

1/2005

Re: Protect Conservative Students' Ignorance

Dear Editor,

A recent letter (RG, 01-08-2005) promoting an "Academic Bill of Rights" is one of the more scary ideas I've seen in quite some time. While a quick read of the document gives the impression of promoting the free expression of ideas, the ultimate implications of the following section should be clear upon further consideration: "Faculty will not use their courses for the purpose of political, ideological, religious or anti-religious indoctrination." That sounds fine until one considers that teaching the heliocentric theory (that the Earth goes around the Sun) might be construed as "anti-religious indoctrination" by some religious followers. Let's not even mention the basis for the modern understanding of biology (evolution by natural selection) which is probably considered "anti-religious indoctrination" by most Protestants in this country.

The ulterior motive of this anti-intellectual movement seems to be one of preventing students from being exposed to any ideas that might challenge their heartfelt intuitions or beliefs. This misguided effort is a direct reversal of the traditional role of a university education in which the hard-won, evidence based and often counter-intuitive knowledge of humankind is taught to each new generation of students, in a continuous effort to overcome our all too natural tendency to believe "how it seems to us" as opposed to "how it really is".

Yes, we are all born with the intuition that heavier objects fall faster than light objects, and yes it does indeed appear that the Sun goes around the Earth, and after all, how could something too small to see, make me sick? But as intuitive as these beliefs seem, they are not supported by the evidence. Learning that many of our intuitions and beliefs are sometimes reliable but also often fallible, is an essential part of an enlightened education. Learning to think critically (even about one's own beliefs), questioning authority and tradition is how understanding progresses. Let's not limit the challenging of young minds to think critically. This effort will ultimately prove fatal to our country's ability to innovate and discover new frontiers of knowledge.

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