

# The Detroit News

*The Detroit News - June 7, 1996*

## **Editorial: Marginalizing Academic Trivia**

American universities, we have noted often, are the last bastions of socialism. The publication of a New York University professor's bogus article by a "respectable" left-wing journal just because it flattered their ideological predisposition confirms that political correctness has replaced intellectual rigor on American campuses.

Fed-up with all this, a group of alumni are taking steps to nudge universities back to their true mission: Serving as centers for the transmission of learning.

Alumni donated about \$3.4 billion to colleges last year. In return, they received sky-rocketing tuitions, declining academic standards, lower graduation requirements, trivial courses, neglected teaching, speech codes and demands for more marginal courses in gender and race issues. Many English departments have relaxed their great authors requirement. And Yale University was forced to return a \$20 million grant to alumnus Lee Bass for failing to institute a Western Civilization program.

To make sure that their money is not used to finance questionable causes they do not support, some donors have formed the Fund for Economic Renewal under the eegis of the National Alumni Forum. The Forum, a bipartisan, nonprofit organization, consists of alumni and college trustees who share the goal of promoting academic freedom and excellence.

This is how the experiment will work: Instead of giving their money directly to universities and thereby relinquishing all control over it, donors will pool it in the fund. The fund will not only channel the money toward causes that the donor favors but also monitor how it is spent. The donor can instruct the fund to send the money to specific programs, universities, or causes. Donors who wish to make direct contributions can nevertheless get the fund's help in identifying projects worthy of financing.

More than \$50 million has already been entrusted to the fund. Especially helped will be small donors who lack the resources to properly steward their money in universities. "It can do for the individual donor what mutual funds did for the individual investor," notes James H. Higgins, former chief executive officer of Mellon Bank Corp., a supporter of the project.

The market analogy does not end there, however. Courses in cultural studies, deconstructionism and postmodern thought abound in academia partly because government subsidies insulate universities from their clients' demand. In fact, universities have little idea -- and no mechanism for finding out -- what curricula and courses have a genuine market. Gifts targeted to specific programs will provide important

clues as to what parents and students really want taught.

Our hunch is that even this small measure of donor oversight will go a long way toward marginalizing the academic trivia so common on campus. Others are welcome, of course, to solicit donations for their own whims and fads. But the Fund for Academic Renewal appears to be a worthwhile effort to shore up the mainstream in higher education.