



Q&A on “A Compromise on Creationism”

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<https://peacefulscience.org/articles/qa-wsj-compromise-on-creationism/>



I recently authored a *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) editorial, “[A Compromise on Creationism](#).” This editorial stimulated quite a bit of discussion. Several responded publicly and privately. Steve Pettit, the president of Bob Jones University (BJU), responded with a [letter in the WSJ](#). I also received quite a few emails expressing strong opinions in different directions.

It is great to see a growing conversation. This particular conversation would benefit from more information. What exactly was the proposal? What is accreditation and why is it important? What is academic freedom, and how does it interact with belief statements at religious institutions? These are the sorts of questions I want to respond to here.

Questions on the Proposal

The article is behind a paywall, so how and when will it become public?

My WSJ article is behind a paywall. But 30 days after publication, I can publish it here. So check back soon. In the meantime, do not believe everything you hear about what I wrote. There have been a lot of rumors floating around that are not true.

What is the key question you are raising and addressing?

I am raising this question: *should secular and non-religious institutions accredit and recognize young-earth creationist institutions?* This question requires us to navigate the tensions between belief statements, academic freedom, and national norms. I am answering the question “yes,” but arguing that accreditation policies need to be guided by principles of transparency and academic freedom.

What prompted your article?

CHEA is currently reviewing TRACS, and will decide in October 2021 whether or not it will renew its recognition of TRACS. This was the news item that prompted my article. I also submitted a third-party comment to the committee reviewing TRACS.

Wait, what? What are CHEA and TRACS?

TRACS is the [Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools](#), a national institutional accrediting agency that accredits (some) Christian colleges, institutions, and seminaries. Most accrediting agencies are recognized by [CHEA](#), the [Council for Higher](#)

[Education Accreditation](#), which periodically reviews accreditors to ensure their compliance with standards.

Are there any other relevant institutions? What are their relationships to one another?

The universities and colleges accredited by TRACS are interested in how this proceeds. President Pettit’s response to my article puts Bob Jones University (BJU) at center stage, and BJU makes for an instructive test.

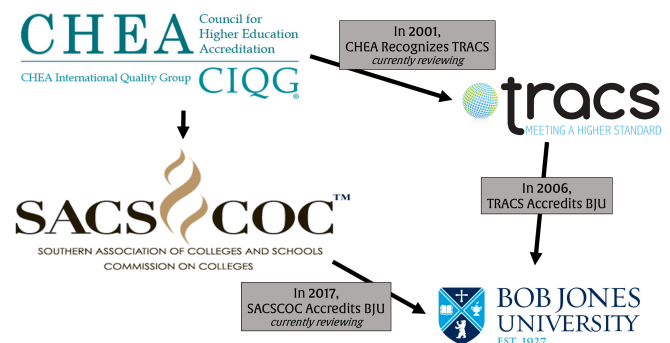
BJU is accredited both by TRACS and by the [Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges](#) (SACSCOC), a regional accreditor with a secular mission. For example, The University of Texas system is accredited by SACSCOC. As it happens, SACSCOC is currently reviewing BJU to determine if they will continue to accredit BJU.

So the key organizations we are discussing are CHEA, TRACS, SACSCOC, and BJU, but there are others too.

What do you mean by “creationism”?

In the context of this article, I am discussing *scientific* elements of *Young Earth Creationism* (YEC) exclusively.

I am not addressing Intelligent Design (ID) or Old Earth Creationism (OEC) or any component of YEC that appears in non-science courses, such as theology, philosophy, or hermeneutics courses. I am not discussing “creationism” broadly construed to describe the beliefs of all Christians, including myself, that affirm the doctrine that God created all things.



Here are some of the key dates and relationships between CHEA, TRACS, SACSCOC, and BJU. CHEA and SACSCOC are secular. TRACS and BJU are creationist.

What did you propose? What was the compromise?

Creation science is not aligned with national norms in science education. Some scientists argue that institutions that teach creation science should not be accredited.

