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Op-ed below:

<https://academeblog.org/2017/02/08/responding-to-the-professor-watch-list/>

Responding to the "Professor Watch List"

Guest Blogger / [February 8, 2017](#)

BY MATTHEW BOEDY

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When I stood in front of my students on the first day of the semester a few weeks ago, I wondered for a moment how many knew I was on that “professor watch list” curated by the conservative group Turning Point. For the record, I’m on it for my stance against “campus carry.”

It was likely some knew, if we believe the reach of Turning Point’s Twitter account and campus chapters: 64,000+ followers and 275+ groups. My university in northeast Georgia, which does not have a TP chapter, is in a conservative area home to more than a few Confederate flags, a supermajority vote for Donald Trump, and state legislators who all voted for “campus carry” last year. I also appeared on state public radio about the list in December. And Charlie Kirk, founder of Turning Point, is a Fox News regular. So the odds were high.

During winter break, when I was fine-tuning my syllabus for my freshman composition course on the rhetoric of higher education, I told myself I didn’t care about the list. I wasn’t going to change my topics, my reading list, or my plans for discussions. I would “put my head down” and teach. Do my job. Defiance, if not indifference.

But as I planned my first day lecture – where I would introduce the themes of the course and why I thought rhetoric was the right avenue to study higher education – I changed tack.

I walked in that first day and announced to the students that this semester we would spend some time researching issues where I and they would have different opinions. As an example of my opinion I told them my stance on campus carry. I told the students that I didn't care what their opinions were, but I did care about their arguments. How and why and for what audience they argued. And I added there were answers of right and wrong to many things and if they argued for the latter, they would be expected to face criticism. Instead of being on a watch list – and the worries that could come with it – I was being a professor.

It probably isn't what Charlie Kirk wanted. In fact, I know it is not. He relishes the fact that he awakened a sleeping giant as colleagues across the country have nominated themselves and whole departments for his list. All the more evidence of his claim, he exclaims: higher education is biased against conservatives; look at all the liberals coming out to defend it.

What Kirk didn't think through was the local effect – the ways in which this individual professor would change. Unintended consequences are often the most powerful. In response to this list, I didn't back off my pedagogy; I strengthened it. I didn't silence myself; I wrote another op-ed and will fight the new "campus carry" bill in our legislature. Most importantly I didn't accept Turning Point's major premise – the hopeless divide of liberal and conservative in higher education. Instead, I invited legislators who want more guns on campus into my classroom. I made my classroom a place for thought, debate, rhetoric at its best.

I became a professor. One who owns values and opinions. One who imparts understanding, not merely skills and content. One who teaches, like those great pedagogues in ancient Athens. One who opens up space for democracy. For example, I had my students send emails to their senator about Betsy Devos. (By the way about 85% were against her confirmation.)

Higher education is under attack in many ways. From the labels of elitism to uselessness to inefficiency and ineffectiveness. And many faculty members have been silent in defending their cause, accepting their role as a cog in a system that argues for smaller and smaller budgets and battles other government agencies facing the wrath of groups like Turning Point whose main slogan is "Big Government Sucks."

Most sadly, we haven't been professors. And frankly, I wouldn't have become this version of a professor if I hadn't noticed one slow day a bill that wanted to put guns in the book bags, purses, and pockets of the students before me. I wonder what other things I have not been paying attention to.

Being a professor may be the only response we have in this age of institutional realignment and political headwinds too strong for critical thought. It may be the only route we have to a future. I don't mean to sound frightened, but I am. But I am not worried about a watchlist; I am worried about what is to come.

And let me remind you that the best place we can be professors is the classroom. As it has always been. We can organize nationally and practice citizenship at the state level. But an impact we always have had is in the people sitting in front of us. Who call us professors.

If professors being professors is the effect of the professor watchlist, I say amen.