

Statement on HR 4137

Madame Speaker, anyone in need of proof that federal control follows federal funding need only examine HR 4137, the Higher Education Opportunity Act. HR 4137 imposes several new mandates on colleges, and extends numerous mandates that previous Congress imposed on colleges. HR 4137 proves the prophetic soundness of people who warned that federal higher education programs would lead to federal control of higher education.

Opponents of increasing federal control over higher education should be especially concerned about HR 4137's "Academic Bill of Rights." This provision takes a step toward complete federal control of college curriculum, grading, and teaching practices. While this provision is worded as a "sense of Congress," the clear intent of the "bill of rights" is to intimidate college administrators into ensuring professors' lectures and lesson plans meet with federal approval.

The "Academic Bill of Rights" is a response to concerns that federally-funded institutions of higher learner are refusing to allow students to express, or even be exposed to, points of view that differ from those held by their professors. Ironically, the proliferation of "political correctness" on college campuses is largely a direct result of increased government funding of colleges and universities. Federal funding has isolated institutions of higher education from market discipline, thus freeing professors to promulgate their "politically correct" views regardless of whether this type of instruction benefits their students (who are, after all, the professors' customers). Now, in a perfect illustration of how politicians use the problems created by previous interventions in the market as a justification for further interventions, Congress proposes to use the problem of "political correctness" to justify more federal control over college classrooms.

Instead of fostering open dialog and wide-ranging intellectual inquiry, the main effect of the "Academic Bill of Rights" will be to further stifle debate about controversial topics. This is because many administrators will order their professors not to discuss contentious and divisive subjects in order to avoid a possible confrontation with the federal government. Those who doubt this should remember that many TV and radio stations minimized political programming in the sixties and seventies in order to avoid running afoul of the federal "fairness doctrine."

I am convinced that some promoters of the "Academic Bill of Rights" would be unhappy if, instead of fostering greater debate, this bill silences discussion of certain topics. Scan the websites of some of the organizations promoting the "Academic Bill of Rights" and you will also find calls for silencing critics of the Iraq war and other aspects of American foreign policy.

Madame Speaker, HR 4137 expands federal control over higher education; in particular through an "Academic Bill of Rights" which could further stifle debate and inquiry on America's college campus. Therefore, I urge my colleagues to reject this bill.