In my WSJ article, I advocated for a principled compromise to be negotiated before TRACS's recognition by CHEA is renewed. I offered a compromise. Creation science should be tolerated by secular institutions, but that (1) deviations from national norms should be transparently disclosed, and (2) the academic freedom of dissenters from creation science at these institutions should be protected.

Academic freedom and transparency are principles to which secular accreditation institutions are already committed. I wrote that accreditors should consult with mainstream scientists to gather information and negotiate better policy, guided by principles of transparency and academic freedom.

Questions on Accreditation

Are you arguing against the accreditation of creationist institutions? Are you trying to “cancel” Christian colleges?

No, quite the opposite. I am arguing that secular institutions *should* accredit and recognize creationist institutions. This has made [my proposal controversial among many secularists](#).

In contrast, many of my colleagues in science argue that CHEA should not recognize TRACS, and that SACSCOC should not accredit BJU (and other similar universities).

Still, I am arguing that secular institutions should make space for creationist organizations, but they should do so while still holding them to “higher standards” aligned with “national norms.”

Why are you demanding that creationist institutions be held to “higher standards”?

Creationist institutions should be held to the *same* standards of academic freedom and transparency as all other academic institutions. Some creationist institutions' practices are not currently consistent with these standards, so this would mean holding them to *higher* standards than they are currently practicing.

What do you mean by “national norms”?

I mean exactly what [TRACS itself](#) means: “practices, terms, or policies which are common in American higher education.” TRACS [requires](#) all the institutions it accredits to “meet national norms in the areas of curriculum; programs; faculty credentials; and measured student learning outcomes at the course, program and institutional levels.”

This is about science curriculums, not beliefs. National norms do not apply to content of belief statements or personal beliefs, but they do apply to curriculum. So I am not asking creationists to change their beliefs in order to be accredited.

Whether we disagree with creation science or not, everybody agrees that creation science is not aligned with national norms in science curricula. While no one should label or denigrate creationists, secular

institutions are not obligated to accept credit from *courses* that deviate from national norms

Is funding tied to secular accreditation? Are you attacking their livelihood?

Federal funding to creationist colleges does not depend on accreditation by secular institutions. [TRACS is recognized by the US Department of Education \(USDE\)](#) independent of CHEA. For this reason, if CHEA did not recognize TRACS, all the institutions TRACS accredits would still be eligible for federal funding to support their students. Likewise, if SACSCOC chose not to accredit BJU, they would still be eligible for federal funding because they are accredited by TRACS.

What will creationist organizations lose if they are not accredited by secular organizations?

Creationist institutions do *not* require accreditation by secular organizations to serve their mission. In fact, the two creationist institutions in question (TRACs and BJU) were not accredited or recognized by secular organizations for most of their respective histories.

TRACS was founded in 1979, but only recognized 22 years later by CHEA in 2001. BJU was founded in 1927, and for the vast majority of that history they were opposed to the very idea of accreditation. BJU changed their position on accreditation very recently, and were accredited for the first time in 2006 by TRACS. Surprising many observers, BJU sought and obtained accreditation in 2017 by SACSCOC, a regional secular accreditor that also accredits, for example, the University of Texas.

Secular accreditation of these institutions is fairly recent, and TRACS and BJU functioned for decades without it. In fact, BJU was strongly opposed to accreditation for generations. Their funding and mission is not tied to accreditation by CHEA or SACSCOC.

Questions on Academic Freedom

What is “academic freedom”?

Broadly speaking, there are three aspects of academic freedom, depending on whether we mean freedom for (1) [institutions](#), (2) professors or (3) [students](#). Secular institutions emphasize the freedom of professors, with some attention to the freedom of students.

I, personally, am advocating for academic freedom for professors and students, whether they are in secular institutions or in creationist institutions, whether I agree with them or not.

In contrast, some YECs tend to emphasize institutional freedom for YEC institutions, but in the context of secular institutions they emphasize academic freedom for YEC students and professors instead. In effect, professors should be free to teach ID and creation science at secular institutions, on the one hand. On the other hand, YEC institutions are free to fire professors that dissent from scientific creationism.

