

Thomas G. Palaima REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

A11

Confident young minds

I was in Minnesota two weeks ago at St. Olaf College, a Lutheran school with about 3,000 students. If the students in my lectures on the Greek polis and Homer, at my Phi Beta Kappa talk on truth and fiction in war stories and at a casual lunch are representative, they are being well served by the faculty at this still small-town liberal arts college.

These students could hold their own when it came to analyzing arguments or criticizing statements and propositions. Even in areas of Greek language, ancient history or accounts of war and violence that I have studied longer than they have been alive, they posed serious questions and pursued them.

Funny thing. They weren't much different from the students I teach at the University of Texas-Austin. Even if I disrespected the serious calling I feel to humanist scholarship and wanted to brainwash my students, I don't think I could. I partially control how a relatively small number of them use their minds, at most, 135 hours every four-month semester. Their thoughts are their own.

Imagine my shock when, back in my Minneapolis hotel room, I turned on the 700 Club on the Christian Broadcasting Network and heard Pat Robertson interviewing David Horowitz, author of "The Professors: The 101 Most Dangerous Academics in America." The theme of their five-minute discussion was taken straight off the dust jacket of Horowitz's book. "Today's radical academics aren't the exception — they're legion. And far from being harmless, they spew violent anti-Americanism, preach anti-Semitism and cheer on the killing of American soldiers and civilians — all while collecting tax dollars and tuition fees to indoctrinate our children."

I jotted down some of their remarkable claims. Academics are paid \$100,000 to \$150,000 per year to work six hours a week with four months paid vacation. They are pursuing a leftist revolution by search committee. They are using our colleges and universities to attack society. At least 30,000 to 40,000 of these termites are eating away at American values right now. Some of them are killers — or out and out Communists. Don't let your child be brainwashed or physically beaten up by these radical professors.

I take for granted that most

open-minded people will see these exaggerations for what they are. But viewers of CBN receive this kind of commentary regularly.

At UT, the poster child for radical termitism in Horowitz's book is associate professor of journalism Robert Jensen. Jensen's classes have a political content. Therefore, they have been included on a national professor watch list and monitored by a UT conservative student organization. Horowitz claims that Jensen's tenured status will enable him to vote on the fates of younger faculty for the next 30 years.

True enough. But Jensen is not a department of one. In my department, we have conservatives, liberals, atheists, doctors of divinity, pacifists and people like myself who believe that armies and wars are occasionally necessary. Votes on promotion and tenure have never broken down along any of these lines. One wry reason for this is that we professors are too petty to let big real-life issues affect our academic decision-making.

In fact, the article Horowitz cites for many of his claims, "High Noon in Texas for Leftist Academics," (Cybercast News Service, Nov. 6 2003), demonstrates clearly that concerned students are sharp enough to critique Jensen's ideas. I would imagine most students view Jensen's radical opinions in context and move on with their lives. The dissenters are given pause by those who agree with Jensen. They also have been galvanized to strengthen the arguments supporting their own views.

I myself have written a response to Jensen's views of how professors in Texas reacted to 9/11. I found the process stimulating. Jensen, in person and in print, listened respectfully to my counter arguments, but he did not hesitate to attack them logically and forcefully. That is what free inquiry is all about.

Political extremists, on the left and right, exist in society at large and on college and university campuses. Some campuses have an overall conservative feel. Some have a liberal one. Our fortunate children, when they are on the cusp of lifelong citizenship, are given four years to find out what the world and our country are all about. The world is wonderfully diverse.

And our country, thank God, still believes in critical inquiry, and has confidence in young minds, even if Pat Robertson and David Horowitz do not.

Palaima is Dickson Centennial Professor of Classics at the University of Texas at Austin.

