

Conservative college faces faculty exodus: Academic freedom at issue

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A small evangelical Christian college focused on shaping home-schooled students for careers in public service will lose about one-third of its faculty after several professors at the young school charged that their academic freedoms were violated.

Administrators at Patrick Henry College in Purcellville, Virginia, which opened in 2000, called the professors' claims "patently, categorically false" and said the school's vision for classical liberal arts remains intact.

"Contrary to insinuations by departing faculty, PHC has been, and remains, zealously committed to a rigorous study and debate of all ideas, and all schools of thought, as the success of our students in every realm of the public square dutifully attests," the college said in a May 20 press release.

Departing faculty, by contrast, say administrators have questioned their adherence to the Bible in their writings and class discussions.

"It comes down to a number of issues—academic freedom, due process and antagonism to the Reformed faith," said David C. Noe, an assistant professor of classics. Noe and four other faculty decided during the spring semester that they would not return to the college in the fall. Noe, who was hired in 2000, will be a visiting professor at the University of Iowa.

The school's mission is to "prepare Christian men and women who will lead our nation and shape our culture with timeless biblical values." Eighty-five percent of the student body was home-schooled, and students often spend a semester in prominent internships, including at the White House.

The college's blended focus on liberal arts and biblical principles has led to disagreements about how to fulfill its mission.

Noe and J. Kevin Culberson, a departing assistant professor of history and literature, wrote a March article published in a Patrick Henry publication, the *Source*, in which they declared: “While it is true that the Bible contains all we need to know for reconciliation with God, it does not include all the information we need to live happy and productive lives.”

College chaplain Raymond Bouchoc, in a reply endorsed by college president Michael Farris, said the article left the reader with “some harmful implications.” Arguing that scripture is sufficient for providing “universal guiding principles for all of life,” Bouchoc said: “It may not provide the particulars of how to repair the door jamb, but it does provide universal principles applicable to fixing it.”

Erik Root, a departing instructor of government, said the issues at the school centered on “the ability for not only students to ask questions but professors to ask questions of the class.”

The five departing faculty—including one who was fired—were part of a total of 16 faculty at the start of the year. Before their plans to leave were announced, Farris declared that he is moving to the role of chancellor.

In April, the college announced that Graham Walker, a vice president and dean at Oklahoma Wesleyan University, would become the school’s president in July.

On May 20, 49 of the school’s 303 students graduated. David Halbrook, director of communications, said 92 percent of the remaining students plan to return in the fall.
- *Adelle M. Banks, Religion News Service*