

A voice of dissent at Navy

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Since last week, Bruce Fleming's e-mail inbox has been jumping.

On Friday, *The New York Times* published an opinion piece in which Fleming, a civilian English professor at the Naval Academy, said the school has "lost its way" and should be "fixed or abolished" along with the other military service academies.

Not unexpectedly, some of the resulting e-mail he's received from alumni and fellow faculty members has been of the "How dare you?" variety.

But Fleming said 90 percent of the responses have been positive. Midshipmen, some e-mailing from their private accounts rather than their school computers, have thanked him for saying what they cannot.

"I see myself as speaking for the students who can't speak out for themselves," Fleming said in an interview at his home in Davidsonville.

Fleming said he once asked midshipmen in his two sections of freshman English to write about how their view of the Naval Academy had changed since they started. Nearly every one wrote about disillusionment.

At a proud institution that prefers to keep disagreements within its well-guarded walls, Fleming is a threat. He can't be fired (easily, anyway) because he's a tenured professor who's been at the academy for 23 years. But the academy can sure try to make his life difficult.

In superficial ways, the academy seems open to the public. It's glad enough to let tourists and the press in to witness parades, meal formation, the Herndon Monument climb, the Sea Trials, graduation and, of course, the Blue Angels shows - the shiny stuff that makes up what Fleming calls "military Disneyland."

But substantive critiques of the institution's mission are not appreciated. Nor are simple questions, except under tightly controlled circumstances.

Midshipmen are discouraged from talking to the press without permission. Although any random tourist can walk in and wander the academy grounds after showing a driver's license, reporters are instructed that they must check in with the academy's Public Affairs Office before visiting and be chaperoned like schoolchildren on a field trip.

Fleming has been annoying the powers that be for years. In 2005, he wrote a book, "Annapolis Autumn," that took a critical look at academy culture. An opinion piece last year in *The Capital* criticized the institution's affirmative action policies, saying they undermine the excellence upon which the academy prides itself.

That got him labeled a racist by some, though he is a registered Democrat who called his background "completely liberal."

Fleming said he has faced consequences for his criticism, including the denial of pay raises and an "official letter of caution" in his file.

Cmdr. Joe Carpenter, an academy spokesman, said privacy laws prohibited him from discussing personnel issues regarding an individual employee.

So who is the guy causing all this controversy? For starters, he's not the firebrand you might think.

He is 55, but could pass for 15 years younger. With his trim frame, neatly kept hair and thin-rimmed glasses, he does not fit the image of the paunchy English professor with wild hair who rarely sees the sunshine.

Fleming, who has worked as a model, goes to the gym and likes to grab students' attention on the first day of class by doing one-armed push-ups. He has praised mids for their politeness, eagerness and idealism, in contrast to your average sullen college student.

"I love the students at the Naval Academy, and I believe in the mission of the institution," he said. Later, he added: "My beef with the institution is that it fails to live up to its own standards."

The timing of the *New York Times* piece has drawn as much flak as the content. It seemed "ungracious," in the words of the kindest critic, to run such a piece a week before commissioning - a time of pride and celebration for mids, parents and the school.

In fact, the timing was not Fleming's choice. He started shopping the piece months ago to publications including *The Christian Science Monitor* and *The Washington Post*. He said *The Times* accepted it in March, but did not publish it until May 21, presumably because it was graduation season.

Fleming said the people in charge of the Naval Academy - superintendents and commandants who serve for a few years at a time - rarely ask fundamental questions about the future of the institution.

As a military installation, the academy is often compared to a ship. And as Fleming observed, most people assigned to captain a ship simply want to complete the journey safely. Quite reasonably, they don't ask: "Should we have this kind of ship at all?"

Fleming said he does not ask such things simply to be provocative, but because he wants to bridge the divide between the civilian and military worlds.

"Change won't happen from within," Fleming wrote in *The Times*.

I asked Fleming whether he has any confidence that his critiques will lead to change. He smiled and said, "I'm a professor. I write."

Aware of the risk of sounding a little pompous, he said his mission, like that of the philosopher Socrates, is to seek the truth regardless of what's popular.

As Fleming noted, Socrates was sentenced to die by drinking the poison hemlock.

But then, Socrates didn't have tenure.