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BOARD EDITORIALS

Blind Logic

Rather than sue America Online for not being accessible to the blind, users should take their business elsewhere.

Lawyers for the National Federation of the Blind seem to think the way to get things done is with a lengthy court battle - talk about a case of the blind leading the blind.

The group filed a lawsuit Thursday against America Online for discriminating against blind people. Unlike other dial-up networks, AOL's software remains incompatible with programs that convert text to audio or Braille.

With other options available, the plaintiffs should simply exert their freedom of choice and use another network.

Instead, they chose the American way - a cumbersome lawsuit.

The suit accuses AOL of violating the Americans With Disabilities Act, which requires equal access to public accommodations. However, not everyone agrees that the act applies to cyberspace, thus igniting a pernickety debate over meaning and precedence.

Some contend that AOL is not a physical place and therefore not liable to the same standards of access. However, because courts have ruled in the past that an accommodation can be a service, AOL might be subject to terms of the act.

The fact remains that AOL is inaccessible to the blind. Instead of quibbling over legal jargon, the federation should focus on positive solutions to the problem.

Users should first consider dial-up networks which are accessible to the blind.

A second option is to use mediating software. There are several applications based on voice recognition software that could easily work with AOL.

Users could also wait for the next version of AOL. New software, due next year, will include features that make it more user-friendly for the blind.

Despite the range of solutions to this dilemma, it seems simplicity will not suffice. Instead of actually solving the problem, the federation prefers to stir up attention-getting legal brouhaha.

The blind deserve equal, but not better, options. They are consumers just like the rest of us. People must remember that consumption is a consensual act: If you don't like the product, you don't have to buy it.

So long as there are viable alternatives to AOL, the blind have the prerogative to take their business to networks that already meet their needs. That's the power of choice.

NORA EL-KHOURI — EDITORIAL NOTEBOOK

First-Degree Essay

Ponder, Texas, authorities recently jailed a 13-year-old for writing a threatening essay. Have we learned nothing from Columbine?

On Halloween, while you and I mingled with Austin Powers and giant genitals on Franklin Street, 13-year-old Christopher Beamon spent the night in a Texas jail.

He wasn't arrested for murder or robbery. He didn't even commit a crime. Christopher Beamon went to jail for writing an essay.

The fiasco began when Beamon's seventh-grade teacher told the class to write a horror story. After receiving a grade of 100, Beamon volunteered to read his essay to the class.

In his story, Beamon uses a handgun to kill several of his classmates. Then he accidentally shoots his teacher.

The next day, parents of some of the students named in the essay called to complain. School authorities notified the police.

Beamon was ordered to be detained at a juvenile detention center for 10 days but was released five days later after the family's lawyer demanded the 13-year-old's freedom.

Truly, Beamon's essay is a little disconcerting. He includes graphic detail about getting high off marijuana and freon gas from an air conditioner. And, of course, there is the part where he "busted out a 12-gauge" and

shot his classmates and his teacher.

With the Columbine High School massacre barely behind us, it's understandable that officials at Ponder High School would be a little uneasy.

But the fact remains that school officials treated Beamon like a criminal when he should have been treated like a kid who could potentially have some problems.

Ponder officials say they were concerned because Beamon had some discipline problems in the past. Hmm, at my school, the principal sent kids with discipline problems to the guidance counselor, not jail.

If Columbine taught us anything, it's that troubled children are very volatile, often unknowingly so, and must be treated with care and concern.

Sending a kid to prison is not the way to show care and concern.

Has the fear swallowed us? Have we become so paranoid that we have to jail any kid who breathes a suspicious word?

Here's hoping that the answer is no, and that other school officials will learn from the mistakes of those at Ponder High School.



Taking Dyson's Speech to Heart

I had the opportunity to hear Michael Eric Dyson speak at Memorial Hall on Monday. Dyson, whose December 1996 profanity-laced Commencement speech caused such a fracas, was back in town for a race-relations seminar.

