

Acquiring Administrative Support for Academic Freedom

George W. Wolfe

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Can university faculty voice well-reasoned ideas without being attacked? My answer to this question is, of course not! Both within and outside the university, professors have often become political targets, especially during times of war. On one of his infamous White House audiotapes, Richard Nixon includes university professors on his list of political enemies.^[1] This, however, is the calling of the academic profession: to question the status quo and probe deeply the implications of salient issues as we live what Robert M. Hutchins called the "life of the mind." As I quipped to a reporter on station WHTR in Indianapolis during a television news interview, "Not since Socrates has so much attention been paid to professors who challenge their students to think critically and question authority."

If professors are doing their job, they will likely be subject to some verbal abuse,

particularly when their teaching, research, and creative endeavors rub shoulders with topics that are socially or politically controversial. These attacks may come from people who are unfamiliar with the academic culture, but more frequently they are launched by well-educated, politically motivated individuals who strive to appeal to people who hold extremist views. Disrespectful interrogation, however, should not occur within the university. Faculty and administrators must be supportive of each other and set an example for adhering to the civil values of the academic culture, where reasoned debate should be welcome.

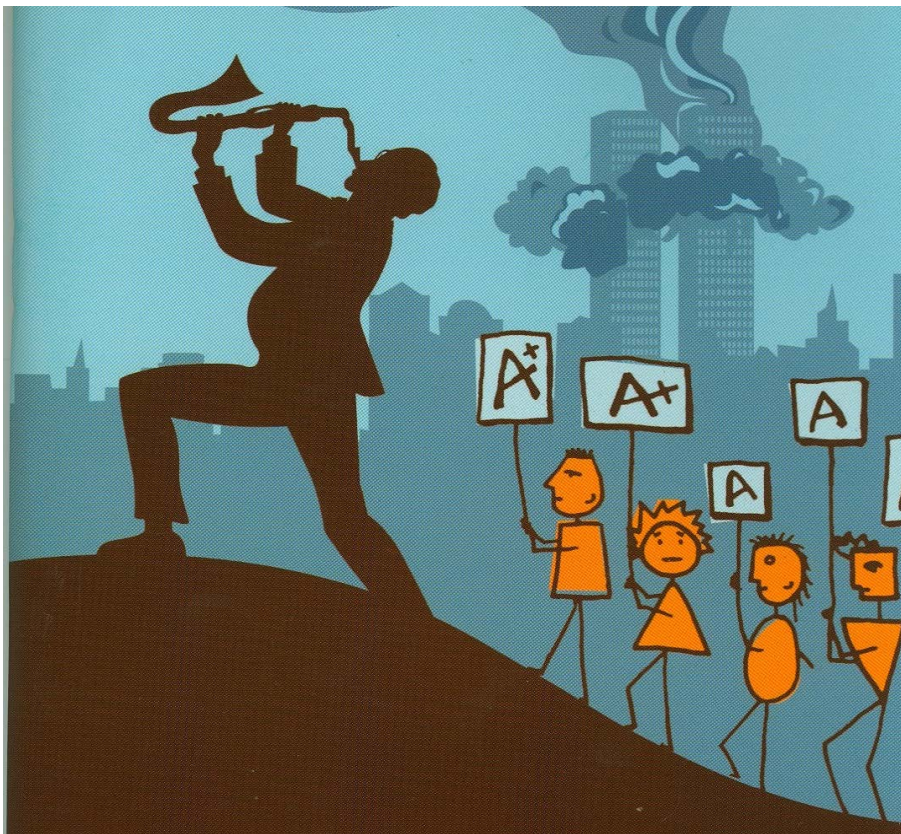
Twice in my career as a university professor I have had my academic freedom challenged. Both times, administrators at Ball State University have come to my defense. How I was able to secure their support should be of interest to both university faculty and administrators. Before explaining, allow me to summarize the circumstances that provoked the complaints of colleagues and right-wing political commentators. The following subtitled section is taken from the introduction to my recently published book, *The Spiritual Power of Nonviolence: Interfaith Understanding for a Future without War*.^[2]

