



2007

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Recommended Citation

Fish, Stanley (2007) "Advocacy and Teaching," *Journal of Educational Controversy*. Vol. 2 : No. 2 , Article 6.
Available at: <https://cedar.wwu.edu/jec/vol2/iss2/6>

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ARTICLE

Advocacy And Teaching

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NY Times Columnist

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When a bill before a state legislature bears a woman's name, it is usually because someone has been abducted or raped or murdered. But in Missouri, House Bill 213, or the Emily Brooker Intellectual Diversity Act, is under consideration because someone was given an assignment.

According to a complaint filed in the United States District Court in Missouri, Emily Brooker, a student at Missouri State University, was required by her professor in a social-work class to participate in writing a letter supporting gay adoption. The letter was to be signed by every student and forwarded to the state legislature. (It was never sent.)

Ms. Brooker declined to sign, saying that the position taken in the letter conflicted with her religious beliefs. A month later she was called before a faculty-student committee to respond to questions about her academic performance and her fitness for social work. Nine months later (Sept. 17, 2006), she filed her complaint, and on Nov. 8, 2006, the university settled out of court and agreed to pay Ms. Brooker a sum of \$9,000, waive academic fees totaling another \$12,000, clear her academic record and remove her professor from his administrative duties and the classroom. In short, a slam-dunk.

A story with a happy ending? Yes and no. Yes, because at least on the reported facts, she was obviously in the right. No, because no one involved in this little drama got the issue right.

Ms. Brooker apparently believed that the issue was religious freedom, and this was certainly the argument made by the Alliance Defense Fund, a Christian organization that brought the case on her behalf.

"Being a Christian shouldn't make you a second-class citizen on a college campus," said David French, the fund's senior legal counsel. The injury, however, was not done to Ms. Brooker as a Christian, but to every student in the class, Christian or not, opponent or proponent of gay adoption.

For what the professor was requiring of his class was public advocacy, and it doesn't matter whether an individual student would have approved of the advocacy; advocacy is just not what should be going on in a university.

Once advocacy is removed from the equation -- once issues, including gay adoption, are objects of study rather than alternatives to be embraced -- the beliefs, religious or otherwise, of either students or professors, become irrelevant.

A student assigned to study an issue must be equipped with the appropriate analytical skills. Acquiring and applying those skills in no way depend on political or ideological affiliations. If the assignment is to give an account of the dispute about gay adoption rather than to come down on one side or the other, two students with opposing views of the matter might very well produce the very same account. Academic performance and individual beliefs are independent variables. They have nothing to do with each other.

If the distinction between studying and advocating were honored, there would be no need for Provision J of House Bill 213, which deals with "conflicts between personal beliefs and classroom assignments." There could be no such conflicts if classroom assignments asked students to analyze an issue rather than pronounce on it; no one's personal beliefs about anything would be in play.

Not only is Provision J beside the point; the entire bill is beside the point because it addresses a problem that should never arise, and proposes a remedy no different from the disease it claims to cure. Under House Bill 213, institutions of higher education would be required to report each year on their efforts "to ensure and promote intellectual diversity."

"Intellectual diversity" -- a term of art introduced by the conservative activist David Horowitz -- mandates the proportional representation, on the faculty and in the curriculum, of conservatives and liberals. Its watchword is "balance," but balance is a political measure, not an educational measure, for it could be achieved only by monitoring the political affiliations of professors and the political content of the materials they assign.

Emily Brooker's professor was wrong to enlist her in a political campaign. Promoting and actively enforcing something called intellectual diversity would vastly extend his wrong and make it the law of the state.