

“Them” vs. “Us”:

Global Perspectives and Academic Freedom in Curriculum Internationalization

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Tags

Cross-cultural issues; Education Policy; Internationalization and Global Learning; Leadership and Strategy; University/Higher Education

Setting

The institution described in the case is a large, public research university in the United States. It is a four-year institution. The average enrollment is approximately 30,000 students in undergraduate and graduate programs. The school has a long history of academic excellence and has historically had a good academic reputation in providing a rigorous liberal arts education, which promotes student engagement with diverse perspectives and international settings. Providing a curriculum in which students learn about global perspectives is a foundation of the school's efforts to internationalize their institution's academics and optimize student learning. Creating graduates who can be successful in an increasingly globalized world is one of the institution's prime goals and is strongly held by their leadership, as well as their faculty, staff, and student body.

Case

An English course at a large research university was focused on literature based on a major transnational terrorist attack. The course was a first-year seminar, in which students are encouraged to reflect on the course content, come up with original ideas and analyses of the course material, and participate in class discussions. This course is exemplary of many of the institution's courses making internationalization efforts. It presents content from a

global perspective with the goal of encouraging students to see beyond their prior understanding of the material and recognize that their perspective on a topic or issue is both valid and one of many.

One semester, however, an incoming freshman to the university took offense to the course's syllabus and required reading materials. The student argued that the literary works used in the class were too sympathetic to terrorists. Said student came to these conclusions from the contents of the syllabus, researching book reviews of the materials, and reading past reviews of the class. However, it should be noted that the student was not enrolled in the course. They claimed that one did not have to take the course or read any of the course materials to know that the materials and the course itself were sympathetic to terrorists. At the time of the controversy, the class had full enrollment. Additionally, students who had taken the course previously reported that the class was inclusive to various perspectives and students were encouraged to see the material from different viewpoints but were not expected to change their thoughts or beliefs on the event.

The opposing student relayed their opinion in an online article. The student's article garnered media attention from other outlets and gained support from some of the institution's campus organizations. These groups—led by students—not only disapproved of the course and agreed with the author of the article, but they began a petition for the course to be discontinued and removed from the department's course offerings. This petition was directed towards the institution's administrators and leadership.

While the campus organizations believed the course to be denigrating to the nation and its values, the institution's faculty and leadership disagreed. The professor of the course defended their right to determine course curriculum and materials. They were supported through this process by the Dean of the department who believed that the faculty member had the right to full control of their course. The leadership of the institution also supported the faculty member and department, recognizing that both were demonstrating dedication to the institution's internationalization goals. As a department and an institution, this meant that the academic freedom of their faculty members and internationalization initiatives were considered an institutional right over the demands and grievances of students. The Dean believed that the faculty member not only had full rights over their course, but that the course's emphasis on learning about the perspectives of others was a value of the institution's mission and everything it stood for.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- In this scenario, what was more important: student feedback and media attention or campus internationalization efforts? How would your institution react to a similar situation?
- How would this scenario be different if the class were about an issue besides terrorism?
- Are there issues or topics that internationalization curriculum should or should not discuss?
- What role do domestic perspectives play in these courses?
- As generations change and students have access to more information than ever and can post anything on the internet, how will this come to affect institutional internationalization initiatives? Can access to these technologies bring more diverse and global perspectives into campus conversations or do they increase the risk of dissent, bias, or even hate speech?