

The new code of silence: Texas Tech University bans gender and sexuality teaching and research

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In a sweeping attack on freedom of speech and thought and science, Texas Tech University (TTU) in Lubbock, Texas, a public institution that serves 42,000 students, has issued a near total ban on the teaching, research and discussion of sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI). This is in line with other attacks in Texas university systems.

The draconian directive, announced in an April 9 memo from University Chancellor Brandon Creighton, is an obvious appeal to social and intellectual backwardness and an attempt to shove ultra-right Christian ideology down the throats of faculty, students and staff. This is only the thin end of the wedge, laying the groundwork for a far broader assault on critical investigations of modern society and, ultimately, of capitalism and the oppression and violence that flow from it. The “illegalization” of entire fields of study in this authoritarian manner has only sinister, Nazi-like implications.

Creighton is a right-wing figure, a former Republican Texas state legislator, in which capacity “he earned a reputation as a fiscal conservative and pro-business leader,” according to his official biography. That same jewel of a biography notes that Creighton’s “vision” at TTU centers on “advancing excellence” in “free-market enterprise.”

According to the university’s new policy, courses cannot include any materials that “center on” the topics of sexual orientation or gender identity. The issues cannot be raised in any university setting, no student can engage in research or write on the subjects, undergraduate and graduate courses, certificates, and programs that address sexual orientation and gender identity are now banned, and all future faculty hires must take into account the university’s new code of silence.

Even “incidental references”—defined as a single sentence—must be avoided and “alternate materials” swapped in. If this is impossible, the incidental references cannot be discussed. “There are no exceptions to the Alternate Materials Rule for core, undergraduate courses,” states the memo.

AI will be used to search out sexual orientation and gender identity themes.

Allegedly, students currently conducting research on or enrolled in programs that relate to SOGI can finish their studies, SOGI-related work by faculty already employed at TTU can continue, and references can be made to SOGI legal and political policies and demographic data where necessary. In addition, if the study of the subjects is required to attain professional certifications and credentials, students are permitted to do so.

However, the limits placed on these circumstances are so extreme as to make it impossible to actually investigate or discuss sexual orientation or gender identity.

Thus, if a textbook addresses the question, professors are instructed to skip over it. If the issue comes up in relation to another subject—for instance, the fact that James Baldwin, the major 20th century African

American author, was gay—it can be noted in passing, but not taken into consideration in discussions of Baldwin’s life story, much less his art.

Even in instances in which sexual orientation and gender identity are topics that must be learned or a person will be disqualified from his or her profession—such as counseling and the health sciences—TTU bureaucrats first must be notified of the fact and second, reserve the right to determine that the curriculum actually is not necessary.

The ACS Committee may require changes if, upon further review and consultation with the respective Provost, the committee determines the material is not strictly required by the relevant licensing or credentialing body, or if the content disclosed under patient and clinical care is determined not to be strictly required for such care.

In short, far-right ignoramuses who know nothing about science or society will be telling future doctors or therapists, for example, what they can and cannot know.

Other carve-outs from the policy that are announced in the memo are equally ominous. Allegedly, it is allowable to discuss intersex people—i.e. individuals whose biological sex is for some reason, whether it be physiological, chromosomal or hormonal, indeterminate—but, “faculty may not use these biological conditions to advocate for or validate sociological frameworks of fluid gender identities.” This stupidity contradicts the university’s own gag order. According to TTU, biological sex and gender are identical, with the former determining the latter. However, for a group of people whose sex the university acknowledges is neither clearly male nor female, it is impermissible to consider the fact that their gender identity may also not be binary.

The TTU Board of Regents’ absolute equating of sex and gender is one of the most degraded aspects of the policy. Under its “Two Human Sexes Requirement and Biological Science” section of the memo, the university declares, “State and federal law and TTU System guidance dictate that only two human sexes, male and female, are recognized.” It adds, as part of its “Prohibition on Endorsement of a Gender Spectrum,” “Instructors may not teach that gender identity is a fluid spectrum, endorse the existence of more than two genders, or decouple gender from biological sex as a factual or scientific baseline.”

There is neither a federal nor state law that states that there are only “two human sexes, male and female.” And while it is an aim of the extreme right, the First Amendment has not yet been overturned. People are free to say whatever they want about sex and gender.

Beyond that, historical and contemporary evidence demonstrate that

gender norms shift over time and vary across cultures. Homosexual sex was not uncommon among Roman men, and it was not regarded as a violation of male social norms. In Afghanistan today, some segments of society raise daughters as Bacha Pash—that is, female children are treated as boys until the age of puberty. In South Asia, Hijra are formally recognized as a third gender. Even in societies that have traditionally had more rigid categories, what has been expected of men and women has constantly changed, as cultures evolve and people push against, reject, and transform what is considered socially “acceptable” behavior.

