

Posted on Thu, Apr. 07, 2005

Unenlightened

'Academic freedom' bill is a sham

Rare is the college student who, by graduation, hasn't had his or her opinions, assumptions and value system tested. That's as it should be. Aside from a professional degree, one of the most valuable things a university can offer is an opportunity to learn to think for oneself.

Rep. Dennis Baxley, R-Ocala, obviously doesn't think Florida's public college students are capable of such an exercise. So under the guise of "academic freedom," he has sponsored a bill to shield their tender little minds from "controversial material."

Mr. Baxley has based his bill on the belief that university professors overwhelmingly identify themselves as liberal. There's merit to that observation, which has been bolstered by studies and surveys. But that's not inherently bad, and it could be that academic life appeals more to people on the left end of the political spectrum.

Though it purports to fight political correctness, Mr. Baxley's bill is nothing but. "Controversial" is a subjective term, and this measure would have a chilling effect on speech at Florida's public universities as professors weigh the consequences of airing ideas in the classroom.

That ultimately cheats students. Learning isn't just a matter of memorizing facts and figures or of communicating with the like minded. People often draw conclusions by hearing ideas that contradict their own, even those that offend them.

Consider the uproar in 1999 when Glayde Whitney, a behavior geneticist at Florida State University, wrote the foreword to a book by ex-Klansman David Duke. The now-deceased Mr. Whitney's claims that black people are intellectually inferior to whites were repugnant; yet, then-President Sandy D'Alemberte ignored calls for the professor's ouster and defended his right to free speech.

While strongly disagreeing with Mr. Whitney's views, Mr. D'Alemberte recognized that public universities are an ideal setting to debate ideas - the good, the bad, the dangerous.

Conservative commentator David Horowitz didn't aid Mr. Baxley's cause by invoking filmmaker Michael Moore's 2004 appearance at FSU as "evidence" of the university's imbalance. As Rep. Loranne Ausley, D-Tallahassee, pointed out, that visit was sponsored by FSU's College Democrats - and did they forget that last spring's commencement speaker was Vice President Dick Cheney?

Other lawmakers would do well to give Mr. Baxley's bill a grade of F - for fatuous.