

The Harvard Crimson

SEARCH

NEWS OPINION MAGAZINE SPORTS ARTS MEDIA FLYBY ADMISSIONS

Try Google AdWords™

www.google.com/AdWords

Get \$75 Worth of Advertising When You Spend \$25 With AdWords

The Doctrine of Academic Freedom

Let's give up on academic freedom in favor of justice

By SANDRA Y.L. KORN February 18, 2014

7

The Red Line

In July 1971, Harvard psychology professor Richard J. Herrnstein penned an article for Atlantic Monthly titled “I.Q.” in which he endorsed the theories of UC Berkeley psychologist Arthur Jensen, who had claimed that intelligence is almost entirely hereditary and varies by race. Herrnstein further argued that because intelligence was hereditary, social programs intended to establish a more egalitarian society were futile—he wrote that “social standing [is] based to some extent on inherited differences among people.”

When he returned to campus for fall semester 1971, Herrnstein was met by angry student activists. Harvard-Radcliffe Students for a Democratic Society **protested** his introductory psychology class with a bullhorn and **leaflets**. They tied up Herrnstein’s **lectures** with pointed questions about scientific racism. SDS even **called** for Harvard to fire Herrnstein, along with another of his colleagues, sociologist Christopher Jencks.

Herrnstein **told** The Crimson, “The attacks on me have not bothered me personally... What bothers me is this: Something has happened at Harvard this year that makes it hazardous for a professor to teach certain kinds of views.” This, Herrnstein seems not to have understood, was precisely the goal of the SDS activists—they wanted to make the “certain kinds of views” they deemed racist and classist unwelcome on Harvard’s campus.

Harvard's deans were also unhappy. They expressed concerns about student activists' "interference with the academic freedom and right to speak of a member of the Harvard faculty." Did SDS activists at Harvard infringe on Herrnstein's academic freedom? The answer might be that yes, they did—but that's not the most important question to ask. Student and faculty obsession with the doctrine of "academic freedom" often seems to bump against something I think much more important: academic justice.

In its oft-cited Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure, the American Association of University Professors **declares** that "Teachers are entitled to full freedom in research and in the publication of the results." In principle, this policy seems sound: It would not do for academics to have their research restricted by the political whims of the moment.

Yet the liberal obsession with "academic freedom" seems a bit misplaced to me. After all, no one ever has "full freedom" in research and publication. Which research proposals receive funding and what papers are accepted for publication are always contingent on political priorities. The words used to articulate a research question can have implications for its outcome. No academic question is ever "free" **from political realities**. If our university community opposes racism, sexism, and heterosexism, why should we put up with research that counters our goals simply in the name of "academic freedom"?

Instead, I would like to propose a more rigorous standard: one of "academic justice." When an academic community observes research promoting or justifying oppression, it should ensure that this research does not continue.

The power to enforce academic justice comes from students, faculty, and workers organizing together to make our universities look as we want them to do. Two years ago, when former summer school instructor Subramanian Swamy published hateful commentary about Muslims in India, the Harvard community **organized** to ensure that he **would not return** to teach on campus. I consider that sort of organizing both appropriate and commendable. Perhaps it should even be applied more broadly. Does Government Professor Harvey Mansfield have the legal right to publish a book in which he **claims** that "to resist rape a woman needs ... a certain ladylike modesty?" Probably. Do I think he should do that? No, and I would happily organize with other feminists on campus to stop him from publishing further sexist commentary under the authority of a Harvard faculty position. "Academic freedom" might permit such an offensive view of rape to be published; academic justice would not.

Over winter break, Harvard published a **statement** responding to the American Studies Association's **resolution** to boycott Israeli academic institutions until Israel ends its occupation of Palestine. Much of the conversation around this academic boycott has focused on academic freedom. Opponents of the boycott claim that it restricts the freedom of Israeli academics or interrupts the "free flow of ideas." Proponents of the boycott often argue that the boycott is intended to, in the end, increase, not restrict, academic freedom—the ASA points out that "there is no effective or substantive academic freedom for Palestinian students and scholars

under conditions of Israeli occupation.”

In this case, discourse about “academic freedom” obscures what should fundamentally be a political argument. Those defending the academic boycott should use a more rigorous standard. The ASA, like three other academic associations, decided to boycott out of a sense of social justice, responding to a call by Palestinian civil society organizations for boycotts, divestment, and sanctions until Israel ends its occupation of Palestine. People **on the right** opposed to boycotts can play the “freedom” game, calling for economic freedom to buy any product or academic freedom to associate with any institution. Only **those who care about justice** can take the moral upper hand.

It is tempting to decry frustrating restrictions on academic research as violations of academic freedom. Yet I would encourage student and worker organizers to instead use a framework of justice. After all, if we give up our obsessive reliance on the doctrine of academic freedom, we can consider more thoughtfully what is just.

Sandra Y.L. Korn '14, a Crimson editorial writer, is a joint history of science and studies of women, gender and sexuality concentrator in Eliot House. Her column usually appears on alternate Mondays.

