

Letter to the editor of Harvard Magazine, published in the Nov/Decs 2024 issue

Academic Freedom

I WAS APPALLED by Lincoln Caplan's report ("Academic Freedom and Free Speech," September-October, page 32). Robert Post's theories are reactionary and simply wrong in their characterization of the activity of research and learning on a university campus.

We read: "Because of the standards that guide each academic discipline, tenured scholars have the authority to veto the ideas and speech of untenured scholars and students if they don't meet those standards." This authoritarian vision of academic work does not reflect actual practice—and it's a good thing, too, because if it did we would never make real progress in research. The new generation carries a subject forward, beyond the ken of "tenured scholars" with "authority." The hierarchical model Post posits is the old Soviet model of academia.

This purports to be an article about free speech and academic freedom. In Caplan's words, Post asserts: "On campus, there is freedom to discover, develop, and distribute ideas in pursuit of knowledge and diffuse it in education. In the public sphere, there is freedom to debate and deliberate about ideas in expressing and responding to others' opinions." This encapsulates a discredited account of education. Knowledge is not "diffused" in education. Students are not jars of water in which the salt of knowledge can be dissolved. Learning happens when the learner commits to a belief and strives to defend it. Expression of opinion is key to the process.

The arguments put forward uncritically in this article attempt to construct a theoretical framework for administrative action to keep politics (that is, "opinion") off campus. It is disheartening to see such retrograde and dangerous perspectives presented uncritically in *Harvard Magazine*.

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