Challenging the Status Quo

In the fall of 2004, the U.S.-led war in Iraq was in its second year. National right-wing political commentator David Horowitz began criticizing collegiate peace studies programs throughout the country, claiming they were indoctrinating students with a liberal anti-American political agenda. As director of the Center for Peace and Conflict Studies at Ball State University, I became one of his prime targets, along with peace studies faculty teaching in Indiana at Earlham College and Purdue University. Mr. Horowitz used his Internet publication Frontpage Magazine, as well as conservative radio talk shows and the C-Span cable television network, to launch his nationwide campaign. Local newspapers and the Associated Press covered the controversy, and articles were run in media outlets throughout the country, including the CNN website and in USA Today. There is a bit of irony in the fact that the CNN and USA Today articles appeared during the Christmas season when Christians celebrate the birthday of the Prince of Peace.

The barrage of publicity made several false and misleading statements about the peace studies program at Ball State. It even went so far as to accuse the Ball State Peace Center, the Muslim Student Association, and the student organization Peaceworkers of being anti-American and supporting terrorism. Journalist Thomas Ryan, in his Frontpage Magazine

article “Recruiting for Terror at Ball State,” wrote that peace studies programs were “indoctrinating students and recruiting them to agendas that are anti-American, anti-military and friendly to the terrorist enemies intent on destroying us.”^[3] The Horowitz propaganda machine published a cartoon depicting me playing the saxophone while the World Trade Center burned in the background (see figure 1). There was also an attempt by a Republican state senator to introduce a so-called “Academic Bill of Rights” into the Indiana House of Representatives, legislation which could have allowed politicians to oversee university course offerings and course content.



Front Page Magazine, 8 Nov. 2004, used by permission.

The false and exaggerated accusations, however, backfired on Mr. Horowitz. Two students in my class wrote a letter refuting the accusations made against me. After I submitted documentation proving the accusations were not true, Ball State University President Jo Ann Gora published a guest editorial supporting my teaching and validating the academic discipline of peace studies.^[4] Soon thereafter, the *Fort Wayne Journal Gazette* and *The Star Press* of Muncie published editorials condemning Mr. Horowitz and calling for the Indiana

State legislature to withdraw the Academic Bill of Rights.^[5]

A year later, Mr. Horowitz included me in his book *The Professors: The 101 Most Dangerous Academics in America*. Much of the chapter profiling me restated the false accusations made a year earlier despite evidence to the contrary submitted to Mr.

Horowitz's organization by Ball State University Provost Beverly Pitts.^[6] Dr. James Pyle, who was then Assistant Vice President of Academic Research at Ball State University, continued offering administrative support when he assumed supervision over the peace center after Provost Pitts accepted the position of president at the University of Indianapolis.

Former Ball State University student David Swindle, who now works as an editor and writer for David Horowitz, investigated the political attack on the Ball State Peace Studies program for his senior thesis. When interviewed for an article published on *Frontpage Magazine*, Mr. Swindle states:

After months of research and 90 pages of argumentation I had come to the conclusion that George [Wolfe] had been slandered—a position I still hold passionately. None of the student's charges stood up to the facts.^[7]

The hate mail I received during the wave of distorted publicity from 2004 to 2007 revealed that there is a great need for professors to explain the discipline of peace studies to religious leaders, educators, politicians and the general public. My inclusion in Mr. Horowitz's book provided me with numerous opportunities to do just that as I began giving peace studies presentations nationally and internationally. These included lectures at Limburg Catholic University in Hasselt, Belgium, and peace education workshops to school administrators on the Caribbean island of Saint Lucia by invitation of the Ministry of Education. Such invitations are examples of what theologian Walter Wink calls the "enemy's gift," which are the favorable opportunities a conflict provides if a person is able to subdue anger and view the dispute in a positive framework.^[8]

Academic Freedom in the Bible Belt

This was not, however, the first time my academic freedom has been challenged. In 1991, I received a grant from the Eli Lilly Endowment, Inc. to study Hindustani music in India. When I returned from this sabbatical, I collaborated with Ball State University composer

Jody Nagel. Together we developed a composition that served as a musical backdrop for the narration of highly similar verses found in Hindu and Christian scriptures. The underlying message of this creative work was clear: Hinduism and Christianity were related and some of the wisdom central to Christianity may have come from Hindu sources.