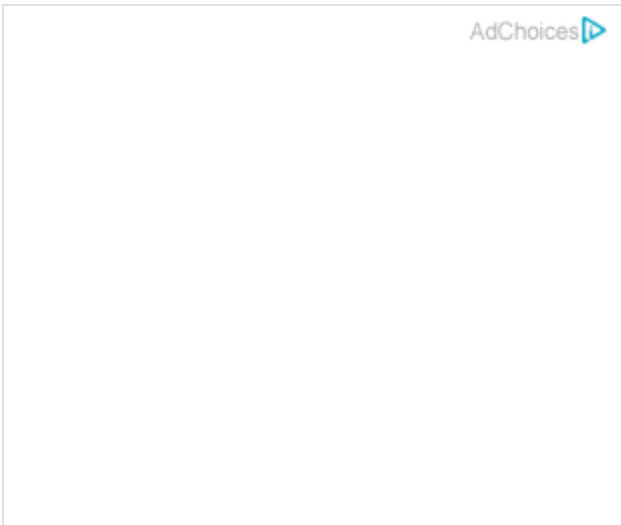
MULTI-PAGE VIEW

Tags | COLUMNS

Want to keep up with breaking news? Get the latest, straight to your inbox.

MOST READ

1. [Fifteen Hottest Freshmen '17: Date Spots](#)
2. [Harvard Research Computing Resources Misused for 'Dogecoin' Mining Operation](#)
3. [The Doctrine of Academic Freedom](#)
4. [Kappa Sigma Fraternity Re-Established on Campus](#)
5. [Don't Teach For America](#)



608 Comments

The Harvard Crimson

 Login

Sort by Best

Share  Favorite 

Join the discussion...

**Libtard** · 6 days ago

Instead of summoning the thought police, the proper way to combat offensive research is to disprove it. That may take a bit more effort than just whining in The Crimson, but ultimately it is how we progress as a society.

Governments during Galileo's time tried to suppress offensive research. For the sake of humanity, I'm quite glad they didn't succeed.

559 | · Reply · Share ›

**brando55** → Libtard · 5 days ago

"Offensive" usually means true, but unpleasant. Hence her demand to silence people who can't be refuted.

326 | · Reply · Share ›

**Bustr** → brando55 · 3 days ago

How about a new slogan:

"Burn Books for Justice!"

56 | · Reply · Share ›

**dbrower** → brando55 · 4 days ago

Disagree -- "offensive" means unpleasant to someone; truth has little to do with the reaction on the part of the receiver. Offensive but true (Galileo) ought to oblige the offended to reconsider; Offensive and false ought to make the one uttering reconsider (pick your own example). Offensive with indeterminate truth is, well, annoying.

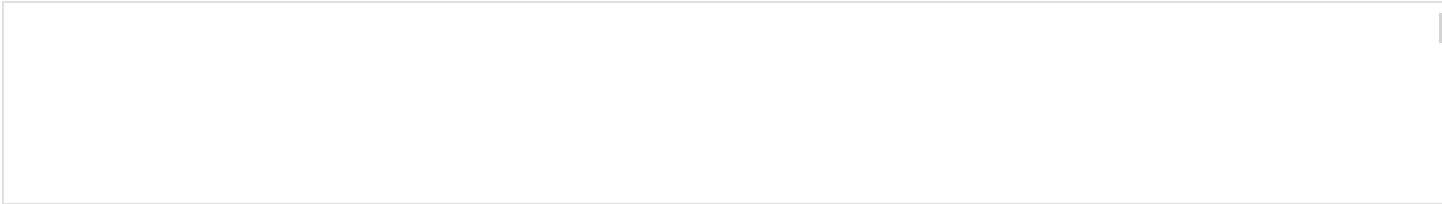
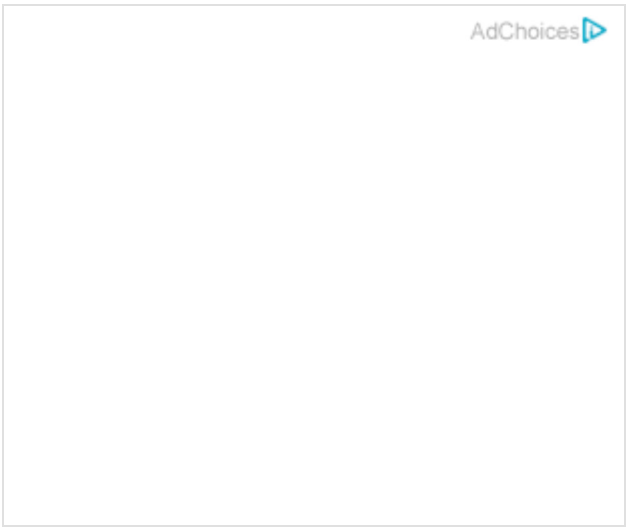
As a 1st amendment absolutist, I'm inclined to be an Academic Freedom absolutist as well. Including the right of the community to protest against views they find distasteful. The professor ought not get fired for speech, but it's certainly fine to call him (or her) an ass.

41 | · Reply · Share ›

**Kevin Bertsch** → dbrower · 4 days ago

But she's not advocating calling someone names - she's advocating removing the person from the faculty. Do you think you might be forthright enough to take a position on that?

77 | · Reply · Share ›



Copyright © 2014 The Harvard Crimson, Inc.

[PRIVACY POLICY](#) [RIGHTS & PERMISSIONS](#) [CONTACT US](#) [CORRECTIONS](#) [SUBSCRIPTIONS](#) [ARCHIVES](#)
[WRITERS](#)