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A Split Decision for Gore, This Time Among His Columbia Students

By FELICITY BARRINGER

Al Gore taught his last journalism class at Columbia University yesterday. The reviews are in for this politician-as-teacher, and they are mixed.

Some students were thrilled at their proximity to fame and said they felt that the former vice president had opened their horizons. Others felt cheated. They complained that he had treated them more like a studio audience than budding journalists as he chatted with celebrity guests like Rupert Murdoch, David Letterman and Alan Greenspan, and ducked questions about the election.

"It's really a problem to have a professor who's afraid to say what he thinks," said Seth Solomonow, a journalism graduate student who attended most of the classes in this noncredit course at Columbia's School of Journalism.

Mr. Gore's explanation yesterday that he did not want to worsen the post-election rifts "during a period of constitutional vulnerability" mollified some skeptical students, but they said they would have welcomed the explanation more when the course began, not as it was ending.

The former vice president's reticence, like so much about his course, was a product of a jarring culture clash. From the moment the school agreed to his offer to teach, the remnants of the Gore campaign image machine — a rump caucus of aides with cell phones buzzing, e-mail flying and thumbs punching away at wireless pager keyboards — were inserted, episodically, into a freewheeling, questioning academic culture.

But an academic culture of free inquiry is not usually besieged by a gaggle of reporters on hand to record every random musing. Usually, courses take weeks to plan, not days. Usually, the students do not suspect a professor is image-mongering at their expense, and few professors worry about students' fattening their clipping files by writing news



Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

Al Gore, with security and aides, arriving at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism to teach his final class.

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articles about their lectures.

For Michael Arnone, a journalism student, the class offered a lesson that the school may not have intended. "I did get lots out of it," he said. "I learned how to interact with a very intelligent, highly connected and experienced source who isn't there to tell me what I want to know; he's there to tell me what he wants me to know. That is valuable experience for any reporter."

To hear Mr. Gore tell it, he chanced on the notion of teaching journalism when musing on his immediate future after the Supreme Court ruling that led to George W. Bush's becoming president.

"I thought about the subjects I might be qualified to teach," he said in an interview yesterday. "And I concluded that there were really none," he added with a laugh. "And then I glanced back at my résumé and what popped out at me was the fact that I had worked as a journalist for several years. So I thought maybe I could teach journalism."

Roshni Abayasekara, a journalism student, said she would have preferred if Mr. Gore had played to his strengths, and explained how politicians handled the press. She warmed to the class, she said, when the guest speakers arrived. "What I particularly enjoyed were the speakers that he brought in and the almost question-and-answer sessions he would have," she said. "He was very intuitive and posed a bunch of really insightful questions."

Among the things Mr. Gore would not talk about in class were his future political plans. In a brief interview yesterday, he explained: "The election was not what I came here to talk about. And I tried to make that clear and I think the vast majority of the students understood it, and whether they agreed with it or not, they certainly respected it."

As for his future, he added: "I don't know what I will do. I don't know if I will be a candidate again or not. And I'm enjoying making a contribution in other ways. By teaching. My wife and I are writing a book." He said he wanted to wait and make decisions when "I have a little more distance and perspective. Distance from and perspective on the last election."

His students had hoped to share in that perspective. Mr. Gore's reticence and the haphazard style of the early lectures left them frustrated.

The course was fraught with unintended consequences from the moment when Reed E. Hundt, Mr. Gore's friend and a former chairman of the Federal Communication Commission, called Tom Goldstein, the journalism dean, to propose that Mr. Gore teach at Columbia.

The course was thrown together at the last minute. "I don't think ever in the history of a university has a course been put together in two days," Mr. Goldstein said. "That led to some initial confusion, I think. We can operate pretty fast, but a university is not accustomed to working under those deadlines. Even a journalism school."

The Gore camp's conditions clashed with the desire of administrators to expose as many students as possible to the prize guest lecturer. Mr. Gore wanted a class to have a consistent group of students, and be small enough for him to build a rapport, according to those who were part of the initial planning. The Gore camp balked when administrators at the School of International and Public Affairs set up a lottery, hoping to cycle 100 of their interested students through the eight-class course. By the second class, a set group of students from that school were included.

The first lecture was the defeated Democratic presidential candidate's first public appearance since President Bush's inauguration. A hungry press corps was waiting outside to hear what he had to say. The idea of a news conference after class had been

rejected by the Gore camp, according to people briefed on the negotiations. So news organizations from Newsday and CNN to Fox News, USA Today, The Daily News and The New York Times, were recruiting students to report on their class. At which point David Klatell, the associate dean, who was quarterbacking the fracas while Mr. Goldstein was on a trip abroad, declared that the class was off the record.

The idea that a journalism school was pulling a veil over a newsworthy event led to a public relations disaster, which some students said gave them a dose of cynicism about their celebrity professor.

Evan Cornog, a journalism professor, said yesterday, "A better job could have been done preparing everyone for reasonable expectations." The course, he added, "just evolved and there were a few mistakes."

As the classes turned from Gore- led lectures to Gore-led question- and-answer sessions, some students kept pushing him to answer election- related questions. Some of the nonjournalists in the class grew tired of it.

Benjamin Bolger, a graduate student in architecture, said last week: "I admire Professor Gore deeply. I think he's made a very genuine effort to give of himself freely to students."

"What I find troubling is that a lot of students ask questions that are clearly things he has suggested he is not prepared to speak about," he said, adding, "I think it's a problem when journalism students don't respect those wishes."

Marguerite Reardon, a student who attended some of the lectures, said: "You know, I thought it was interesting. I think maybe there are people out there who think he shouldn't have been there, that it was a waste of time. I don't think it was a waste of time. I thought it was interesting. He's a noteworthy person. He is probably going to be doing other stuff. I wanted to hear what he had to say."

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