

Diversity's role in tenure questioned

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This is the first installment in a three part series regarding Virginia Tech's new policies and plans to focus on diversity in the institution.

Related: [FIRE's letter](#), [College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences guidelines](#)

After sustaining brief but spirited criticism in regard to the role of diversity in professors' tenure hearings within the College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences, Virginia Tech is exploring ways to clarify the language used regarding the role diversity initiatives play in the faculty selection process.

As the guidelines stand in a March 9 draft for promotion and tenure review, there is "special attention to be given to documenting involvement in diversity initiatives."

The university is now working to make sure it is known that participation in diversity initiatives is not a requirement, but simply an additional qualification to attaining a promotion or tenure. These contributions to diversity may include publications, research, courses taught and competitive grants earned by the individual up for review.

The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education sent a letter on March 25 to the Tech administration saying the revisions to the CLAHS guidelines to tenure and promotion of faculty were a "threat to freedom of conscious."

FIRE is a conservative advocacy group committed to upholding freedom of speech in public institutions and whose Web site links "mandatory diversity seminars" to "ideological indoctrination" in university orientation sessions.

"Really, the president responded with, 'Thank you for your letter,' and that was pretty much it," said Larry Hincker, university spokesman.

This response was noted by FIRE as almost a "non-response," according to FIRE spokesman Adam Kissel, the director of the individual rights defense program.

"It's good that he noted that the guidelines had not been adopted by the college or the university as of yet," Kissel said. "And it was a very important step that he spoke with the provost about reworking the guidelines. But he's not actually promising to do anything."

These new guidelines are in line with Tech's latest concerns for diversifying campus, both in faculty and student numbers.

With these new guidelines calling for participation in "diversity workshops," attendance for harassment prevention training and emphasis on putting special focus in curriculums on diversity, FIRE is concerned that Tech is slowly tightening its grasp on what can be taught in the classroom.

"All of the points made in the policy are things that we look for when considering a faculty member for tenure or promotion," Hincker said. "But the problem came up in terms of the language used. It needed to be made clear that we cannot require faculty to participate in diversity initiatives."

This push to encourage faculty to become more "diversity conscious" has led to much outside agitation by way of FIRE. FIRE was initially informed of the possible violation of faculty rights via an "anonymous tenure track faculty member who feared retribution from the university," Kissel said.

"A university would not be able to tell its faculty that they had to adhere to certain religious views, or teach them," Kissel said. "People would be much more up in arms if religion was the issue, but this undue pressure of faculty members to confirm their dedication to diversity is just as strong of an issue."

Provost Mark McNamee was also cited in the letter for his "Reporting Diversity Accomplishments in the Faculty Report," which included possible ways to "incorporate diversity-related scholarships in courses, readings, programs, service learning activities and your own research/scholarship."

"There is a specific process for making requirements for faculty, and no steps have been taken to make new requirements," McNamee said. "Now we just have to make sure that people know what is going on and that we would never require faculty to do something in their own classrooms that they don't agree with."

FIRE said in its letter that it believed, "Not only do such evaluative criteria unacceptably interfere with faculty members' moral and intellectual agency, but these statements also contain vague language that causes confusion and invites abuse."

FIRE claimed that, because the criteria in the new guidelines were so vague as to what should actually be done, that they infringed upon the rights of the teachers and could lead to biased teachings.

"There was some confusion as to whether these should be requirements, but we do not require faculty members to be advisers for students groups or hold administrative positions," Hinker said. "Although these are very important parts of university life, and they are things that we look at in faculty member dues, there is no university requirement."

The letter also cited that the university has no legal right to dictate what its professors should believe, including a mandate to a commitment to diversity. FIRE stated in its letter, "By requiring candidates for promotion and tenure to demonstrate an active involvement in 'diversity initiatives,' Virginia Tech impermissibly forces faculty members to confess both by word and by act their faith in the opinion that 'diversity' was essential to their teaching and academic life."

"We will be working very closely with internal groups to make sure that we are all on the same page, knowing that no new requirements have been made," McNamee said. "We are still committed to supporting diversity, and we still have some work to do. I just wish that they would show some faith and allow us to make progress knowing that we would never willingly do anything inappropriate."