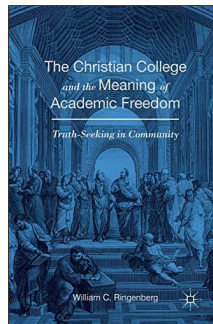
Should accreditors care about academic freedom?

In October 2012, CHEA issued a [joint statement with the American Association of University Professors \(AAUP\) on accreditation and academic freedom](#). This statement affirmed “the role that accreditation plays in the protection and advancement of academic freedom.”

How do belief statements interact with academic freedom?

Belief statements are one way that religious organizations limit academic freedom of students and professors at their organizations. In 2018, the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU) also [affirmed the AAUP’s statement of academic freedom](#), adding guidance of their own about the fair application of belief statements. I recommend [The Christian College and the Meaning of Academic Freedom \(Ringenberg, 2016\)](#) to learn more.

In contrast, secular institutions do not operate by belief statements. The AAUP’s [1940 statement \(along with its update in 1970\) on academic freedom](#), however, acknowledged the tension between belief statements and academic freedom. Most administrators and scholars, secular and religious, are unfamiliar with how belief statements interact with questions of academic freedom. This unfamiliarity might be why these violations of academic freedom were overlooked in the last decade.



Should we allow belief statements?

We absolutely *should* allow religious organizations to maintain and enforce belief statements. In the United States, belief statements are protected by the “[freedom of association](#)” clause of the First Amendment. The belief statements themselves are not the problem.

However, institutional belief statements are in tension with academic freedom, and they need to be applied with fairness, consistency, and transparency.

What do you mean by fairness, consistency, and transparency?

For example, all the accrediting institutions we are discussing require universities to make all their policies, including statements of faith, publicly available, so prospective students, staff, and faculty know in advance what is expected of them.

Likewise, if a belief statement is changed to be more restrictive, then those hired before the change cannot be held to the new restrictions. It would be unfair to impose a new belief statement retroactively on those who joined the university when an old belief statement was in effect.

Ken Turner, former faculty at Bryan College, [summarizes a common pattern](#),

One problem is that many institutions have a doctrinal statement that says one thing, but the administration (often on a whim without due process) wants to move the goal post of “what’s in” and “what’s out.”...This [infringes] on academic freedom because it circumscribes that freedom beyond the official documents of the

institution and subjects [professors and students] to the private interpretation and interests of a sitting president or board.

Such machinations violate the policies of both accreditors (TRACS and SACSCOC) as well as CHEA. One reason I wrote the WSJ article was to draw attention to this deviation from accreditation guidelines, and ask accreditors to protect vulnerable faculty and students.

How common are these violations of academic freedom in creationist institutions?

Here are a few examples.

William Dembski is a well known critic of evolutionary science, but he believes the earth is old and understands Noah’s flood as a local, not a global event. He was a professor at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary (accredited by SACSCOC) when they retroactively required him to affirm a global flood. As Dembski explains,

My questioning the universality of Noah’s flood meant I was a heretic, or at least not suitable for teaching at Southern Baptist seminaries, and thus I’d need to be clearing my desk immediately—unless my theological soundness could be quickly reestablished.

In response, Dembski was forced to violate his conscience by recanting his belief in a local flood. [This unfair application of belief statements violated his academic freedom and severely impacted him and his family.](#)

More recently, around 2014, *Answers in Genesis* published the [Tenets of Creation \(TOC\)](#), and lobbied administrators at colleges to commit to these tenets.

Bryan College (accredited by SACSCOC), where Dr. Turner was a professor, also signed on. The overreach by the administrators even left YECs like Todd Wood on the outside, because he did not toe the line on scientific YEC. The academic freedom policies and I’m advocating, to fairly apply belief statements, [would have protected these faculty.](#)

Returning to BJU as a case study, it appears that BJU broke these rules. Without noting it transparently at BJU, [Pres. Pettit signed BJU on to the TOC](#) and also substantially narrowed the range of beliefs they tolerated in 2014. It appears they applied these changes retroactively to faculty, by issuing “[position statements](#),” rather than altering their belief statement. Moreover, [BJU’s policy on academic freedom \(and its history of changes\) is confidential and not available to the public on their website](#). A [leaked memo about SACSCOC’s initial review of BJU in 2016](#) suggests that accreditors were asking about academic freedom, but SACSCOC did not ensure BJU would make public its academic freedom policy.