I subsequently performed this composition over thirty times and featured it on a compact disk entitled “Lifting the Veil,” which is also the title of the Nagel composition. The work was premiered at the San Francisco Theological Seminary, a mainline Presbyterian institution, where it was received with great interest. Its reception at a recital at Ball State University, however, was much more restrained. Muncie, Indiana, lies at the northern edge of the mid-western Bible belt. Some faculty and students saw my campus premiere as controversial.

A few months later, the director of the Ball State School of Music told me a member of the music faculty had complained to him about my decision to perform this composition, suggesting that the work and the program notes I had prepared were an affront to Christianity. The School of Music director, Dr. Greg Steinke, himself a successful composer, assertively defended my artistic collaboration with the composer and my subsequent campus performance.

Creating the Advantage

As indicated by these two experiences, I have never felt that my academic freedom has been compromised during my twenty-eight years of teaching at Ball State University. How is it that I was able to secure the support of administrators?

First, I made it a point to work with administrators as a team player. Never did I assume an adversarial posture. When contacted by Ball State provost Beverly Pitts shortly after the Horowitz attack, she asked me how she should respond to the accusations that had been made. Dr. Pitts let me know from the beginning that she wanted to take on this fight, that this was her job as provost. She only needed from me material to address the issues in the media, and more importantly, to the Ball State board of trustees and politicians at the Indiana State House. In my case, this consisted of documentation proving my argument that the accusations being made against me were either false or misleading exaggerations. She was as determined to stop the Academic Bill of Rights in its tracks at the legislative level as

I was. I wisely decided to stay out of the way and let her do her job.

Second, I placed Ball State administrators in a position where it was to their advantage to support me. Defending academic freedom costs nothing, and I had plenty of documentation to both defend my course on the history and philosophy of nonviolence and to prove I was being slandered. I also made sure my interaction with administrators was always one of civil dialogue rather than of adversarial debate.

It must be noted that Provost Pitts had a stake in winning this fight. She had appointed me to the position of director at the Center for Peace and Conflict Studies. It did seem odd to the uninformed observer that a saxophone professor had become the center director under her watch. At the time, few people besides the Provost knew that, while my masters degree is in music performance, my doctorate is in higher education administration. I also had served on the advisory board for the peace center for ten years prior to my appointment as director and was therefore intimately aware of the mission, goals, and inner workings of the Ball State peace studies program. Peace studies, however, is particularly vulnerable to criticism that invokes the issue of teaching credentials. It is by nature an interdisciplinary or interdepartmental program, and the focus of peace studies curricula can vary greatly depending on a program's emphasis at a particular university. Mr. Horowitz attempted to equate peace studies with political science or international affairs. At Ball State, however, our emphasis historically has been on mediation, domestic violence, social work, and the role of activism in making injustice visible. In this regard, my particular contribution was in how the arts have played a dynamic role in exposing injustice in everything from racial discrimination to labor exploitation to the overreaching power of government.

Despite the provost's desire to handle the media attention, I nevertheless was free to engage the media. This I did under the council of the Ball State Office of University Communications. After interviews with three instate newspaper reporters, an Associated Press reporter, and news interviews aired on two Indianapolis television stations, the provost and president trusted my ability to interact with reporters. I did, however, decline an opportunity to be interviewed on MSNBC at the request of Dr. Pitts.

The Academic verses the Political Culture

Today, the University is a cumbersome mix of corporation and academy. Professors are

supposed to have the freedom to teach as they choose; yet administrators have to respond to politicians, parents, students, alumni, and other stakeholders who provide financial support through budget allocations (from politicians), contributions (from alumni), and tuition payments (from parents and students). These political and economic pressures create a tension within which university administrators must live and work.

