

Huddleston v. Academic Freedom and Shared Governance: Summer 2015 Edition

By Siobhan Senier

Whatever you think of this summer's kerfuffle over the Bias-Free Language Guide, you should be concerned over its takedown as another small step in the continuing incursion against academic freedom and shared governance.

On the off chance you managed to miss the media circus: on July 28, the conservative website CampusReform.org published an "exposé" of the Bias-Free Language Guide, a document posted on the website of UNH's Office of Inclusive Excellence. From the [Washington Post](http://WashingtonPost.com) to [Bill Maher](http://BillMaher.com), everyone was suddenly shrieking that students couldn't use the word "American." Mark Huddleston immediately [condemned the guide](#) and "ordered a review of UNH's web posting policies." Within two days (two days. In July) the Bias-Free Language Guide was taken down.

In truth, the guide simply suggested that "American" should not be confused or conflated with "North American" or "U.S. citizen," when the latter is what a person really means. In truth, the guide was a teaching tool, crafted by concerned staff and faculty "to serve as a starting point about terms related to age, race, class, ethnicity, nationality, gender, ability, sexual orientation and more. . . not to represent absolute requirements of language use but, rather, offer a way to encourage us to think critically and reflectively about the terms and phrases that many people use regularly in conversation and writing."

Such nuances were apparently lost on our president. Or were they? On Twitter, he became an instant darling of self-proclaimed campus watchdogs like Christina Hoff Sommers, as well as everyday citizens intoning, "may all Prezzys of these leftist academic hives behave as well as this guy." Surely, too, Huddleston is responding to the election cycle and the power of the state legislature. On the same day he issued his statement, an "outraged" Jeb Bradley issued [his own](#): "When the subject of UNH funding occurs as the budget gets resolved I look forward to proposing an amendment to rectify this sad state of affairs in Durham."

We know what this means. It's not just business as usual in New Hampshire, where the tail always wants to keep wagging the emaciated dog. This problem is national and global, as we are witnessing a massive assault on public education that not one of our six-figure administrators seems inclined to challenge. The relentless, neoliberal redistribution of resources to the VPs and the building contractors, with austerity for the other 99 percent, is only abetted by attacks on free speech and critical thinking. These attacks are lobbed especially hard against humanists and social scientists, especially when it comes to scholarship and teaching around the concerns of marginalized people. For a depressing case, we can look to Shannon Gibney, the professor of English and African Diaspora Studies at Minneapolis Community and Technical College who was formally reprimanded for making white students (i.e., "consumers") feel "uncomfortable" in a class where she talked about structural racism. For a more hopeful case, we might look to Steven Salaita, whose suit is proceeding against the University of Illinois, which fired

him for tweets critical of Israel's military attacks on Gaza. The Center for Constitutional Rights, which has taken up Prof. Salaita's case, sees this as a First Amendment issue, with the university "violating his right to speak freely on issues of public concern without being fired."

Can UNH faculty, staff and students "speak freely on issues of public concern"? Jeb Bradley can opine that "The University System of New Hampshire should concentrate on educating students to compete in the 21st century economy rather than taking political correctness to farcical levels," but the fact remains that hate speech and outright violence still hurt far too many people on college campuses, [including ours](#). The fact remains that students might "compete in the 21st century economy" better if they reconsider terms like "manpower" and "girls in the office," as the guide suggested.

Some faculty and staff are now afraid to speak out about issues like these, especially after this summer's social-media witch hunt had many "taxpayers" demanding the "names" of the staff who worked on the guide and of professors who use it in their teaching. Other campus community members have felt the chilling effect of being told not to speak to the press, but to "go through UNH Media Relations." And many of us are just doubly demoralized now, since in the very same week of the Language-Guide flap, the Provost and the COLA Deans declined to renew funding for the Center for Global, Race, and Diversity Studies. Yes, it was a busy summer here in Durham, and like urban planners who quietly withdraw fire and police services from impoverished neighborhoods, our administration prepared to watch critical race and ethnic studies programs--for which students and faculty have been fighting since the 1990s--just quietly burn.

The work of teaching about social justice, it seems, is almost always done gratis, on our own time; the decisions to defund or clamp down on these efforts are increasingly made without faculty input or governance. Again, whatever you think of the ill-fated Guide to Bias-Free Language, you cannot sit idly by while administrators and legislators override the work and academic freedom of faculty, staff and students.

Sitting here in 2015, one feels almost nostalgic for 1957, when the Supreme Court famously described "four essential freedoms" of a university: "to determine for itself on academic grounds who may teach, what may be taught, how it shall be taught, and who may be admitted to study" (*Sweezy v. New Hampshire*). In the McCarthy era, at least, it was clear *who* constituted "the university itself": not noisy taxpayers, not legislators, not administrators, but professionally trained scholars and their students and support staff who are striving to learn and to reflect. If you belong to that latter group, and would like to continue using and discussing the bias-free language guide in the spirit in which it was intended, visit the new blog, "[Our UNH](#)."