

ASK FACTCHECK

Obama a Constitutional Law Professor?

Posted on March 28, 2008

Q: Was Barack Obama really a constitutional law professor?

A: His formal title was "senior lecturer," but the University of Chicago Law School says he "served as a professor" and was "regarded as" a professor.

FULL QUESTION

When I was in law school, I addressed all of my course instructors as "professors," regardless of their rank or formal position in the school academic hierarchy (tenured professor, assistant professor, adjunct professor, lecturer, etc.). Was Obama exaggerating or factually wrong in referring to himself as a "constitutional law professor" at the University of Chicago Law School even though his official title was lecturer?

FULL ANSWER

Sen. Obama, who has taught courses in constitutional law at the University of Chicago, has regularly referred to himself as "a constitutional law professor," most famously at a March 30, 2007, fundraiser when he [said](#), "I was a constitutional law professor, which means unlike the current president I actually respect the Constitution." A spokesman for the Republican National Committee immediately took exception to Obama's remarks, pointing out that Obama's title at the University of Chicago was "senior lecturer" and not "professor."

Recently, Hillary Clinton's campaign has picked up on this charge. In a March 27 conference call with reporters, Clinton spokesman Phil Singer claimed:

Singer (March 27): Sen. Obama has often referred to himself as "a constitutional law professor" out on the campaign trail. He never held any such title. And I think anyone, if you ask anyone in academia the distinction between a professor who has tenure and an instructor that does not, you'll find that there is ... you'll get quite an emotional response.

The campaign also sent out an e-mail quoting an Aug. 8, 2004, column in the *Chicago Sun-Times* that [criticized](#) Obama for calling himself a professor when, in fact, the University of Chicago faculty page listed him as "a senior lecturer (now on leave)." The *Sun-Times* said,

"In academia, there is a vast difference between the two titles. Details matter." The Clinton campaign added that the difference between senior lecturers and professors is that "professors have tenure while lecturers do not."

We agree that details matter, and also that the formal title of "professor" is not lightly given by academic institutions. However, on this matter the University of Chicago Law School itself is not standing on formality, and is siding with Obama.

Due to numerous press inquiries on the matter, the school released a carefully worded [statement](#) saying that for his 12 years there he was considered to be "a professor."

***UC Law School statement:** The Law School has received many media requests about Barack Obama, especially about his status as "Senior Lecturer." From 1992 until his election to the U.S. Senate in 2004, Barack Obama served as a professor in the Law School. He was a Lecturer from 1992 to 1996. He was a Senior Lecturer from 1996 to 2004, during which time he taught three courses per year. Senior Lecturers are considered to be members of the Law School faculty and are regarded as professors, although not full-time or tenure-track. The title of Senior Lecturer is distinct from the title of Lecturer, which signifies adjunct status. Like Obama, each of the Law School's Senior Lecturers have high-demand careers in politics or public service, which prevent full-time teaching. Several times during his 12 years as a professor in the Law School, Obama was invited to join the faculty in a full-time tenure-track position, but he declined.*

Contrary to what the Clinton campaign claimed, not all professors have tenure. For instance, academics with the title of "assistant professor" typically work for between five and seven years before being reviewed for tenure.

Furthermore, Obama was not merely an "instructor" as Phil Singer stated. As a "senior lecturer," Obama was in good company: The six other [faculty members](#) with the title include the associate dean of the law school and Judge Richard Posner, who is widely considered to be one of the nation's top legal theorists.

-Joe Miller

Update March 28: As originally written this item stated flatly that the law school "confirms that Obama was a professor." We have rewritten the item in parts to more accurately reflect the nuance in the law school's news release.

Sources

Farrington, Brendan. "Obama: Bush Not Respecting Constitution." The San Francisco Chronicle, 30 March 2007. 27 March 2008.

Sweet, Lynn. "Sweet Column Reprise. Obama's Book: What's Real, What's Not." Chicago Sun

Times, 8 August 2004. 27 March 2008.

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