed model bills/resolutions for the Academic Bill of Rights.

[alec.org](http://alec.org)

**Center for the Study of Popular Culture (CSPC).** Headed by Students for Academic Freedom founder David Horowitz, the Center “is dedicated to defending the cultural foundations of a free society, a task made even more pressing by the attack on America of September 11<sup>th</sup>, the Iraq conflict and the internal opponents of freedom this attack has revealed.” The Center has an online journal, *FrontPage Magazine*, featuring stories regarding the Academic Bill of Rights.

[frontpagemag.org](http://frontpagemag.org)

**Students for Academic Freedom (SAF).** Comprised of 150 campus chapters and a national office, SAF is dedicated to documenting alleged instances of viewpoint bias against students and the adoption of corrective measures against such bias (i.e. Academic Bill of Rights). SAF’s website includes a listing of campus chapters and the original text of the Academic Bill of Rights.

[studentsforacademicfreedom.org](http://studentsforacademicfreedom.org)