

Written Testimony of:  
Karen Schermerhorn  
Co-President, Faculty and Staff Federation of  
Community College of Philadelphia

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Higher Education

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Karen Schermerhorn is a professor of English at the Community College of Philadelphia, where she has taught for 39 years. She is also the president of the Faculty and Staff Federation at CCP which is the union representing all faculty, full and part-time, as well as the Classified staff. In addition, she serves as Vice President for Colleges of AFT Pennsylvania, and on the higher education program and policy council of the American Federation of Teachers.

First let me thank Chairman Stevenson, Co-chairman Curry and the rest of the members of the committee for the opportunity to submit written testimony. The Select Committee has an important decision to make and I applaud you for making sure that all constituents are heard. I think it is particularly important that during this final hearing you receive input from faculty, students, and administrators at the community college level since the hearings up to this point have focused primarily on four year institutions. I will focus my comments on my institution, the Community College of Philadelphia (CCP), where I have taught English for nearly 40 years, as well as community colleges in general.

As this is your fourth hearing, I know that you have heard a tremendous amount of testimony. Let me first say, in response to a question I imagine that I would be asked if I were testifying before you, that I believe it has been valuable for your committee to have heard as much testimony as you have. I think it is particularly important for you to find out, as I believe you have, that our institutions take these issues seriously and have processes in place to address them. I am going to outline for you what we do at CCP, but let me give you some background about our institution that I believe is important.

CCP has been serving Philadelphia and the state of Pennsylvania since 1965. Since then we have helped over a half million students and are the fifth largest higher education institution in the state. Students come to us seeking associate's degrees, certificates, improved workplace skills, and lifelong learning. Many students transfer to four-year programs and an amazing number, over 90 percent, stay and work in the area. In short, CCP provides broad and valuable resources to Philadelphia and, in particular, serves as an important contributor to the local economy and workforce.

Just as importantly, we help students to expand their knowledge and perspectives of the world around them and help them learn how to continue to inquire about that world. As our college's mission statement outlines, students are encouraged to

achieve an “improved ability to pursue paths of inquiry, to interpret and evaluate what is discovered, and to express reactions effectively.”<sup>1</sup>

As faculty members, then, our job is to help students succeed on multiple levels. It is tremendously rewarding to help students learn how to successfully sort through a complex world of ideas and make decisions based on an analysis of various facts, perspectives and opinions, but it is also an extremely complicated task. We are not producing widgets; this is a human endeavor. I submit to you that the vast majority of faculty members at CCP (and in higher education generally) are intensely focused on just that very challenge—preparing students for a complex world where knowledge and skills are increasingly important. My colleagues at CCP chose this profession because of their commitment to education, not politics. Certainly some may see their efforts to help the students who attend CCP succeed as a political endeavor in the largest sense, but they did not invest years in schooling and training in their disciplines because of their desire to be political commentators. Their interest is in helping students succeed, the pursuit of knowledge, and in particular, helping students develop a thirst for that same pursuit. This work is incredibly important at the community college level. And here, let me pause on one point.

As I have followed the committee’s work, as well as the national discussion surrounding these issues, there seems to be a “typical student” taking “typical classes” being discussed. That typical student is a naïve, traditional 18-24 year-old student taking classes that either have a natural connection to political theory (i.e., sociology, political science, or economics) or they are particular disciplines which appear not to be in favor such as social work, women’s studies, ethnic studies, etc. As at most community colleges, at CCP the situation is quite different. The median age of our students is 26. Sixty-six percent of them are women. The majority of our students work in addition to attending school, and many have family responsibilities. They are not children and they are hardly naïve. They are adults working with other adults to get an education to improve their lives and the lives of their families. They are

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<sup>1</sup> CCP Mission Statement, <http://www.ccp.edu/site/about/mission.php>.

enrolled in everything from general education to career and technical programs to continuing education. Sometimes their classes might involve discussions of politics or current events when appropriate. Sometimes differences of opinion are raised, and sometimes a student might feel disgruntled by something he or she has heard a faculty member or fellow student say—just as, I might add, I have been offended by comments others have made in my classes. This does not warrant more oversight, but rather a recognition that “[e]ducation,” as John Dewey put it “is not preparation for life; education is life itself.” At CCP, our students are well aware of the fact that school is a part of life that includes interactions among all kinds of different people with different beliefs, attitudes and opinions—that is, in fact, the strength of our institution, not its weakness.

That said, this committee is charged with looking at a very serious question, which is what happens when someone steps over the line—speaks or acts inappropriately in their role as a faculty member or as a student in a class. I commend Chairman Stevenson and the committee for recognizing that the correct question to ask, in this circumstance, is what process does the institution have in place for addressing that situation rather than making this an issue about a faculty member or a student?

At CCP we have an extensive Student Appeals Process for disciplinary issues regarding acceptable behavior in the classroom or on campus; grading issues where a student believes that he or she has received a grade in a prejudiced or capricious manner; and protecting a student’s freedom in the classroom. This process is readily available on the college website and easily accessible from the home page.<sup>2</sup> This process includes:

- An appeals committee made up equally of students, faculty and administrators;
- Student appeals advisors to assist students wishing to use the process;
- Timelines that ensure not only speedy resolution of a student’s appeal but also ample time to allow students to avail themselves of the process.

