

# Of politics and academic freedom

Free exchange of ideas is essential to modern society - recent moves to silence grad student unprecedented, indefensible

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At the turn of the year, Daniel Donato was submitting his research report to the prestigious journal *Science*. Less than two months later he was in the center of a national controversy regarding OSU's funding practices and the US Bureau of Land Management's impartiality regarding controversial research.

Over the last few years Donato led a project under the auspices of Oregon State University's College of Forestry which examined the impact of post-fire logging in the Biscuit wildfire site in southwestern Oregon. After compiling data from sites that had been logged and sites that hadn't his team reached the rather controversial conclusion that post-fire logging might be detrimental to the recovery of burned forest land.

The one-page report concludes that salvage logging two years after the Biscuit wildfire set back the recovery of the forest and increased, rather than reduced, the amount of dry fuel on the ground. This runs counter to a report published earlier by two OSU professors that suggested aggressive logging and replanting as a means to restore burned forests such as those devastated by the Biscuit fire. The professors' report was embraced by the US Forest Service and the Bush administration, which promptly expanded their logging plans for the Biscuit burn.

When the professors learned of Donato's report in mid-January, they led a contingent of their colleagues at OSU's College of Forestry in writing the editors of *Science* asking that the journal delay publication of the report. After subjecting the findings to independent peer-review, *Science* opted to publish the report despite the professors' objections.

The January blow-up raised questions about whether the College of Forestry's funding constituted a conflict of interests. The school receives roughly 10 percent of its funding from logging industry taxes. An opinion piece in *The Oregonian* called for OSU officials to examine their funding practices and take steps to maintain the school's credibility. Lawmakers assured the public that investigations would be made.

After that the controversy appeared to be dying down. Then, as is often the case, the federal government stepped in and made matters worse.

It seems that Donato's research project was in large measure funded by grants distributed by the BLM as part of a federal Joint Fire Science program. The BLM pulled the research project's funding, claiming that Donato's report

violated federal law as well as the terms of the research grant by trying to influence pending legislation on salvage logging. The BLM also claimed that Donato's research team had not consulted them before submitting the study and the report did not include a disclaimer saying that the findings were not necessarily the views of the government.

The BLM's actions kicked the controversy up anew and turned what had been an already shady in-house academic battle into an issue of governmental censorship. It was seen by many as another in a series of attempts by officials to suppress scientific conclusions running contrary to Bush administration policies. With a long history of disputing scientific findings on controversial subjects such as global warming and oil prospecting, it's easy to see why some academics and civil libertarians are skittish about the subject of governmental interference in

research, particularly from the Executive Branch.

This is one of those sticky political wickets from which no one comes away clean, and the Bureau of Land Management may come out dirtiest of all. The BLM swears up and down that the suspension of funds was not politically motivated. However, the abruptness of their response, coupled with previous attempts by the Bush administration to bury science that doesn't agree with their politics,

makes the move appear to most scientists as punishment for not toeing the President's line. The suspension of the funding after controversial findings is without precedent, and though the funding was quickly restored and losses accrued during the suspension will be covered, much damage has been done.

Donato's research team may appear the David of this particular moral tale, but the report as published in *Science* has generalities of the sort that invite criticism. The data was collected over a period of about two years - a span that many say is too short a time to collect conclusive evidence. Also, the report draws broad conclusions based on data collected at only one burn site, which may or may not be representative of

all. The OSU College of Forestry and the professors who attempted to block the findings come out of this looking partial to the logging industry, and will be fighting to regain credibility for a long time to come. While the report has its flaws it is still worthy of debate in the scientific community. Without the freedom to exchange ideas and hypotheses in an open forum the whole system of university education and research becomes a cruel joke, with yes-men professors as the punch line.

The faculty involved in the scandal should have known better.

It might very well be that the funding suspension was based entirely on miscommunication and oversight, but the perception remains that the BLM and OSU acted shamefully to suppress scientific research. If the distributors of research grants and the faculty of universities send the message to researchers to agree or else then progress in our understanding of the world will only be hurt.