In the spirit of Dyson's call for an honest dialogue about race in the United States, I'll offer my 2 cents.

First, I must admit that I attended Dyson's talk with some preconceived notions about what I was likely to hear. Because I haven't read any of Dyson's books, my only exposure to his intellect was through the reports of his Commencement address in which he quoted profane rap lyrics.

Those reports characterized Dyson's comments as incendiary and confrontational and quoted many in attendance who felt that his remarks were, if nothing else, in bad taste and out of place.

And so I went to Monday's talk expecting to get all riled up. I did, but not in the way I had expected.

Dyson's speech was provocative. But it was masterfully reasoned and superbly delivered. I found myself in agreement with (almost) everything he had to say, especially his call for an open discussion of the importance of race in American culture.

It is in that spirit that I (not without some trepidation) offer the following:

Nowhere is the need for truthful discourse on race in America more prevalent than in the area of affirmative action in college admissions.

Dyson is correct in asserting that foes of affirmative action, in an effort to cloak themselves in the appearance of race blindness, have ripped Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous quip about individuals not being judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character out of its historical context.

But there is an even bigger danger lurking behind the efforts of those who want to do away with affirmative action. By focusing on "preferences," those who would abolish affirmative action programs divert attention away from the underlying problems which produced the necessity for those programs in the



CHRIS HARRISON
SHOOTING FROM THE HIP

first place.

For example, the Scholastic Assessment Test, which almost all of us took to gain admission to college, floated a trial balloon this past summer about altering the way in which scores were tabulated. In essence, non-Asian minorities who performed better than "their group" would be awarded an extra 200 points.

There was an immediate and vociferous backlash.

The Educational Testing Service, which runs the SAT, pulled the proposal.

Also this past summer, a new "resource guide" promulgated by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights stated that "the use of any educational test which has a significant disparate impact on members of any particular race, national origin or sex is discriminatory" unless the school using the test can prove otherwise.

Therefore, colleges and universities must prove that their use of SAT scores in admitting students does not produce proportional representation by race and gender.

The problem with attacking the SAT because it has a "disparate impact" on African-Americans and Hispanics is that it disregards the underlying problems that face non-Asian minorities.

There are at least two dilemmas which must be overcome before the achievement of non-Asian minorities mirrors those of Asians and whites.

The first is property tax-based school funding. So long as rich districts outspend poor districts on books, teachers, classrooms, etc., there will never be equality in achievement. It

is far too late in the learning process to compensate for underresourced education to give minority students preference in college or graduate school admission.

A study by educational researcher Linda Wightman found that 21.9 percent of black law students entering schools in 1990-91 failed to get a degree, compared with 9.7 percent of whites.

The skills that are necessary for success in law school are learned in grade school, not law school. If grade schools are not equal, then how can law school achievement be equal?

The second issue which must be addressed is the persistent culture of racism which continues to portray blacks and Hispanics as, if not dumb, than as intellectually inferior to whites and Asians.

A recent University of California study showed that while 100 percent of Asian students and 87.5 percent of white students who scored in the top 25 percent on the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills were enrolled in algebra, only 51 and 42 percent, respectively, of high-scoring blacks and Hispanics were.

As is the case in most public high schools, in California enrollment in advanced college preparatory classes is determined by high school administrators.

How is it that blacks students who score as well as their white counterparts fail to get into the same college-prep classes?

There is no simple answer, but the facts seem to indicate that blacks and Hispanics are steered toward less rigorous classes because the administrators feel that is where they belong.

I believe strongly that equality of opportunity (not equality of outcome) is the principle upon which the United States was founded. But that principle becomes a platitude when those who have been denied the opportunity are also denied the outcome.

Chris Harrison is a second-year law student and doctoral candidate in political science from Chapel Hill. Reach him with questions or comments at barkley@email.unc.edu.

