



# Faculty Forum

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## Can We (Should We) Be "Politically Correct"?

It was brought to my attention the other day that pressure has, on occasion, been brought to bear on various groups on campus to alter or eliminate various items, objects, selections, etc. from art exhibits, library displays, theatrical productions, the campus radio station and other activities. I take this to be a suggestion that we, as a campus community, need to be "politically correct." It is not my intention to suggest that we should not have concerns about offensive language, behavior, or thought, but, rather, that on occasion, at least, it is impossible to avoid being offensive and still be true to our educational mission.

The "Aspirations" section of Western's Mission Statement says that "Western Carolina University aspires to provide an environment in which students, faculty, and staff jointly assume responsibility for learning where the free exchange of ideas, and in which intellectual challenge, and high standards of scholarship prevail." It goes on to include the idea that "graduates of the University should demonstrate the ability to think critically, to communicate effectively, to identify and resolve problems reflectively, and to use information and technology responsibly" and that "to encourage and protect the free and open interchange of ideas, the university strives to provide experiences that foster the development of respect among all its members toward the larger communities of which it is a part. Accordingly, the University encourages its students, faculty, and staff to display the following traits of citizenship" among them "behavior characterized by honesty, integrity, and responsibility."

I would suggest that there is a conflict between the excessive demand for "political correctness" and this aspiration for the "free and open interchange of ideas." It seems to me that part of our university mission **requires** us to "push the envelope," to expose our students to ideas which may be uncomfortable, to challenge their beliefs, not out of a sense of attempting to destroy them but to encourage them to examination. Education can not be limited to that which no one finds offensive or nothing can be learned. It is through the process of examination that intellectual growth occurs, whether it leads to changing one's ideas or reinforcing them. I once took a course in Comparative Religion where I was exposed to a variety of belief systems from the major religions of the world. It didn't alter my personal beliefs (at least much), but I did learn something about the beliefs of different religions and how they agree, or disagree, with my own ideas.

As a theatre faculty member at Western, I think it is the duty of our theatre to present to the community important plays which may use language or contain ideas which may be disturbing to some, not because I support this language or these ideas but because this is the job of a theatre in an educational setting. I have been required, as a student, to read literature which I didn't like and which contained material to which I took exception and, I suspect, I have required my students to do the same. I've done that because this literature has been deemed of some importance either historically or literarily. Ibsen's play, *Ghosts*, refers to venereal disease and insanity, *The Man of La Mancha* (and other significant works) contain rape scenes and



other acts of violence. In many works from the past, characters of color are portrayed in what we would now consider demeaning roles. Some people object to the unclad human body being portrayed in paintings, photographs, or sculpture. Must we refuse to present, read, display or make available **all** works of art, literature, etc. which (no matter what their importance) deal with topics which are "impolite?" If we must refrain from anything which might offend someone's sensibilities, we will eliminate a lot of art.

Let's extend the idea further. Should we remove Aristotle from our shelves because he was a pagan? Perhaps we shouldn't study Marx, or Mao, or Hitler because we don't like what they say? I would suggest that we need to study these last three writers to understand how they could have had the influence they did, but we don't have to admire them, or their ideas. How can a person make a judgment about the value of an idea or work or "art" if we do not allow it to be seen? This isn't an argument for a total lack of discretion, but it is an attempt at saying that there is value in knowing about the things we hate. Voltaire once wrote something to the effect of, "I may disagree with what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it." This is what a University is all about. We don't all have to agree about everything—we don't have to agree about much of ANYthing—but we have to allow reasonable people to express ideas or values which we may not support.

Last spring, members of Fred Phelps' Westboro Baptist Church requested and received permission to appear on campus and protest the University Theatre's production of *The Laramie Project*. Personally, I was offended both by what they said and, even more, because they have no other stated interest except censoring ideas with which they disagree. I don't agree with everything said in this play. I don't believe that any of us involved with its selection probably agree with everything in it, but we did all agree that the play was important to be seen because it would encourage debate and discussion about what I, at least, see as the most important idea in the play, how a community not totally unlike our own dealt with a horrendous hate crime. My opinion of Matthew Shepherd's life style is not really relevant; how I deal with killing someone for having a different life style, religion, or political belief is. If we are to achieve the sort of world which seems to be the motivating force behind "political correctness," we must not limit our view to only that which already passes the test. We must understand what creates hate, distrust and intolerance.

Yes, we should make efforts to maintain a sense of decorum appropriate to adults, but we must allow each other to exercise the freedom to pursue valid intellectual thought even if it leads us into areas which are not comfortable. I would go so far as to suggest that intellectual "comfort" leads to complacency and blandness. If we are not challenged and challenging for our students, there is something truly "incorrect," for we are creating stagnation. Personally, I believe, along with the character, Stephen Hopkins, in Peter Stone's *1776* "in all my years I never heard, seen nor smelled an issue that was so dangerous it couldn't be talked about." I've had my say, what do you think?

**Richard S. Beam, Dept. of Communication, Theater, and Dance**

*The opinions printed here belong solely to the authors and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the editorial staff or of the Faculty Center. If you would like to respond, e-mail Nienhuis by the 8th of the month.*



# ***Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning***

**Responses to "Can We (Should We) Be 'Politically Correct'?", by Richard Beam, 3/1/05**

I must say that I fully agree with the ideas presented by Richard Beam. Art has always reflected the society and its culture, philosophy, beliefs, and actions in any given period. Let's do our best to preserve this purity, plurality, and freedom, no matter how rough or uncomfortable it may at times seem to be. Our students deserve the right to choose what is or is not appropriate and where to draw a line because our lives are all about making proper choices and right decisions one at a time. Thank you, Richard, for your open mind.