For anyone who has a brain, it is obvious that while the genetic-biological differences that underpin the male-female divide have remained over the course of human history (albeit their complexities now much better understood) and are not simply a “social construct,” the boundaries of masculinity and femininity have shifted.

Both gender and human sexuality are fascinating and very complex realms of social reality, bringing together questions of biology, psychology and culture. They are universal, inescapable, and impact everyone. They are deserving of scientific inquiry, social reflection and artistic exploration. When society finally began to throw off the yoke of religious obscurantism, social humiliation and prudishness that for centuries surrounded these realms of the human experience and to understand these subjects as worthy of serious investigation, it took an important step forward.

The Christian right-wingers who penned TTU’s policy wish to, as Trump revealed in his promise to return Iran to the “stone age,” bring the world back in time. They fantasize about some sort of mythical-biblical age in which, in their mind’s eye, to be a woman means to pop out infants and a man to run around clubbing animals for dinner. The consideration of anything otherwise is blasphemy to be denounced by the priests of the high order.

An aspect of the memo that is less well-developed but equally, if not more, dangerous, is the attack on those who are not heterosexual. While much of the TTU board’s order focuses on assaulting the idea of gender fluidity, the study, discussion and research of sexual orientation is also banned. The very words “gay,” “lesbian,” “bisexual,” “queer,” can no longer exist at TTU, much less be the subject of investigation and discussion.

Homosexuality is commonplace in society and widely accepted by the majority of the US population, which generally also believes that LGBTQ+ communities should have special anti-discrimination protections. The ultra-right, however, has always viewed romantic and physical relationships that defy social boundaries with terror, because they bear within them the prospect that people will unite across divides and challenge those in power. At TTU, these layers, knowing that support for the Trump administration’s policies is faltering and they are isolated and increasingly hated, hope they can stoke ignorance and use fear as some sort of bulwark.

In an effort to win support for its policy, the Board of Regents includes prohibitions that tap into frustrations over the identity-politics approach that has come to dominate academia over the course of the last several decades.

They write,

To ensure academic objectivity, faculty are prohibited from teaching as absolute truth that: ? One race or sex is inherently superior to another; ? An individual, by virtue of race or sex, is inherently racist, sexist, or oppressive, consciously or unconsciously; ? Any person should be discriminated against or receive adverse treatment because of race or sex; ? Moral character or worth is determined by race or sex; ? Individuals bear responsibility or guilt for actions of others of the same race or sex;

or ? Meritocracy or a strong work ethic are inherently racist, sexist, or constructs of oppression.

The standards outlined here are directed at the reactionary notions, preached widely in the social sciences and humanities, that all whites are racists, all men are oppressors, all heterosexual individuals are privileged and that these hierarchies constitute the social structure, are systemic and institutional, inescapable tools of domination that benefit all within the majority group. The *New York Times* has been a leading proponent of this view, with its 1619 Project rewriting American history in order to fit this narrative. Concepts like “color-blind racism,” propagated by sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, apply these notions to contemporary reality. For years, DEI [Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion] efforts have become the mainstay of the Democratic Party and what passes for American liberalism or radicalism.

When applied to the classroom, these racial, gender, and sexuality-based approaches, with zero progressive content, have been enormously damaging, serving as grist for the mill for the far right. For years, sociology courses have, to varying degrees, subjected students to the gospel of “white privilege,” terrorizing those who question the validity of the concept, which is rooted in a rejection of economic class as the basis of oppression, bulldozes over all social and historical complexities to arrive at a pre-determined idea that the root of society’s problems has and always will be “whites,” full stop.

Research has likewise suffered, with scholars often so busy “queering” and “gendering” whatever subject matter is under discussion that the most important questions are drowned in a miasma of secondary, tertiary and even less important themes, such that no one could ever possibly understand anything. However much a study of sexuality among Civil War soldiers might be interesting from the standpoint of understanding the men who fought and died, the conflict between North and South was not fundamentally about “heteronormativity” and the matter, to be blunt, is of little importance for understanding the essence of the revolution that destroyed slavery in the US.

But while the far-right taps into the frustrations within the broader population over these approaches, it seeks to use them not to foster critical discussion, but to set the stage for further and deepened censorship and its own form of even more intense ideological terror. The stupidities of the identity politicians are being used to prepare an assault on the real threat to the wealthy and powerful—the idea that class oppression is the basis of capitalism and thus class struggle the basis for liberation.



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