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## First Amendment survey disturbing

Tuesday, November 25, 2003

As an enterprise that considers the First Amendment the bedrock of our existence, we were dismayed by a survey last week showing that many people are unfamiliar with one of the building blocks of our nation.

The survey, conducted by the nonprofit Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, found that one in four American college students was unable to name any of the freedoms guaranteed by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

These, we must emphasize, are college students, supposedly the best and brightest products of the U.S. educational system. They should have been taught the American way of life and system of government since kindergarten, yet approximately 25 percent are no more familiar with the First Amendment than they are with, say, the Constitution of Brazil.

But before we come down too hard on the students, the survey showed something even more distressing. Eleven percent of campus administrators -- from presidents to assistant deans -- were also unable to list any rights in the First Amendment.

That certainly helps explain the failings of the students. If that many administrators don't believe the First Amendment is important enough to know, why would the students at their schools feel any differently?

OK, for any college students, administrators or anyone else out there unfamiliar with the specifics of First Amendment, it's time for a quick civics lesson.

"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances."

In short, that means:

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- The United States has no official state religion. As long as you are breaking no other laws, you can worship when, where and how you choose without fear of government reprisal.
- You are allowed to openly disagree with the president, or the governor, or the mayor, or any other elected official. In totalitarian countries this can get you killed, imprisoned or tortured. In America, you are protected by the First Amendment.
- The media is not controlled by the government. Newspapers, radio and television stations are free to take whatever positions they see fit on the issues of the day, and their fate is decided only by the marketplace.
- You and a group of like-minded individuals can demonstrate in the streets to make yourselves heard, whether you are, for example, opposing the war or supporting the troops. This has been a powerful tool for political change throughout American history.
- You can contact your elected representatives and ask them to support legislation that you support.

Those are a lot of fundamental freedoms for one amendment, and it is no accident that the Founding Fathers made it the first one on the list.

We hope the survey shakes the halls of academia and creates a surge of interest in the First Amendment and the rest of our governing documents. These freedoms are fragile, and they are only guaranteed if knowledge of them is passed from one generation to the next.

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