Despite these external pressures, the expectation within the university is that a culture of scholarly professionalism, rather than of adversarial politics, is to be maintained. This means that civil discourse and integrity in the interpretation and presentation of research are preferred and expected over political debate and media sensationalism. The academic culture is one in which professors respectfully agree to disagree. We prefer to focus our criticisms on the issues and views being discussed rather than on the person holding those views. In my experience, administrators do their best to support faculty who live by the implied but unwritten rules of the academic culture.

In our present-day media soaked world, it is tempting to get caught up in media attention and be drawn into the debate culture of radio talk shows and cable television. This is exactly what politically aggressive writers and talk show hosts want to happen. When challenged publicly, professors must be careful not to reveal a student's grade or class attendance record as divulging such information is considered a breach of confidentiality. In my own case, I made efforts to protect the young student who was attacking me politically. I consented to do an interview on a radio talk show in Florida only if the interviewer agreed not to mention the name the student involved.

Then there are those controversial political issues that arouse strong feelings in both teachers and students. When dealing with such "hot topics," it is usually possible to construct a viable educational context for class discussion in which the topic can be presented without professors feeling they are compromising their academic freedom. Handling such issues brings up the question of bias. Should professors feel free to express their personal views in the classroom? The answer I give to this question is yes, especially if it enriches the course material and teachers are able admit to students that they are offering an opinion. Problems can arise, however, when professors are unwilling to entertain challenges to their opinions, or try to pass off their opinions and subjective interpretations of research as facts. When this happens, I believe teachers cross the line into the domain of bias.

A bias is defined as a prejudice, and as such is different from a reasoned professional opinion. Bias is usually exposed when a person is expressing a stereotype or is making overly broad generalizations. In my experience, professors rarely cross the line that separates professional opinion from bias. One of the tactics used by David Horowitz and other extremist commentators, however, is to present any opinion that is contrary to theirs as bias.

Highly complex issues, such as those related to religious belief, sexual orientation, economic recession, foreign policy decisions, or climate change are prone to provoking prejudicial views in both faculty and students. When presenting such admittedly bias-laden topics, the questions we ask as teachers to hone a student's critical thinking skills are more important than the answers we give. For example, is it possible to be pro-choice and, at the same time, against abortion? Through dialogue we seek to make a student aware of a weakness or limitation in their argument so they can arrive at more informed opinions on their own.

When teachers express their own opinions as fact, they are frequently giving answers, not asking questions. We then end up stifling student-teacher dialog rather than encouraging it. A way to make students feel comfortable contributing to a discussion is to build the dialog on some common ground that underlies the issue. For example, most students will agree that the debate over whether climate change is caused by human activity or is the result of a natural planetary cycle is secondary to the need for people to care for the environment and insure a sustainable future.

Strategies such as these help teachers stay above the fray and within the expectations of the academic culture. The administrators I have worked under have had no problem defending my academic freedom when I can clearly demonstrate that the purpose of my approach to classroom teaching is to cultivate higher-order critical thinking skills in the student.

Liberal Education is not Liberal Politics

One strategy applied by critics of the academy is to use language loosely, especially where claims of political bias can be made. In the Horowitz campaign, this was done by confusing liberal education with liberal politics. Liberal education is not about liberal politics, but

about exposing students to a broad range of disciplines. In the process, students are asked to assess and synthesize information and are challenged to think critically and independently. Liberal political labels and their association with political candidates, on the other hand, are a much different matter. Such political associations are quite fickle and often change from decade to decade.

Over the past thirty years, core curricula at universities have become increasingly interdisciplinary, drawing connections between diverse and what superficially may seem to be unrelated concepts.^[9] In my teaching studio at the Ball State School of Music, for example, I teach saxophone performance and chamber music. I also expose students to Zen and Taoist philosophies by quoting passages from the *Tao Te Ching* and from Eugen Herrigal's *Zen and the Art of Archery*.^[10] This includes discussion on the importance of silence in performance and in the contemplative experience, and on living by one's insights rather than by solely relying on structured theory or reason. Sound outrageous? After all, what is a saxophone teacher doing exposing his students to a Chinese contemplative philosophy that later merged with Japanese Buddhism?

