Why don't academicians like idea of 'intellectual diversity'?

By ROGER KOOPMAN

If you want to see members of the university community have a total meltdown, start asking questions about their toleration of differing points of view, and their safeguards against political and ideological indoctrination.

My House Bill 525 posed those questions, based on the Legislature's legitimate interest in encouraging a learning environment that is open, unbiased and intellectually diverse. You would have thought I set off the world's largest stink bomb, from the reactions I got!

In a free society, two overarching principles apply to public life: transparency and accountability.

These are democracy's insurance policies, nourishing and protecting the people's right to know, insisting that our public servants and governmental institutions operate in the light of day, their actions open to healthy public scrutiny.

Accountability is grounded in the belief that democratic governments do not write their own performance reviews. They are employed by the people, and their work must be judged by the people they serve.

Public institutions — all public institutions — are ultimately accountable to the taxpayers who underwrite them. I would submit that if a person working in the public sector has a "problem" with this principle, they are probably in the wrong line of work.

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But recently, I made a startling discovery while attempting to introduce more transparency into our state university system. Apparently the virtues of an open and free government do not apply to public higher education.

Reacting like a roomful of scorched cats, tenured educators protested as unthinkable, *any* effort to track the fairness and professionalism of university policies and instruction.

That is what the bill proposes. One annual report, added to the many studies and reports universities already produce on other aspects of "diversity."

HB525 then encourages institutional (not legislative) solutions to whatever problems become apparent. It recognizes that the free exchange of ideas is not just something desirable in theory; it must be promoted by actions — not just words — if the academy is to provide a rich education for its students. What the bill does not do is provide any form of legislative intervention or intrusion, nor any level of regulation, rulemaking or control.

The bill declares that "the free exchange of ideas is indispensable to teaching," and that universities should encourage "toleration of diverse opinions." Pretty radical stuff.

Throughout America, the overwhelming leftward tilt of university faculties is well documented. This imbalance not only runs the risk of ideological indoctrination, but even more concerning, it can effectively suppress competing points of view — as evidenced in the books never read, the ideas never discussed, the courses never offered, the speakers never heard and the professors never hired.

We know this problem exists in Montana, but to what extent? It is certainly evidenced in the politically correct speech codes at UM and MSU — chillingly reminiscent of Orwell's 1984.

Outlawed at UM, for example, are (1) comments about women's bodies, (2) sexist jokes, (3) inappropriate gifts, (4) hooting, whistling or lip-smacking noises, (5) statements like "hey, baby, give me a smile," (6) "exaggerated courtesy," and so forth.

MSU makes illegal any verbal or nonverbal behavior that might subject a member of the other sex to "embarrassment or discomfort." Take heed. The Campus Thought Police are watching you!

No studies have been done on our universities, and no objective data are available. I have heard shocking examples of political bias — including students being graded down for "incorrect" thinking, and professors being persecuted for their conservative views.

But rather than rely on stories, HB525 poses important questions and calls upon the u-system to examine itself.

Each university unit, at the request of the Board of Regents, would design and conduct its own study on intellectual diversity, then generate an annual report — to be presented at a public hearing before a committee of the legislature.

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Why, then, did academia go ballistic? Why indeed.

UM President George Dennison testified that HB525 would grievously interfere with the governance of his university. MSU President Geoff Gamble complained that such a law would frighten off top-level faculty, administrators and students.

University-professor-turned-legislator Franke Wilmer berated the bill as the brainchild of David Horowitz, even after I had informed her that Horowitz had nothing to do with it.

College administrator/legislator Margarett Campbell blasted the measure as "extremist." Student government lobbyist Scott Martin fumed that HB525 would "promote intellectual stifling and ignorance."

Reasonable people will not be swayed by the hysterical reactions of some.

Reasonable people will recognize that daylight and accountability do not destroy academic freedom — they strengthen it.

That public universities are n sacred cows, removed from all public scrutiny, simply because their calling is educational. But the most disconcerting aspect o this is the anger and paranoia that radiates from the Ivory Tower when someone suggests turning the flashlight on.

Why the fear of public exposure? Why the indignation over the slightest hint of public accountability? Why the obsessive claims to privileged secrecy Is the truth so incriminating tha it must stay hidden?

Lest we forget, this is Americ where governmental openness, transparency and accountability walk hand in hand with liberty itself.

They are the hallmarks of all our public institutions.

Once we accept the elitist notion that state universities are governments unto themselves, freed from any linkage between public funding and public accountability, on that day we will have sentenced those institu tions to the static, mushy mediocrity that protectionism and arrogance always produce.

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