

# National Association of Scholars

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## Articles

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### If I Ran the Zoo IV

June 19, 2008 By Todd Zywicki

It is appropriate to have a graduate of Dartmouth College offers his thoughts on “If I Ran the Zoo.” Dr. Seuss was a Dartmouth alum (Class of 1925) and, in fact, adopted his *nom de plum* while at Dartmouth. The good doctor, whose full name was Theodore Seuss Geisel, became editor-in-chief of the Dartmouth *Jack-O-Lantern*, the college’s humor magazine. Alas, while in that position of responsibility he was caught throwing a drinking party in violation of Prohibition laws and forced to resign his editorial post. To continue his work on the *Jack-O-Lantern* without the administration’s knowledge (wink, wink) he commenced signing his name as Dr. Seuss—“Seuss” being his middle name and “Dr.” reputed to have been a joke response to his father’s wish that he obtain a doctorate and become a professor. Coincidentally, Mr. Rogers also attended Dartmouth and Captain Kangaroo was an honorary degree recipient and adopted alumnus. I offer no theory of the direction of causation as to this notable propensity for childhood icons to hold Dartmouth connections.

I don’t know what Dr. Seuss would offer if he ran the zoo of higher education. One can assume that the university would be a more joyous and less grimly serious place than it is today. The sacred cows that dominate the modern academy would likely be the subject of well-deserved ridicule and its self-important progenitors knocked-off their pedestals. Were Dr. Seuss in charge, free speech would reign and it might be permissible to even tell a joke on campus again or to challenge prevailing political-ideological orthodoxies. Indeed, Dr. Seuss himself was a frequent skewer of prevailing orthodoxies (including the perceived excesses of McCarthyism in *Horton Hears a Who*), even if his work occasionally crossed the line into bad taste and even racism.

Inspired by the muse of Dr. Seuss, if I ran the zoo I can think of three innovations that would make universities more fun, creative, and stimulating places. Whether these are more or less likely to be seen in the zoo than Gerald McGrew’s fantastical creatures I will leave the reader to discern.

**Repeal all speech codes.** According to FIRE, an overwhelming number of colleges and universities have speech codes in place. Speech codes are antithetical to the free discourse and free expression of the university setting. Even where not formally enforced, they create a chilling effect and self-censorship by establishing informal norms for the scope of “acceptable” dialogue on campus, institutionally elevating some viewpoints as more legitimate than others and encouraging the informal silencing of some ideas. I’d scrap all speech codes and replace them with the values of the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights. While I was at it, I’d bring on board the spirit of many other provisions of the Bill of Rights (if not necessarily every letter), such as due process protections for student disciplinary proceedings, including a right to counsel, freedom from unreasonable search and seizure, and the right to confront witnesses. To make campuses safer, I’d also consider bringing campus firearms rules into conformity with Second Amendment values and state laws that permit licensed individuals to carry firearms for self-protection, or at least responsible faculty and staff.

**Address the creeping “corporatization” of academic culture.** Much of the leadership of higher education today has lost its way through a creeping “corporatization” of academic culture. Money matters, of course—a lot. Without it, nothing else is possible. But university leaders today often place financial considerations ahead of the university’s core institutional mission of education. Presidents are chosen largely for their fund-raising prowess rather than their intellectual leadership. Universities spend millions of dollars on glossy mailings and PR professionals to promote the institution’s “brand” rather than on improving educational quality. And, above all, leaders of the modern university eschew all controversy that might be thought to damage “the brand” and disrupt the largesse of large donors. During the Cold War Dartmouth’s great president Ernest Martin Hopkins defended the right of Communists to speak and teach at Dartmouth, even against the demands of major donors, and even publicly defended the rights of its student newspaper to editorialize on a labor dispute that adversely impacted the mining operations owned by a large donor. Trustees and presidents are stewards of the educational as well as financial health of their institutions, and too often today they allow the latter to take precedence over the former.

**Increase alumni voice in university life and governance.** If I ran the zoo, the final thing I would do would be to increase alumni voice in university life and governance. There is a structural imbalance in the governance of the modern university. Policy is dominated by the “permanent constituencies” of the modern university, the faculty and administration. These perspectives are crucially important, but also limited in scope and inherent biases shaped by their perspectives. Students, by contrast, have little direct voice in their educational experience—nor is it obvious that they should. Former students, by contrast, can draw on both their student and post-graduate lives to provide a voice for students tempered by the wisdom of experience, although they too have biases. Although not always harmonious, at its best, the balance and tension between faculty, administration, and former students can provide checks and balances among the three groups. Instead, at many institutions alumni are treated as little more than “human checkbooks,” to be seen and not heard, and to contribute without asking any questions about how their money is

spent.

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