



A Compromise on Creationism

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Next week the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, or CHEA, which scrutinizes other accrediting organizations, will consider whether it should continue to recognize a young Earth creationist group. This might seem like a classic instance of the tension between religion and science. But the real issue is whether Americans can live alongside each other while disagreeing about the most important issues.

The Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools, known as Tracs, describes itself “as a national institutional accrediting agency for Christian post-secondary institutions, colleges, universities, and seminaries.” Founded in the late 1970s, the group today accredits more than 80 schools around the world. That includes Bob Jones University, which grants science degrees that require course credits in creation science.

The Tracs statement of faith includes conventional Christian beliefs about the “unique divine, plenary, verbal inspiration and absolute authority” of the Bible and the “redemptive sacrifice of Jesus Christ.” It also holds the “special creation of the existing space-time universe and all its basic systems and kinds of organisms in the six literal days of the creation week” to be true.

In the early years, Tracs had its applications for recognition denied by the U.S. Education Department. It finally gained federal recognition during the George H.W. Bush presidency. Eventually, in 2001, Tracs was recognized by CHEA. The council periodically reviews member institutions to assess whether they meet its standards. CHEA has been soliciting comments to guide its decision about renewing Tracs.

As a medical doctor and research scientist, I reject young Earth creationism as a valid scientific theory. Like most scientists, I perceive a readily observable fact: Earth is billions of years old. And many of my colleagues believe that CHEA shouldn't have admitted Tracs in the first place.

But a 2019 Gallup poll showed that 40% of American adults “ascribe to a strictly creationist view of human origins, believing that God created them in their present form within roughly the past 10,000 years.” As much as the scientific community disagrees, creationism is not going away.

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Rather than reject Tracs or passively renew its membership, CHEA should offer a constructive solution that holds the group to higher standards on science education. There is a complex thicket of concerns to negotiate: creationist belief statements, academic freedom and national norms. A committee that includes mainstream scientists could gather information and develop detailed recommendations for the institution to adopt. Absent some principled compromise, a renewal of Tracs membership should be delayed or denied.

One helpful principle is transparency. As a matter of academic freedom, scientists should tolerate institutions that teach creation science. But deviations from national norms in a science curriculum need to be prominently disclosed, tracked and reported. In practice, that means transcripts that clearly state which courses and degrees include creation science. Credit from courses that include creation science should not be used toward science degrees. Nor should they be eligible for transfer to secular institutions.

Institutional tolerance of dissenting views ought to be a two-way street. If Tracs is recognized, it should also give more space to students and faculty who disagree over key issues. Tracs member institutions operate by belief or faith statements, with varying levels of tolerance for dissent. A reasonable process would not require creationist institutions to modify their faith statements. But to align with national norms, Tracs should defend the academic freedom of those who dissent from scientific creationism.

Identifying and implementing the correct remedies will take time, and may still be controversial among Tracs membership. But they should understand the significant benefits for their universities if brought into alignment with national educational norms.

The U.S. public arena is secular but also pluralistic. Americans disagree with one another, and those differences matter. Avoiding conflict by unconditionally renewing Tracs' membership is an unacceptable approach. But we need a more constructive solution than simply excluding those with whom we disagree—even if they seem obviously wrong, as creationists do.

The best solution is to respect Tracs institutions' unique character while holding them to high academic standards. Insisting on policies of transparency and academic freedom might even lay the groundwork for change in future generations.

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References

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