It's Time to Move the Academic Freedom Debate Along
By John C. Cavanaugh
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Freedom of expression is arguably the most important right we enjoy. On that point, I believe Kermit Hall, David Horowitz, and I would wholeheartedly agree. I also applaud their conviction that colleges and universities are places that must do everything they can to open students' and the public's minds to all sides of issues. Indeed, colleges and universities globally have historically been the birthplace or catalysts of intellectual movements such as the belief that the world is not flat (Thomas Friedman notwithstanding), democracy is worth establishing and defending, and wars are sometimes morally indefensible.

I firmly believe that discussions about academic freedom are essential to reminding us what really matters in intellectual pursuits. As Hall so effectively stated in his article, we in academia must be on our guard against bias from any direction. I am gratified that Horowitz believes that the ACE statement and others like it, which firmly reiterate the core principles of academic freedom and the need to avoid bias, are sufficient and make legislative action unnecessary. That has been my position in discussions regarding academic freedom and the academic bill of rights in Florida, and the basis for the reasoning that legislation was unnecessary to achieve our aims.

So, my primary problem with Horowitz's argument is not whether academic freedom should be supported and protected in all of its facets. Rather, it is the manner in which he frames the argument in terms of "professionalism." On the one hand, it is a brilliant deflection of the issue. What "fair-minded reader" (to use his phrase) of his article would disagree with the premise that faculty should act with professionally in the classroom? But to then imply that any expression of personal opinion by an instructor in the classroom on a "controversial matter" that cannot be firmly grounded in the faculty member's "field of expertise" (however that might be done) invariably constitutes unprofessional behavior and therefore has no place in the classroom is wrong. (I wonder if Horowitz would have applied this logic and chastised George Wythe had he, in his law classes, expressed an opinion to Thomas Jefferson about the oppressive nature of the policies of the British king. Would Horowitz have considered Wythe's opinion to be outside his "field of expertise"?) In my view, it is the context in which the topic is introduced and the intent of the comment that matter, not the mere fact that the topic is introduced. Only after a careful review of these aspects should a determination of "professionalism" be made.

A second problem is that his argument regarding "intellectual diversity," emphasizing politically controversial statements, is limited in scope. Intellectual diversity is much broader. For example, Horowitz conspicuously avoids the fact that at certain colleges and universities across the country, some topics and entire disciplines are omitted from the curriculum, thereby denying students the "intellectual diversity" about which he so passionately (and correctly) writes. Where is the call for the "leverage of legislation" when colleges or universities refuse to teach evolution, or psychology, or another topic or discipline? Where is the call for the "leverage of legislation" when boards require faculty to sign statements that restrict what can be taught and discussed?
That having been said, Horowitz has done higher education a great service by reinforcing our collective commitment to opening people's minds to the full gamut of ideas. He has spurred the dusting off of grievance policies, and created a renewed vigor for enforcing them. Intellectual diversity is a concept fundamental to higher education. But the general lack of evidence regarding bias he and others allege occurs in grading or other matters, as cited in an official study by Florida's Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability,2 argues that it is time to move this conversation along.

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