On Campus

Procedures Clarified and Enhanced Following Release of Ad Hoc Committee Report

Spring 2005

The faculty Ad Hoc Grievance Committee established to investigate charges of faculty intimidation of students submitted its report to President Bollinger on March 28 and to the public on March 31. The committee found no systematic harassment of pro-Israel or Jewish students by faculty of the department of Middle East and Asian Languages and Cultures (MEALAC), although it did find it “credible” that a faculty member behaved inappropriately when he became angered on one occasion.

The 9,000-word report was critical of Columbia’s “systemic confusion about responsibility and authority” for handling student complaints.” Because there were no clear procedures, the committee found, “outside advocacy groups devoted to purposes tangential to those of the University were able to intervene to take up complaints expressed by some students, further confusing the location of responsibility and authority for addressing student concerns about instruction at Columbia.” The “murkiness” of the procedure for grievances was also a problem for faculty, the committee found, and “instructors expressed concern to the committee that policies on who is allowed to attend classes are unclear, which seems to have contributed to the presence of unregistered and sometimes disruptive auditors.”

President Bollinger issued a statement on April 11 announcing two improvements in the way the University deals with student grievances or concerns. “Most student concerns are best dealt with in informal and collaborative ways at the school level,” he said. “But, occasionally, more formal procedures are needed, and these, too, will now be provided.”

Accordingly, the grievance processes at all schools have undergone review in recent months and are now more clearly articulated than in the past. Graduate professional

schools, for example, have reviewed and revised their procedures, to make sure the avenues for complaints and concerns are clear and understandable, and to provide for an opportunity for appeal to the provost for both the student and the faculty member. Students in schools outside of the Arts and Sciences, such as the School of Engineering and Applied Science or the Law School, “have clearly articulated informal or collaborative grievance procedures in place. Integrated with these procedures are opportunities for lodging a formal complaint at the level of the dean or vice president.”

In addition, for the six schools served by the Arts and Sciences faculty — Columbia College, Continuing Education, General Studies, GSAS, SIPA, and the School of the Arts — a standing faculty committee has been established to review student complaints, including those that could not be resolved through grievance procedures at the school level. Students in these schools can either appeal to the committee if they are dissatisfied with the response from the department or school — or approach the standing committee initially. Students and faculty can also appeal to the provost as part of this process.

The other component of Bollinger’s plan is the establishment of the President’s Council on Student Affairs. “This body will help ensure that students from across the University, as well as the administrators responsible for addressing the quality of student life, have a forum for bringing important matters directly to my attention,” he said. The president and provost will meet with the student group three times a year.

Committee Review

The ad hoc committee was formed in December. Over the course of nine weeks it met with 62 students, faculty, and administrators, and reviewed some 60 written statements from students who said that they had been made to feel uncomfortable by certain faculty — in the classroom and out — when expressing their views supportive of Israel. “Silencing students for expressing . . . relevant viewpoints is certainly unacceptable classroom behavior,” Bollinger wrote in a March 31 memo underscoring the importance of the investigation.

The committee emphasized that it was not looking at the curriculum of any MEALAC courses or the politics or opinions of any of its faculty, only the allegations of faculty intimidation. At the same time, the report noted that the term *intimidation* itself is "very capacious." What is intimidating to one student might be stimulating pedagogy to another. "By contrast, instances in which a student is ridiculed, threatened or silenced for holding certain views contrary or inimical to those of the instructor constitute serious breaches of academic norms."

The anticipation of the committee's report and its release received considerable play in the press, both locally and internationally. Some individuals criticized the composition of the committee, arguing that its members held undisclosed relationships to MEALAC faculty.

The accusations of intimidation had been circulated most widely through screenings of the video Columbia Unbecoming, a collection of interviews with the aggrieved students produced by the pro-Israel group The David Project.

According to newspaper reports, many students said that they didn't feel the report fully addressed their complaints, and some faculty complained that the committee itself was "illegitimate." But as Bollinger said in his letter to the community in reaction to the report, "The Committee's work and report help sustain our trust in the absolutely critical norm of peer review, which calls upon those of us in the community of scholars to put aside personal and political views and conduct objective evaluations of scholarship and teaching under accepted academic standards."



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