In that we all lose.

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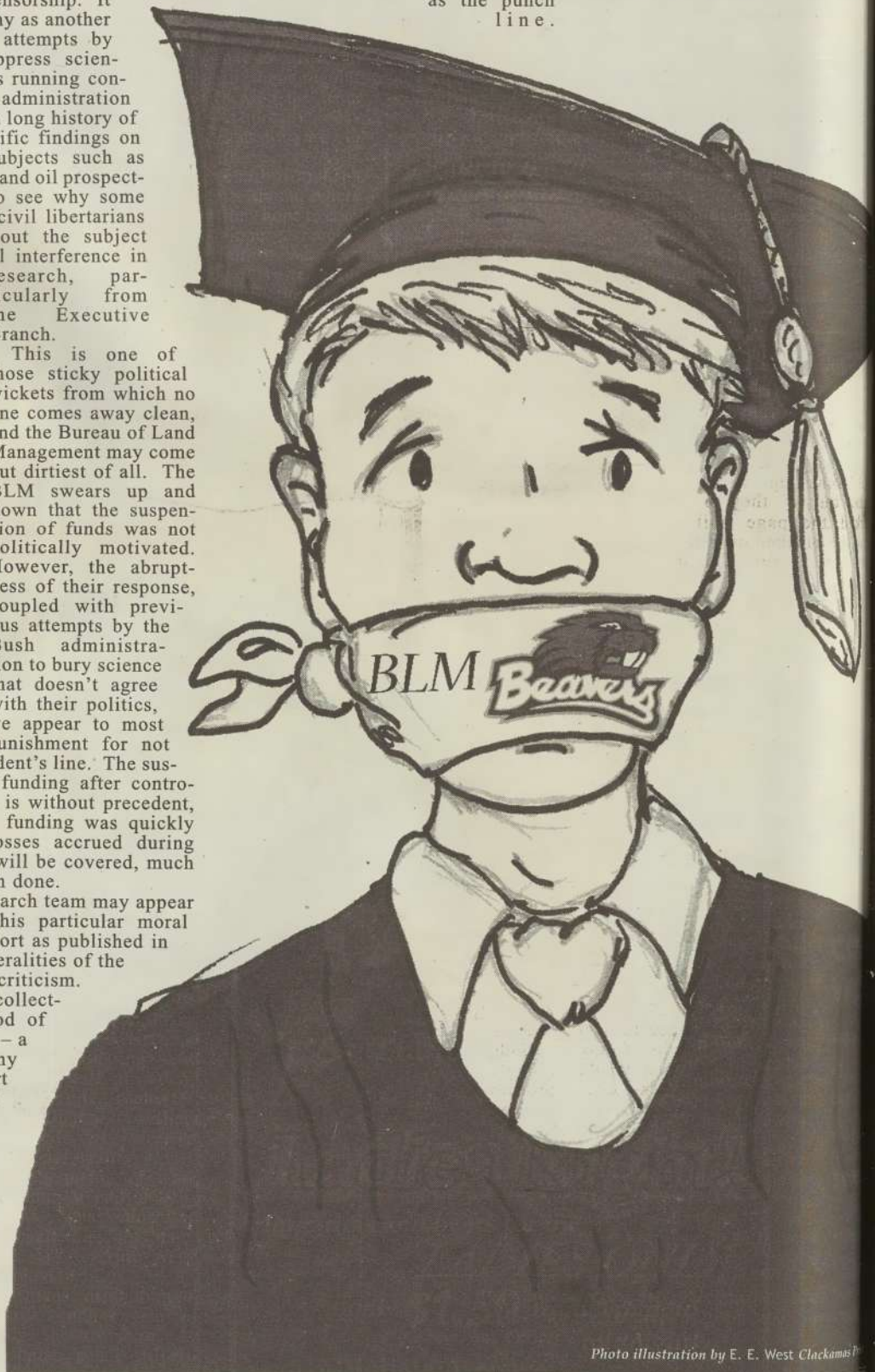


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