**Pavel Wlosok, Music**

I am somewhat confused by Richard Beam's article on political correctness. I am unaware of any climate of repression at Western. I wish that he had provided some concrete examples. I have seen nothing to indicate that mysterious moral arbiters are at work stifling theater or art on the basis of some set of puritanical standards. After all, last month the campus saw performances of The Vagina Monologues, and last summer's theater season gave us plays with adult situations, raw language, and sexual innuendo. What exactly is being censored?

I find it interesting that this is characterized in the context of "political correctness." Lately, political correctness controversies in academia have involved challenges to the status quo in terms of diversity and tolerance as they are narrowly defined these days on college campuses. So, for example, we have the Student Senate at the University of Alabama passing a resolution opposing the Alabama Faculty Senate's calls for restrictions on so-called "hate speech" (so much for freedom of speech). At yet another university, we see a student removed from an education program for writing a paper that argues in favor of corporal punishment in the classroom (there goes freedom of thought). We also find one of our sister institutions in North Carolina punishing a Christian fraternity because it restricts its membership to (gasp!) Christians (forget about freedom of association).

The three examples above (and many more) are detailed by The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education ([www.thefire.org](http://www.thefire.org)), an organization that fights for the rights of students and faculty in the face of repression at the nation's colleges and universities (those bastions of academic freedom). The stories are true. And they are chilling. I recommend a visit to their website. This is where the real battles against political correctness are taking place.

If the best example of "pressure" that we have is Fred Phelps and his protests of *The Laramie Project* last spring, we're doing pretty well. Surely Dr. Beam doesn't object to Westboro Baptist's right to protest. Contrasted with the stories above, the fact that the protest and the play took place without incident indicates that freedom of speech is alive and well at Western.

**David R. Luginbuhl, Mathematics and Computer Science**



## Responses to "Can We (Should We) Be 'Politically Correct'?", by Richard Beam, 3/1/05

For the past few years, I've suffered from déjà vu, as if I'm living in the past – 1984 to be exact – peace is war, democracy is tyranny, facts are censored, lies are legitimized. I feel like the silent screamer in the Munch painting stuck in a global culture of silence.

In this bizarre national context, I was pleasantly surprised to find the students in my First Year Seminar open-minded and thirsty for knowledge, facts, and ideas. As we studied multicultural education in public schools, they were puzzled about their knowledge gaps. They had, after all, just graduated from high school, some with honors. They spoke about how their brief experience in college classrooms and residential living had helped open their eyes to others – others with different religions, races, cultural backgrounds, sexual orientations. Knowledge, facts, ideas and experiences – the college experience – may be our only hope for a more reality-based world.

Richard Beam's *Forum* on the pressure to be politically correct and the suppression of uncomfortable ideas is timely. Colleges are being targeted by censors trying, successfully, to suppress books, faculty, courses, and ideas. We should be careful not to delude ourselves with the illusion that Cullowhee is off the radar of the censors. As Richard points out, the WCU production of *The Laramie Project* put us on Fred Phelps' screen. The internet has forever changed sleepy towns and colleges where we could blithely do our own thing. Faculty in Cullowhee have as much to lose and gain as those in Ann Arbor, Boulder, and Chapel Hill. We have a responsibility to stand up for unpopular ideas whether we like them or not.

### Mary Jean Ronan Herzog, Educational Leadership & Foundations

I want to publicly commend Professor Beam for "outing" an issue I know many of us have had on our minds. During a recent conversation I had with two colleagues in our (English) Department, I heard it phrased "how do we teach what we know with integrity and honesty, how do we tell our truth, and still keep our jobs?" There's an echo in this conversation of the thunderclap of the re-election of George W. Bush when some of us thought that Orwell's 1984 had simply arrived twenty years later than expected. Even last week I had to give serious thought before letting my students know that homosexuality is a matter of genetics and brain chemistry rather than a matter of morality as stated in Leviticus and Jeremiah in the Old (and getting older) Testament. Yes, we live in The Bible Belt; yes, many of our students are Christian; yes, organized religion seems to be in the ascendancy under the present administration. COULD we be "politically correct" about it? Sure! SHOULD we be "politically correct" about it? I don't think so. My mission is to boldly go, not cower in fear.

Speaking of mission statements, I used to teach at Pepperdine University. Pepperdine's mission statement is "the truth, having nothing to fear from investigation, must be pursued relentlessly in all disciplines." Pepperdine is a Christian University, this is its mission statement, and I was specifically hired to teach Asian Studies. I taught my Christian students about Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam. The students learned that every religion is a system of belief, an interpretation. They were encouraged to look beyond the culture, language, and rhetoric of whatever tradition they just happened to be born into. There are beautiful multi-colored fish living in the rice paddies of SE Asia. For many of them their whole world is about the size of a tea cup. Their tea cup piece of reality is probably all they know, or need to know. Being born into any culture or any religion is like being that fish, but the exception is that human beings aren't confined to any one

culture. I suppose I must leave it to the reader to decide if that's the good news or the bad news.

Like Dr. Beam, I too have taken classes in Comparative Religion. I know the difference between a religious person and an EDUCATED religious person. I will continue to do my best to make my religious students, educated religious students. There are religious fanatics in The Middle East and there are religious fanatics here in America. I think one of the best things that religious fanatics do is to preach in front of Dodson and condemn all the students to Hell for being normal, well adjusted human beings or to bring numbers of "true believers" to our campus to parade their ignorance in front of us when we put on plays like The Laramie Project. If you, or me, or Professor Beam, or any of us here at Western stop being "offensive," then we may as well take the blue pill and go back to sleep in Plato's Cave.

**Thomas Jefferson Hughes, English**