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By Cathy Young

Christian fundamentalists miss out on academic freedom

Everywhere you look, gay-related issues are in the news. Vermont legislators give a green light to “civil unions” for same-sex couples. The Supreme Court hears arguments on whether anti-discrimination laws can force the Boy Scouts to accept gay scoutmasters. Closer to home, there’s a strangely muted controversy over a University of Michigan course scheduled for Fall 2000, titled “How To Be Gay: Male Homosexuality and Initiation.”

While the syllabus for the course is still a work in progress, it will examine the “role of initiation in the formation of gay identity” by focusing on such topics as Broadway musicals, drag, writings by gay male authors, the “muscle culture” and interior design. The course description says the class “will constitute an experiment in the very process of initiation that it hopes to understand.”

This has conservative groups such as the Midland-based American Family Association of Michigan crying foul. “How to Be Gay,” they argue, is a blatant attempt to recruit young men into the gay lifestyle at taxpayer expense. The AFA unsuccessfully tried to get the university to cancel the course.

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2000).

David Halperin, the professor who will be teaching “How to Be Gay,” says the talk of recruitment is nonsense. And even some people with misgivings, such as U-M Regent Andrea Fischer Newman, R-Ann Arbor, stress that they fully support the faculty’s academic freedom.

For the sake of a principle as important as academic freedom, fare like “How to Be Gay” is worth tolerating. Despite the provocative title, the talk of “experiments in initiation” and the fact that lab activities will reportedly include a trip to a gay bar, I find it hard to believe the class will work — or was meant to work — as a recruiting tool. Recruitment is supposed to be insidious, and the U-M course is hardly subtle about its subject matter. It’s not mandatory, and it’s hardly something a naive kid can stumble into by accident.

One may, however, legitimately ask: Exactly what is this course doing in the English department?

It’s bad enough to classify great writers who were homosexual, such as Oscar Wilde, solely by sexual identity. It is far worse that, at a time when students even at the best colleges are sadly deficient in their knowledge of our literary heritage, one of the country’s top universities is offering an “English” class in which students will study gay bars, muscle-bound gay icons and the mysteries of interior design. (One could add that the course’s notion of what it means to be gay perpetuates cliches that many gays are anxious to get away from.)

“How to Be Gay” may not represent homosexual recruitment, but it does represent a noxious trend in today’s campus culture: Call it sexually radical chic, which all too often supplants scholarship. (In another controversy a few years ago, a conference on female sexuality held at the State University of New York featured workshops on sexually explicit “performance art.”)

We are not likely to see, any time soon, a U-M course sympathetically exploring the lifestyle of Christian fundamentalists, complete with Sunday trips to church. Yet, if the goal is to expose students to the full diversity of human experience, surely the conservative Christian “counterculture” is at least as alien to the average U-M student as gay male culture is.

But trendy notions of tolerance and diversity generally don't extend to conservative Christians. At colleges from Tufts University in Massachusetts to Grinnell College in Iowa, evangelical groups are being stripped of their official status by student governments because they refuse to let openly gay students hold leadership posts or require student leaders to endorse the view that sex should be reserved for (heterosexual) marriage. In effect, these groups are being punished — barred from meeting in college classrooms, using student activity fees or promoting events through campus listing services — for holding unfashionable religious beliefs about sexuality.

Whatever happened to academic freedom?

Cathy Young is co-founder and vice-president of the Women's Freedom Network. Her column is published on Wednesday. Write letters to The Detroit News, Editorial Page, 615 W. Lafayette, Detroit, Mich. 48226 or fax to (313) 222-6417 or send an e-mail message to letters@detnews.com

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