

# Duke Erodes Liberal Education

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## COMMENTARY

On May 8, the Duke University student newspaper published a stirring letter addressed to the school community that was co-signed by 101 students and former students. The letter protested the decision of the university's Sanford School of Public Policy to decline to renew the contract of Evan Charney, associate professor of the practice of public policy and political science, and called on the provost to reverse the decision.

To no avail. On May 23, incoming Sanford School Dean Judith Kelley informed Charney that Provost Sally Kornbluth rejected his appeal.

Duke's termination of Charney, a productive scholar with wide-ranging interests in ethics and politics who has taught at Duke for 19 years (and with whom I worked in the 1990s when he was a graduate student at Harvard and I was an assistant professor), has all the earmarks of faculty and administration acquiescence to the swelling forces of campus intolerance and anti-intellectualism. At the same time, the legions of grateful students who have rallied around Charney show that a reservoir of love for learning survives at Duke — among the young.

"Professor Charney's teaching style is wonderfully thought-provoking and challenging," according to the Duke Chronicle letter. In his classes, the students explained, "ideas are vetted and sharpened through rigorous debate and discussion on issues ranging from physician assisted suicide to the legalization of sex work." Charney treats all opinions equally: "No thought goes unexamined; no assertion goes unchecked."

In addition, missives praising Charney from students, alumni, and parents poured into Sanford. In a lengthy email to Associate Dean Billy Pizer, outgoing Dean Kelly Brownell and Dean Kelley, a Duke graduate wrote that losing Charney represents "a devastating blow to the university" because he provides "tools, week after week, to think." Another graduate warned that "terminating his contract would not only be a serious loss for Duke, but it would also threaten professors' academic freedom by showing that those who explore controversial topics or express unpopular opinions are at risk of losing their jobs." A third graduate declared, "Not only did Professor Charney create an environment that was fun and engaging, he also found a way to force me to question and probe my long-standing assumptions about ideas as varied as sex work, drug legalization, and the proper role of courts in protecting free speech."

Beyond these written testimonials, a regular Duke Chronicle poll of undergraduates repeatedly recognized Charney as among the university's three most popular professors. After receiving their diplomas at Sanford's May graduation, many students interrupted their march across the stage to approach Charney, who was sitting among the faculty, to shake his hand and thank him.

So, what went wrong for Charney at Duke?

Duke's explanation to Charney was opaque. His colleagues did not present him with concrete complaints or identify specific incidents. The Sanford School told him only that some students rated his teaching "very low" and that he creates a "hostile class environment."

Certainly, huge numbers of Charney's students cherished his courses precisely because he created a class environment hostile to ignorance, self-righteousness, and dogmatism. Since student surveys consistently ranked him among Duke's finest teachers, it is reasonable to surmise that only a small number of students rated his teaching "very low."

One can't rule out that Charney treated a few students brusquely or bluntly. As some 100 students stressed in their letter to the Duke Chronicle, "His courses undertake the difficult challenge of exposing students to viewpoints that conflict with how they think and what they value — and although many students find this teaching style uncomfortable, this is both welcomed and desired. In this Socratic format, the professor leans into student discomfort in order to encourage self-examination and critical inquiry."

Then again, Duke isn't talking. I emailed Deans Pizer, Brownell and Kelley, and Provost Kornbluth seeking information on the decision to terminate Charney. Only Kelley replied, writing, "[W]e are not able to comment on personnel matters."

It's also possible that colleagues who disliked Charney used claims of a "hostile class environment" as a pretext to get rid of him.

But given the flood of impassioned student support for Charney, the proliferation of campus "safe spaces" (the Sanford School boasts one), and the rise of "bias response teams" at colleges and universities around the country, a different explanation seems more likely. It's quite possible that a handful of students who took Charney's section of his department's required class on ethics and public policy were offended by his penchant to put all perspectives to the test. After all, many of the young men and women who now reach our elite universities have been inculcated since primary school with the belief that their moral judgments are beyond reproach and that the purpose of the classroom is to reinforce their political convictions.

It would be little wonder if offended students denounced Charney to the authorities. He requires all students — regardless of race, class, gender, or political persuasion — to justify their views with facts, evidence, and reasoned argument.

Nor would it be a surprise if Charney's Duke colleagues and the university provost preferred to indulge a small minority who marshal indignation and grievance to curtail liberty of thought and discussion. Never mind the overwhelming majority of Charney's students who have been astonished to encounter at Duke a forum for the robust exchange of ideas and delighted by the pleasures and rewards afforded by genuine intellectual give-and-take. Tough luck for future Duke students hungry for knowledge and seeking truth.

Last week after Dean Kelley told him the provost rejected his appeal, according to Charney, she offered a yearly renewable adjunct teaching position when his contract expires next year. But she attached onerous conditions: Undergo diversity training, cease teaching required courses, accept heightened monitoring of his classes by colleagues, and forgo an appeal to the Faculty Hearing Committee.

The next day Charney emailed Kelley to decline her offer and say that he will initiate a Faculty Hearing Committee appeal.

The new appeal will focus on improprieties in the review process. The main impropriety is rooted in an explicit provision of Duke's Faculty Handbook. For "professors of practice" such as Charney, Duke requires "annual reviews" to "be conducted by the director of a program, chair, or dean for the purpose of providing direction and advice to the faculty member regarding progress at Duke." Yet over the course of his last five-year contract, the Sanford School failed to provide Charney a single review, or even the slightest indication of dissatisfaction. This deprived him of the opportunity to respond to concerns about his teaching and make appropriate adjustments.

By disregarding its published rules and regulations, Duke appears to have violated its contractual obligations to Charney.

And by dismissing a professor renowned for inspiring students to think for themselves, Duke seems to have betrayed its fundamental obligations to liberal education.

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