

## St. Petersburg Times

### Bill a sign of lessons unlearned

A Times Editorial

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Not sufficiently content with political intrigue in the state Capitol, House Education Chairman Dennis Baxley now wants to spread some to university campuses. His "student academic freedom" bill is a cookie-cutter version of one that conservative California activist David Horowitz is pushing around the country, and it is designed to put professors on notice.

"Students have a right," the bill intones, "to expect that their academic freedom and the quality of their education will not be infringed upon by instructors who persistently introduce controversial matter into the classroom . . . that serves no legitimate pedagogical purpose."

Presumably, Baxley would summon Horowitz to campuses to decide which matters are "controversial" and serve "no legitimate pedagogical purpose." Or maybe Baxley, an Ocala funeral director, plans to leave all that to the lawyers, as aggrieved students end up suing their professors for impolitic remarks. Think neurosurgeons have a hard time getting malpractice insurance? Wait until professors can be sued by students who are offended by the notion that George Washington was a great president.

The potential impact on faculty recruitment is obvious, and the American Association of University Professors already has denounced the Horowitz code. "The danger of such guidelines," the association writes, "is that they invite diversity to be measured by political standards that diverge from the academic criteria of the scholarly profession."

That much is obvious, and this bill might be dismissed as nothing more than a source for legislative amusement except that its sponsor, Baxley, is the House's education leader. As such, his endorsement might also be seen as reflecting the views of the speaker, Allan Bense. But no one who approaches the issue with any critical thought can possibly believe that lawmakers should be trusted to referee campus debates. Three years ago, voters created a university Board of Governors in an attempt to prevent just such political interference.

In the 1950s and '60s, Florida gained notoriety for a legislative witch hunt, known as the Johns Committee, that searched campuses for homosexuals, Communists and civil rights sympathizers. Surely lawmakers don't want to go down that road again.