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Restoring Liberal Education

The world got the welcome news recently that a group of distinguished scholars had formed a new organization dedicated to the rescue of undergraduate education. It is called the American Academy For Liberal Education, and it is headed by such stellar figures as Columbia University critic and historian Jacques Barzun and Harvard's Edward O. Wilson, professor of science. Its goal is to restore liberal education as we once knew it. As we knew it, that is, before the legions of the politically orthodox succeeded in converting so many institutions of learning into ideological re-training centers.

The organization wants among other things to toughen academic standards substantially. It explicitly affirms that freedom of speech and thought are essentials of intellectual inquiry.

The concerns of the scholars who have formed the American Academy for Liberal Education extend to every aspect of undergraduate education—including the phenomena of grade inflation, whereby A's and B's are handed out virtually as a matter of a student's "right." As Jacques Barzun told us, "The decline in the judgment of quality equals the decline of quality itself."

His group wants mandatory courses in sciences, math, languages, literature, and to ensure that students get a solid grounding in Western Civilization. (They are pursuing these goals from 1015 Eighteenth St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.) But no aspect of this effort to rescue higher education will be more important than that directed toward the protection of free speech and thought. The news of this group's formation is especially heartening in light of what is going on at the University of Pennsylvania.

There, as readers of these pages learned recently, a student has been called before a campus tribunal to face possible expulsion, because he called a group of noisemakers under his dorm window, "water buffalo"—now alleged to be a racial slur. Penn President Sheldon Hackney—Mr. Clinton's nominee to head the National Endowment for the Humanities—has been nothing if not insistent that the grotesque proceedings against this student go ahead.

Mr. Hackney advised us that the reason the university "procedures" must be seen through to their end was that the sorority women charging that they had been racially harassed "felt

mere *feeling* of grievance justify the administration's punitive campaign against a student—for using a term clearly having no relation to a racial slur? Yes, Mr. Hackney told us, the women's feelings of grievance required redress.

Obviously this sort of thing isn't all that rare, what with universities hiring figures such as Penn's Judicial Inquiry Officer Robin Read to monitor student speech. But when news of such events escapes beyond the stone walls, it doesn't go down well among the general populace.

An editorial in the Philadelphia Daily News notes, "It is difficult to imagine bright young minds being educated by a pack of idiots, but apparently that is the way things currently go at Penn." A Massachusetts board member of the American Civil Liberties Union attests that "the Penn administration is one of the most cowardly and craven of any major university."

This last comment might have referred to a recent incident in which no great official concern was displayed when a group of black and Latino students stole and destroyed all 14,000 copies of the student newspaper, the Daily Pennsylvanian, because that paper published the work of a conservative writer. Nat Hentoff reports in the Village Voice on Mr. Hackney's comment that the theft of the newspapers shows that "two important university values—diversity and open expression—seem to be in conflict."

Not everyone in the academy finds this conflict difficult to resolve. At a forum on universities and free speech held at Harvard recently, Professor Randall Kennedy of Harvard Law School challenged the close association between free speech and the First Amendment. According to an account of Prof. Kennedy's "argument" in the Harvard Gazette, the university's official newspaper:

"A university must set its own standards because the Supreme Court can rule either way on freedom of expression cases," he said. "If the court, for example, ruled that shouting racial epithets was protected under the Constitution, then Harvard should offer less free speech than the surrounding society," he reasoned."

He reasoned?

Clearly Professor Barzun and company at the American Academy for Liberal Education have their work cut out for them restoring standards of thought, judgment and achievement at this country's highest institutions