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Mitch Daniels Sought To Censor Public Universities, Professors

AP

| By TOM LOBIANCO

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INDIANAPOLIS — Former Indiana Gov. Mitch Daniels pledged to promote academic freedom when he became president of Purdue University in January, but newly released emails show he attempted to eliminate what he considered liberal "propaganda" at Indiana's public universities while governor.

Emails obtained by The Associated Press through a Freedom of Information Act request show Daniels requested that historian and anti-war activist Howard Zinn's writings be banned from classrooms and asked for a "cleanup" of college courses. In another exchange, the Republican talks about cutting funding for a program run by a local university professor who was one of his sharpest critics.

The success of those efforts remains unclear; Zinn's book, for example, is still used in some courses for aspiring teachers. But Daniels did launch an expansive push while governor to change what courses those hopeful teachers could take for credit at Indiana colleges. That effort is ongoing.

The emails are raising eyebrows about Daniels' appointment as president of a major research university just months after critics questioned his lack of academic credentials and his hiring by a board of trustees he appointed.

Ken Paulson, president of the First Amendment Center, said it's not unusual for governors or mayors to denounce art, music or popular culture. But he said he couldn't find any other examples of governors trying to censor political opponents.

"What sets this apart is what appears to be a back-channel effort by the governor to limit access to ideas," said Paulson, also dean of the College of Mass Communication at Middle Tennessee State University. "Under the First Amendment, the government is prohibited from trying to suppress expression with which it disagrees."

In a rapid exchange of emails between top state education officials on Feb. 9, 2010, including then-Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Bennett, Daniels sought assurance that a Zinn book exploring historical events that Zinn said got little attention was removed from Indiana classrooms.

"This terrible anti-American academic has finally passed away," Daniels wrote. "The obits and commentaries mentioned his book, 'A People's History of the United States,' is the 'textbook of choice in high schools and colleges around the country.' It is a truly execrable, anti-factual piece of disinformation that misstates American history on every page.

"Can someone assure me that it is not in use anywhere in Indiana? If it is, how do we get rid of it before more young people are force-fed a totally false version of our history?"

Scott Jenkins, Daniels' education adviser, quickly responded by noting it was being used at Indiana University in a course for teachers on the Civil Rights, feminist and labor movements.

"This crap should not be accepted for any credit by the state. No student will be better taught because someone sat through this session. Which board has jurisdiction over what counts and what doesn't?" Daniels responded three minutes later.

David Shane, a top fundraiser and state school board member, quickly replied with a strategy directing Bennett and Indiana's commissioner for higher education to review university courses across the state. Shane later added that a statewide review "would force to daylight a lot of excrement."

Seven minutes later, Daniels signed off on the plan.

"Go for it. Disqualify propaganda and highlight (if there is any) the more useful offerings. Don't the ed schools have at least some substantive PD (professional development) courseware to upgrade knowledge of math, science, etc," Daniels wrote.

In a separate round of emails in April 2009, Daniels called for an audit and possible funding cut for a program run by Charles Little, executive director of the Indiana Urban Schools Association and a professor at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis. Little had been highly critical of Daniels' education overhaul in internal emails and he often critiqued the governor's performance at public meetings.

On Tuesday, Daniels stood by his demand that Zinn be excluded from Indiana classrooms but said his request was limited to K-12 schools, where the state has control of the curriculum.

"We must not falsely teach American history in our schools," he said in a Tuesday email to the AP. "We have a law requiring state textbook oversight to guard against frauds like Zinn, and it was encouraging to find that no Hoosier school district had inflicted his book on its students."

Daniels made no mention of Little in Tuesday's email, and it wasn't immediately clear if the audit went through. But he repeated his contention from the Zinn email exchanges that "there is need for a cleanup of what is credit-worthy in teaching of our professions."

"Particularly, I think we need to look at an upgrade of offerings to increase knowledge in the areas of math and science," he said.

Cary Nelson, an English professor at the University of Illinois who served six years as president of the American Association of University Professors, was taken aback by the emails.

"It is astonishing and shocking that such a person is now the head of a major research university, making decisions about the curriculum, that one painfully suspects embodies the same ignorance and racism these comments embody," Nelson said.

The AAUP often investigates cases of censorship from university officials, Nelson said, but it's unlikely the group would open an investigation of Daniels unless his tactics had continued through his time as Purdue's president.

Daniels has adopted a different public approach since taking over at Purdue. He hosted a lecture that included AAUP members on speech suppression at universities nationwide, and he sent an "open letter" to the Purdue community in January saying universities have squashed free speech rather than encourage it.

"The academies that, through the unique system of tenure, once enshrined freedom of opinion and inquiry now frequently are home to the narrowest sort of closed-mindedness and the worst repression of dissident ideas," he wrote.

J. Paul Robinson, former chairman of the Purdue University Senate, which represents faculty, reviewed Daniels' emails Tuesday and said he wasn't concerned that they would transfer to Purdue.

"The faculty still are the ones that establish the academic standards and the curricula – and we are not easily moved," Robinson said. "Mitch knows this, and I am pretty sure he respects it – even more now that he is here than when he was outside."

Purdue University Board of Trustees Chairman Keith Krach, who hired Daniels last year, did not return an email seeking comment. Trustees are scheduled to receive a six-month assessment from Daniels this week.