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<sup>2</sup> See [http://www.ccp.edu/site/current/conduct\\_code/appeals.php](http://www.ccp.edu/site/current/conduct_code/appeals.php).

In response to an inquiry about CCP's experience with complaints about political bias or mistreatment in the classroom due to political beliefs, the college's General Counsel reported that (1) only four complaints of the type referenced by this committee had been filed in the last five years, and (2) all of those complaints had been resolved through the Student Appeals Procedure discussed above. In short, and I believe this the primary issue before this committee,

- we have an extensive policy that covers the areas under question by this committee;
- our policy is utilized in the exceptional cases where it is required; and,
- our policy has brought resolution to the cases heard under its auspices.

So, does this mean that we do not have academic freedom problems at CCP? No it does not. I believe it means that we do not have a problem in the area that you are examining; however, we have what I consider to be a far greater problem impacting academic freedom as well as our ability to deliver the best education we can at CCP. That problem is the continuing decline in the number of full-time faculty we employ at CCP and the continuing reliance on and exploitation of part-time faculty. This is a problem that the legislature recognized in 2003 when the Joint State Government Commission presented the General Assembly with the report of the Advisory Committee on Part-time Faculty, Part-Time Faculty at Institutions Of Higher Education In The Commonwealth Of Pennsylvania. This report made wide ranging recommendations regarding the employment of part-time faculty that the committee believed "would improve the educational climate in Pennsylvania"<sup>3</sup> particularly at community colleges in Pennsylvania where 82.5% of our total faculty statewide are part-time.<sup>4</sup> The report begins with an important statement that goes both to the question before the committee as well as to my institution's concern with the over use of part-time faculty. The report states that "[a]lthough Pennsylvania has a long tradition of non-intervention in the management of affairs at institutions of higher

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<sup>3</sup> Part-Time Faculty at Institutions Of Higher Education In The Commonwealth Of Pennsylvania, 14

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 22

education in the Commonwealth, there is a legitimate public interest to provide for the fair treatment of public employees.”<sup>5</sup>

I have no intention of discussing this entire report, but two sets of related findings in the report are particularly relevant to your discussion here. First the report found that “Part-time faculty members are generally not invited to participate in campus committees or department meetings. . . . Often, part-time faculty members do not have the opportunity to choose the textbooks for their courses and, in some cases, may only have minor input into developing their own syllabi for the courses that they teach.<sup>6</sup> The report goes on to say that “job security for these faculty members may become an issue since institutions can often dismiss part-time faculty members with little notice and without due process rights afforded to full-time faculty members. In addition, part-time, untenured faculty members can lose their jobs for activities such as teaching controversial material or challenging grade changes.”<sup>7</sup> The report recommended involving part-time faculty more fully in the decision-making process and providing some form of job security but, for the most part, these problems still exist in our community colleges.

Part-time faculty are dedicated and hardworking professionals, but too many of them are trying to negotiate a system that does not promote their involvement in academic decision-making and does not reward them for pushing students to consider different, possibly controversial, viewpoints to help them broaden their perspective and deepen their analytical abilities. At our community colleges, “the academic atmosphere and the degree to which faculty have the opportunity to instruct and students have the opportunity to learn in an environment conducive to the pursuit of knowledge and truth and the expression of independent thought”<sup>8</sup> is a problem, but it isn’t liberal bias or unfair grading; it is the lack of academic freedom afforded the vast majority of our instructional workforce.

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<sup>5</sup> Part-Time Faculty at Institutions Of Higher Education In The Commonwealth Of Pennsylvania, 14

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 33-34.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 34-35.

<sup>8</sup> Pennsylvania H.R. 177, <http://www2.legis.state.pa.us/WU01/LI/BI/BT/2005/0/HR0177P2553.pdf>.

I have been a faculty member and a political leader in higher education long enough to know that the response to this concern will involve good intentions constrained by limited funding. I suggest that this answer is not good enough. We need to figure out, as stated by William Green, CEO of Accenture, how to stop overlooking one of our greatest assets and invest in community colleges. “[W]hile Americans are waking up to the idea that we need to sharpen our competitive edge in the world, many still overlook our system of community and junior colleges,” stated Green in a recent Newsweek article.<sup>9</sup> He should know. Not only is Green the CEO of a major U.S. corporation, but he as someone who credits a two-year college for getting him engaged in rising above his own expectations. And it was a faculty member who sparked that interest. “[I]t was a Dean professor, Charlie Kramer, who ignited my passion for economics and taught me how to think analytically.” That connection is what we strive for as the faculty at CCP, but there is much more we could be doing to support our faculty members in that endeavor.

I hope that I have provided you with evidence that the issue before the committee is not one that requires more attention beyond the institutional level at CCP and it certainly does not require more legislative oversight. What does require attention is how to improve the environment for faculty so that they can provide the students with the education they need and deserve.

Thank you for taking the time to read through my testimony.

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<sup>9</sup> Newsweek, May 1, 2006, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/12440501/site/newsweek/>.