



AAUP JOURNAL OF ACADEMIC FREEDOM

[Back to Volume One Contents](#)

Institutionalized Attacks on Academic Freedom: The Impact of Mandates by State Departments of Education and National Accreditation Agencies on Academic Freedom

By John M. Elmore

Governments have ever been careful to hold a high hand over the education of the people. They know, better than anyone else, that their power is based almost entirely on the school. Hence they monopolize it more and more.

- Francisco Ferrer (1890)

Academic freedom in education has always been and continues to be a critical and irreplaceable component in fostering a participatory democracy and a critically engaged citizenry. In fact, when comparing the education systems of democratic and totalitarian societies throughout history, nothing contrasts more consistently than attitudes and practices toward intellectual freedom and control over what is taught in schools. Anton Makarenko (1955) wrote, "It was clear to me that details of human personality and behavior could be made from dies, simply

stamped out en masse" (p.165). It's safe to say that Makarenko was a true believer in standardized education.

Academic freedom and teacher autonomy were clearly viewed as counterproductive to the official truth in classrooms in Stalinist Italy. Within the authoritarian state, the teacher serves as its instrument, merely carrying out the will of those in power by transmitting a predefined version of truth, or what Amy Gutmann (1987) would call a version of the "good life." Standardized education and stringent control over content are hallmarks of the authoritarian state and thus must be fervently rejected within democratic institutions.

These divergent perspectives on the purposes and practices of education weren't missed by early American proponents of democracy and individual liberty. Thomas Jefferson (1820) said, "I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesom discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education. This is the true corrective of abuses of constitutional power." There can be little doubt that one reason the founding fathers left the education of the people to state and local government was to encourage diversity of thought, differing opinions being the lifeblood of democracy. Higher education has historically carried the mantle of this cause; much of that effort has rested on the fundamental principle of academic freedom in our nation's classrooms and the institutional integrity of our colleges and universities.

The cause of academic freedom in our democracy has not gone without challenge. Whether it was the barrage of anti-communist hysteria during the McCarthy period or the onslaught of propaganda justifying the Vietnam War, academics have been forced regularly to defend intellectual freedom in their university classrooms and laboratories. More recently, the horrific events of 9/11 re-energized the war drums of jingoism; professors who dared to encourage their students to question the commonsense version of "Americanism" being peddled by talk radio were demonized and even dismissed. With pitchfork and fire in hand, alarmists such as David

Horowitz declared that the vast majority of the academy is “violently, fervently committed to their unholy war to tear down American democracy and replace it with their version—an Americanized version— of communism” (publiceye.org, 2005). It is interesting to me that such efforts to stifle academic freedom, using fear and coercive threats, seem always to come in the name of maintaining “our” way of life and the protection of “our” freedoms—the very freedoms being censored, restricted, and denied.

In the past, individuals like Horowitz and those of his ilk have been relatively easy to identify; brave academics, often with the support of organizations such as the American Association of University Professors, have stood to meet their attacks. However, for the better part of 30 years, and at a quickening pace over the past decade, this ideal has been under attack in a different way. State legislatures, governing boards, and departments of education, typically in cooperation with powerful accreditation agencies, have begun to dilute academic freedom, not necessarily in the name of political correctness but in the name of efficiency. They have placed an ever-increasing set of demands on programs, dictating content, required experiences, and “measurable” outcomes that simply leave no time nor space for academic freedom. In this circumstance, the enemy becomes less visible, the smoking gun less easily located. In fact, as my own administration often utters in denying any blood on its own hands, “What can we do? This is what’s required to keep our doors open.”

While it is true that these institutionalized attacks run through the history of higher education in the United States, never have they been as intrusive and coercive as now. Professors who once had only to defend their academic freedom by standing their ground against a single authoritarian administrator are now painted as idealistic agitators whose refusal to play by the rules threatens the continued existence of their programs, departments, or colleges. Robeeta Ahlquist (2003) described this common scenario: “Teacher educators are being told by department chairs and deans that if the college doesn’t pass the Commission for Teacher Credentialing...they will have no program, teachers will not be able to become credentialed, we

won't be able to address the pressing need for new teachers, and furthermore, if we don't conform and jump through the state's hoops, we'll all be out of jobs" (p.3). The blatant, manipulative, and coercive threats that Ahlquist describes have become a popular assault on faculty independence and professionalism, which undermines shared governance and short-circuits our ability to advance the democratic principles of free thought and self-determination.

While such despotism certainly has an impact on everyone within the academy, I believe that there is no discipline that has suffered more the loss of academic freedom than teacher preparation. I contend that this is a discipline where academic freedom is crucial, both in terms of the content we teach and the model of democratic teaching we display for our students, our nation's future teachers. As Jack Nelson (2003) so aptly questioned, "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" (p.71).

For the past quarter-century, many progressive educators have pinned much of their hope for grassroots school reform on teacher education programs that are committed to fostering the development of teacher-intellectuals; these professionals will carry forward an agenda of social justice via liberatory education in their respective classrooms (Giroux, 1988; McLaren, 2006; Apple, 1993; Zeichner, 2006). Certainly a fundamental inspiration for this cause can be found in the work of the late Paulo Freire (1973), who made clear the critical role that teachers play in true liberatory education. Freire pointed out that we can educate and liberate or we can indoctrinate and oppress; however, true education must always lead to liberation. Greatly influenced by Freire's work, Henry Giroux (2003) has focused much of his writing on the connection between the enlightened teacher-intellectual, or the "transformative intellectual," and the institutional programs that educate such "agents of hope." Following Giroux's breadcrumbs, the multifaceted circumstances that surround teacher preparation programs and the "brand" of teacher they generate raise concerns about true democratic education in the

United States. In short, as American education continues to vaunt such neo-liberal terms as “standardization,” “productivity,” “accountability,” and the popular—yet undefined—“excellence,” *teacher education* programs have generally capitulated to the pressures of power and transformed themselves into *teacher training* programs. To be clear, this is not a mere matter of semantics; *to train* is very different than *to educate*. Not only do such efforts change the nature of teacher preparation, they fundamentally change the outcomes, fostering the development of teachers who willingly embrace their submissive roles as mere voiceboxes for self-defined philosopher kings, such as state boards of education, and other imperialistic agendas like those set forth in No Child Left Behind.