There are several compositions in the classical saxophone repertoire by Japanese composer Ryo Noda that were inspired by shakuhachi flute music. The shakuhachi flute has been used by Zen monks as a tool for meditation. The contemplative nature of these compositions provides an ideal opportunity to acquaint students not only with Zen and Taoist philosophies but also to contemplative practice, the understanding and experience of which adds significantly to the interpretation of music in general. (By the way, contrary to what David Horowitz suggests, I am not a Buddhist.) I mention this to illustrate how Eastern philosophy, contemplative practice, and music are related. Everything is potentially interconnected. Professors should be able to teach virtually anything as long as they provide valid scholarly and pedagogical reasons for the material or positions they are presenting.

Conclusion

We must recognize that extremist groups and their radical political viewpoints have existed in the United States since the birth of our democracy and the ratification of the First Amendment. The publication and dissemination of their views prior to the global media revolution, however, was mostly confined to local, underground publications. It is the

Internet and the explosion of cable television that has provided a global stage for such groups and a forum for the dissemination of their misinformed and often offensive views.

One purpose of nonviolent activism is to make injustice visible. I therefore see the accessibility of the Internet as a good thing. This has exposed extremist groups and the unjust views they promote. The answer to political intrusion and verbal abuse by misinformed individuals or groups is not to repress their expression but to respond with truth and dignified nonviolence. We must refuse to become like our enemies, and never allow ourselves to be drawn into hateful, slanderous debate. “Truthful effort” or “clinging to the truth” is what Mahatma Gandhi called *satyagraha*, and given time, personal sacrifice, and nonviolent perseverance, it has been shown, many times over, to succeed.

1. 1. Dan Glaister, “Tricky Dicky: Nixon Recordings Confirm Popular View,” *The Guardian*, 4 Dec. 2008, www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/dec/04/richard-nixon-recordings.
2. 2. George W. Wolfe, *The Spiritual Power of Nonviolence: Interfaith Understanding for a Future without War* (Austin, Texas: JOMAR Press, 2011.)
3. 3. Thomas Ryan, “Recruiting for Terror,” *Frontpage Magazine*, 8 Nov. 2004, <http://archive.frontpagemag.com/readArticle.aspx?ARTID=10660>.
4. 4. Jo Ann Gora, “Ball State’s Critics Ignore Facts, Policies,” *The Star Press* (Muncie, IN), 15 Dec. 2004, 5A.
5. 5. Staff editorial, “Unneeded ‘Bill of Rights,’” *Fort Wayne Journal Gazette*, 27 Dec., 2004, editorial page; Staff editorial, “No Demonstrated Need for College Rights Bill” *The Star Press* (Mucie, IN), 7 Feb. 2005, editorial page.
6. 6. For a thorough discussion on the 2004-2006 political attack, see “Peace Studies, Academic Freedom, and Indoctrination: A Dialogue Between David Horowitz and Professor George Wolfe,” edited by D. Swindle, www.bsu.edu/libraries/virtualpress/wolfe/dialogue.htm.
7. 7. Jamie Glazov, “Making Peace with David Horowitz,” *FrontPage Magazine*, 15 June 2009, <http://archive.frontpagemag.com/readArticle.aspx?ARTID=35212>.
8. 8. Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 168-172.
9. 9. For a more thorough discussion on liberal education verses liberal politics, as well

as the dangers of “credentialism,” see “Peace Studies, Academic Freedom, and Indoctrination: A Dialogue Between David Horowitz and Professor George Wolfe,” edited by D. Swindle, www.bsu.edu/libraries/virtualpress/wolfe/dialogue.htm.

10. 10. Eugen Herrigal, *Zen and the Art of Archery* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999).