READERS' FORUM

Booze Clue Crosswords Would Help Students More Than 'Ralph' Ads

TO THE EDITOR:

Binge drinking is a problem on most college campuses today. UNC is no exception to this trend. The students at UNC drink their fair share of alcohol in the countless bars on Franklin Street, at fraternity houses, in apartments and houses and even at keg parties in residence hall rooms. (Believe me, it happens).

Our administration sees binge drinking as an unnecessary evil that plagues the livelihood of this fine institution, and therefore it has gone to great lengths to curb alcohol consumption. One method that UNC has undertaken is the ad campaign "Ralph Beer." For those who have never seen the full-page ads in the DTH and the random fliers posted around campus, the gist of the campaign is to show drunk people throwing up.

In theory, the apparent point of the campaign is to dissuade students from drinking. In reality, the ads have probably not convinced a single student at UNC to avoid drinking. Those students at this

school who do not drink are influenced by their morals and their peers much more so than an ill-guided ad campaign whose point is unclear and effectiveness extremely questionable.

There are ways to convince college students not to drink excessively, but "Ralph Beer" is not the answer. The campaign is a waste of money, paper and ink. Here's a suggestion - replace the space with two additional crossword puzzles relating to alcohol. That will occupy the time of at least one UNC student who would otherwise be spending the time drinking a beer.

Scott Benson
Junior
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Dirtio Sanchez
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Blacks as Mr., Ms. UNC Not a Tradition That Needs to Be Broken

TO THE EDITOR:

In Monday's editorial titled "Mr. & Ms.

Out-of-Date," the writer disguised as Dorothy from "The Wizard of Oz" tries to argue that Homecoming has become an outdated and useless tradition that should be dismissed.

I do not think I clearly understand what "Dorothy's" argument is. She obviously has not seen the wizard. If she had seen the wizard he would have told her the first rule in writing journalism. That is, stick to your main topic.

Is she babbling about getting rid of Homecoming king and queen or getting rid of the black influence in Homecoming elections?

If we examine closely the "real" reason behind why many feel that Homecoming is unconstitutional we can reveal the very racist implications that still exist today. The idea that the Homecoming king and queen are elected based on popularity is indeed true.

I would like to stress first that one has to be popular in order to compete. Second, in order to become popular one has to be very involved in community life on and off campus. Third, one has to pass an interview with the Homecoming board in order to compete in the elections. Mind you that the interviewing process contributes to 25

percent of one's personal winnings.

My question is how is this like a high school popularity contest when the elected are required to do a community service project added to doing their other community duties? The people running are obviously qualified.

Depending on which subcommittees the candidates are involved in impacts the way those community members vote.

It is a competition. The best campaign will win. All are capable of representing the University to the fullest, but it boils down to how well you campaign and advertise.

Many of us try to "sugarcoat" issues that we do not want to face, such as implying that because blacks have been chosen to represent the University for the past 10 years it is somehow a "tradition that needs to be broken." Oh but of course, for the sake of diversity.

Tradition being broken would not be an issue if the Homecoming king and queen were white every year. It is only a justifiable tradition when black influence is not a part of it. These are only some of the implications that underlie this ongoing rage from the "other perspective."

The reason behind using statistics noting

25,000 students attend this university is irrelevant to the inquisition at hand. This infers that a predominantly white school should have predominantly white leaders and especially during Homecoming events.

Why do many complain and refuse to congratulate those who earned their honor?

The answer is purely ignorance. Niccole Cosby and David Cooke did not "nab" the crowns. The crowns were presented to them in great honor, and they truly deserve the opportunity to represent UNC despite what "others" say about their capabilities and their race.

So when Dorothy finally gets to the end of the yellow brick road, I want her to ask the wizard if elections are only silly when African Americans begin to represent the University in high honors. He will tell her that this is indeed not a debate about "useless tradition" but rather a debate about race.

Jessika Sagoe
Senior
Communication Studies

The length rule on letters was waived.



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