Undoubtedly, teacher education programs are critical sites of struggle, educating future teachers and preparing them to carry democratic perspectives, values, and missions into the classrooms of our nation’s schools. Academics within teacher preparation, historically, have embraced this role of “democratic gatekeeper” and, heeding the proclamations of individuals like John Dewey (1913), saw their work as a critical line of defense for democracy. Doubtless, the thought of ceding such critical responsibilities to centralized powers and authoritative accreditation agencies would have been heresy to academics of the past, yet the evidence of this submission is overwhelming. The complete resignation on the part of teacher preparation programs across the country to imperialistic entities such as the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) is part of that evidence.

Sadly, it is this general capitulation of teacher preparation programs that has emboldened these attacks on academic freedom. Academics across this country have become silent and obedient partners in this despotic agenda and their collective resignation is palpable on university campuses across the country. Curricula have been “re-aligned” according to pressures from corporations and authoritarian agencies, and safeguards of tenure and intellectual freedom have been slowly and systematically relinquished, bartered away in exchange for salary increases and healthcare premiums. Democratic pedagogy has been driven

from classrooms to accommodate mandated quantitative assessments; intellectual freedom has been replaced with authoritative matrices and “professor-proof” rubrics. Entire courses have been deleted to accommodate a value system that faculty had no part in defining; our students now are defined as “customers,” our classrooms are “delivery mechanisms,” and the quality of our work is judged in terms of “productivity” and “efficiency.”

In the popular movie “V for Vendetta,” the revolutionary V, referring to the oppressive political atmosphere in the film’s futuristic England, proclaims to the nation, “If you want to know whose fault it is, you need only look in a mirror.” This, I believe, is a fitting admonition to faculty on college and university campuses across the United States who look with disdain on the anti-intellectual and authoritarian culture in which they now reside. Dewey (1913) stated, “Since freedom of mind and freedom of expression are the root of all freedom, to deny freedom in education is a crime against democracy.” If Dewey were alive today, he would not be merely disappointed, but angry; and rightfully so. We have allowed this transformation to take place; we have allowed ourselves, our students, and our work to be co-opted by the powerful and the authoritarian. The final wall of defense within our democracy, as Dewey described it, has been and continues to be under siege and our response has been to collectively shove our heads into the sand.

Is it too late? Is there hope? The idealist within me says yes, but the realist believes that such a recovery will require that faculty organize and push back against the pervasive and corrosive attacks on academic freedom. We must revisit the lofty mission statements of our respective institutions that consistently refer to venerable ideals of democracy, citizenship, and social justice, and find ways to demand that our institutions live up to those principles. We each must find ways to turn our classrooms into laboratories of critical consciousness, to encourage the development of critical agency, to promote engagement by activist citizens and teachers, and to nourish a new generation of transformative intellectuals for a participatory democracy. While this is critical for every member of the academy, it is even more important in teacher education

programs; we have an opportunity to change the landscape of American education through the transformative intellectuals we prepare to educate our students, the future of our nation and our world.

References

- Ahlquist, Robeeta (2003). "Challenges to academic freedom: California teacher educators mobilize to resist state-mandated control over curriculum," *Teacher Education Quarterly*. Winter Ed.
- Apple, M.W. (1993). *Official knowledge: Democratic education in a conservative age*. New York: Routledge.
- Chomsky, N. (2000) *Chomsky on MisEducation* (edited and introduced by Donaldo Macedo). New York: Rowan and Littlefield.
- Dewey, J. (1913/1997). *Democracy and Education*. Free Press.
- Ferrer, Francisco.
- Freire, P. (1973). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Continuum Publishers.
- Giroux, H. (1988) *Teachers as Intellectuals: Toward a Critical Pedagogy of Learning*. Bergin and Garvey Publishers.
- Giroux, H. (2003). *The Abandoned Generation: Democracy Beyond the Culture of Fear*. Palgrave Publishers.
- Gutmann, Amy (1987). *Democratic Education*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Jefferson, Thomas (1820). Letter to Wiliam C. Jarvis, 28 September. Monticello Research Department, September 1989.
- Kohn, A. (2000). *The Case Against Standardized Testing: Raising the Scores, Ruining the Schools*. Heinemann Publishing.
- Makarenko, Anton (1937). *A Book for Parents*.
- McLaren, P. (2006) *Life in Schools: An Introduction to Critical Pedagogy in the Foundations of Education* (5th Edition). Allyn & Bacon Publishers.
- Nelson, Jack (2003). "Academic Freedom, Institutional Integrity, and Teacher Education," *Teacher Education Quarterly*. Winter Ed.
- Postman, N. (1995). *The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School*. Knopf Publishers.
- Publiceye.org, (2005).
- Zeichner, K.M. (2006). "Reflections of a university-based teacher educator on the future of college and university-based teacher education," *Journal of Teacher Education*, 57(3), 326-340.