

**Testimony before the
Pennsylvania House of Representatives
Select Committee on Student Academic Freedom
Jane Munley, President
Pennsylvania Association of Higher Education
Testifying on behalf of the
Pennsylvania State Education Association
Harrisburg Area Community College
June 1, 2006**

Good morning. My name is Jane Munley and I am here to speak in opposition to the need for an Academic Bill of Rights as reflected in HR 177. I am speaking as President of the Pennsylvania Association of Higher Education, the Higher Education Department of PSEA (Pennsylvania State Education Association) and as Associate Professor and Coordinator of Criminal Justice at Luzerne County Community College in Northeastern Pennsylvania.

"Broad-minded, not literal, open to new ideas, not bound by established forms, tolerant of different views and standards of behavior in others. General, extensive, often but not necessarily synonymous with collegiate, as a collegiate education". These are some definitions of "liberal", the last from Webster's 1828 dictionary. Imagine my initial surprise when I first heard of the Academic Bill of Rights (ABoR) – a movement attacking "liberals" on college and university campuses. How could this be? I soon realized that "liberal" in the context of ABoR, meant *politically* liberal and that this movement wanted to take what is one of the last bastions of free speech, of scholarly, intellectual discourse and replace it with political standards of academic appropriateness. Whose politics? Whose appropriateness?

As a student at Penn State in the early to mid-1970's, I best remember several courses and professors that made me uncomfortable, because I had to leave the safety of my reality. I quickly realized that there were other realities in the world beyond my personal one and that I had to learn to live in *that* world if I was to fully experience whatever my life would become. Some of my views changed and others were strengthened as a result of differing beliefs. I thank those professors for that discomfort.

As a parent of two students in public universities in Pennsylvania, I asked my son and daughter what experiences they, their friends and classmates have had in the classroom and if they had had or heard of any of the indoctrination or discrimination horror stories the proponents of ABoR claim to be so common. They both looked at me rather puzzled, saying they have never encountered anything like it nor did they know anyone who had.

As a college professor, isn't it my responsibility to be liberal? To help students broaden their perspectives, be open to new ideas, be tolerant of different views? Students go to college for many reasons, but they all bring their knowledge and beliefs with them. Isn't it important for them to be tested on what they think they know and believe? College is so much more than providing content, information. In many ways it teaches life. And as in life, college can – and should be – challenging, confrontational, and uncomfortable. I taught psychology for over fifteen years and criminal justice now for thirty years. On my syllabi I include a picture of a parachute, with the caption "Minds are like parachutes. . . . they function only when open". I've used extreme examples to make points, to trigger discussions, and sometimes even to bring the day-dreamers back to classroom reality. I've given what some would call silly, even ridiculous assignments to move students out of their boxes. I am sure I have forced some of them to think in ways they did not want to and to face issues they did not like. I mention these things because I fear that the so-called academic bill of rights will stifle the abilities of faculty to challenge students, that it will discourage confrontational and controversial issues from being discussed and debated. I fear that the political power holders – whoever they may be at any point in time – will be dictating the appropriateness of course content.

Proponents of the need for an academic bill of rights claim widespread problems, yet they provide no substantiated evidence to support this claim. Actually, a number of specific claims have clearly been shown to be false. There have likely been isolated incidents of left-wing bias as there have been incidents of religious and other right-wing bias in classrooms. Students can – and should – complain if a significant, valid issue arises. The protocols exist for this purpose at all our public institutions. However, to create a widespread problem where none exists and to then attempt to use this to control education is wrong. It is a disservice to the faculty and students at our colleges and universities around the state and gravely damaging to education itself.

Academic freedom is crucial to the need for open discussion and debate. This attack on academic freedom endangers free inquiry in the classroom and jeopardizes the future of quality education in our state.

Thank you.

Jane Kravitz Munley
President, PAHE

