Thoughts from an undisciplined mind

BY SEAN KELLY

Have you ever felt disillusioned, frustrated, disgusted, helpless or confused about how university is, compared to what you thought it was supposed to be, or how you think it should be? If so, you are far from alone.

Disciplined Minds by Jeff Schmidt provides an institutional analysis to explain why things are as they are in the education system, what the hidden parts of the university’s agenda are, and how this agenda prevents it from being that caring, learning establishment that we read about in the public relations material. The author uses physics as his main example in describing higher education as “an abusive intellectual bootcamp based on conformity.” To give you an idea of this book’s impact, the author’s former employers, the publishers of Physics Today magazine, fired him when they read it.

Schmidt, who has a PhD in physics from the University of California, had been a feature article editor at the magazine for 19 years. To date, more than one thousand people in a wide variety of fields have protested his dismissal. Among the protestors are over 500 physicists, the largest number of physicists ever to speak out on a freedom of expression issue in North America. This interview with Schmidt was conducted on 3 December 2005. For more information about the book and his dismissal, see disciplinedminds.com.

Sean Kelly: How do you feel about your dismissal from Physics Today? What kind of outreach have you felt from the physics community and the broader community in response to this clearly political dismissal?

Jeff Schmidt: Physicists are protesting Physics Today’s action not only because it is repressive, but also because it implies that the institutions of physics are no less political than institutions in other fields. That implication upsets many physicists. The view of the magazine bosses and most of the professional staff is that the magazine should present “The Truth.” To determine what that is, the magazine sends submissions that it receives to various members of the physics establishment for review. A minority of the staff and I pushed to make the magazine a place where physicists could debate the issues. That would be a more interesting magazine.

Management was looking for an excuse to get rid of me, in part because I raised questions about the content of the magazine. One time, for example, I saw that the magazine was planning to say prominently, on the table-of-contents page, that the government’s Los Alamos and Livermore laboratories “are renowned for the development of nuclear weapons.” I objected in writing, pointing out that “renowned” means “celebrated,” which isn’t how most people in the world, even outside of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, view the developers of weapons of mass destruction. The staff editor who wrote that sentence had simply gone overboard in furthering the magazine’s uncritical view of the system. But that phrasing turned out to be fine with management. They rejected my objection and printed the statement unchanged. It’s in the October 1996 issue if you want to see it. The bosses are more comfortable without someone on their staff who raises questions like this.

JS: It is a platform for the physics establishment to address rank-and-file physicists. Some of my coworkers and I pushed to make it a forum for all physicists. The view of the magazine bosses and most of the professional staff is that the magazine should present “The Truth.” To determine what that is, the magazine sends submissions that it receives to various members of the physics establishment for review. A minority of the staff and I pushed to make the magazine a place where physicists could debate the issues. That would be a more interesting magazine.

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Jeff Schmidt (right) with daughter Joshua Rose Schmidt holding his book, Disciplined Minds.

SK: Do you see any specific ways in which the media acts in this scheme of ideological discipline? I realize that the media is run by rich and powerful interests, and therefore serve those interests, I saw that the magazine was planning to say prominently, on the table-of-contents page, that the government’s Los Alamos and Livermore laboratories “are renowned for the development of nuclear weapons.” I objected in writing, pointing out that “renowned” means “celebrated,” which isn’t how most people in the world, even outside of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, view the developers of weapons of mass destruction. The staff editor who wrote that sentence had simply gone overboard in furthering the magazine’s uncritical view of the system. But that phrasing turned out to be fine with management. They rejected my objection and printed the statement unchanged. It’s in the October 1996 issue if you want to see it. The bosses are more comfortable without someone on their staff who raises questions like this.

JS: It is a great that the CUPJ trusts its readers to handle a radical point of view. Not many media do.

SK: What do you think of us publishing this interview in the CUPJ?

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