Addressing the larger problem, the precise way the TOC interacts with policies at these colleges it not transparently disclosed. The colleges that signed on need to explain and disclose transparently how the TOC changed and affects their policy. Accreditors should enforce the rules, and protect the academic freedom of dissenters from overreach by administrators.

Questions on Transparency

Did you call for creationist college students to be “tracked and reported”?

Absolutely not. I asked TRACS to follow its own transparency policy by tracking and reporting which college *courses* (not students) among its member institutions deviate from national norms.

So what did you propose about transcripts?

As one example of transparency, I suggested that *science courses* that deviate from “national norms” should be labeled transparently on transcripts. This was just a starting point for negotiation, not an ultimatum. This policy is intended to be very easy for universities to work around.

The standard of “national norms” comes from TRACS itself, and even creationists agree that scientific creationism is not consistent with national norms. Whether they are from accredited institutions are not, secular institutions are not obligated to accept these credits.

In making this suggestion, I am merely asking for TRACS to develop and apply policy around its own standards. If they have a better approach that still assures us that their member institution’s science courses are aligned with national norms, I am willing to hear it.

How would this apply to the Bio 300 class at BJU?

In my comment to CHEA and my WSJ article, I noted one example of a class that might fit this policy: Bio 300 at BJU. The president of BJU, Steve Pettit responded that this course does not teach creation science, and that BJU does not teach creation science in any of its courses.

If it were true that BJU does not teach creation science, why is President Pettit objecting to the policy? If all the science courses at BJU are aligned with national norms, the policy I suggested does not apply to them.

More likely, BJU actually is teaching creation science in science courses. Their course catalogue describes Bio 300 as “Evolution and Origins,” a course which promises to evaluate “the theories of evolution, the intelligent design movement, and *special creation*” and to explore “a creationary model of the diversity of life.”

In that case, on this policy, BJU would have two options. They could transparently label the course on transcripts as “deviating from national norms.” A better approach would be to change the designation of Bio 300 from biology to philosophy or religion. Then the course would not be a science class, and would not need to be labeled.

This is just one policy suggestion, and not an ultimatum. I’m open to other ideas that preserve their right to teach creation science, while also ensuring the science courses are aligned with national norms.

Are you trying to brand creationist students with a “scarlet C”? Are you intending to “dox” and “punish” creationists?

Absolutely not. I did *not* (and do *not*) advocate “labeling,” “branding,” or “doxing” creationist students or faculty. I oppose that as an outrageous and invasive violation of student rights and welfare.

I am, to the contrary, motivated by concerns for student welfare at YEC institutions. We expect that some of these students are uncertain about YEC creationism. However, BJU does not guarantee privacy to dissenting students or clarify what deviations from their position statement on creation they will tolerate.

Dissenting students are extremely vulnerable to being labeled and shunned by administrators, faculty, staff, and fellow students at BJU. Accreditors should be concerned about ensuring policy to protect these students from punishment.

Questions on the Reaction

Why were the public reactions from creationists so negative?

This proposal protects students and faculty from overreach by administrators, such as Steve Pettit at BJU. For this reason, as my WSJ article notes, my proposal will be controversial among the membership of TRACS. The negative reaction is expected. However, I am not asking them to do anything different. They have the right to run their institutions as they see fit. My appeal is not directed towards them.

Even then, many of the negative reactions appear to have misunderstood or misrepresented my article and proposal. The WSJ article is behind a paywall, which has made it easier to mischaracterize. As the proposal is better understood, I expect many creationists will see the benefits to them.

Still, it will be difficult for those most to benefit to be publicly clear about their support. The policy I am advocating protects professors and students at YEC institutions from overreach by administrators. Those most to benefit are most vulnerable.

Regardless, YEC institutions are not the ones who need to be convinced. The key audience is a different group.

Why was the Intelligent Design movement so negative?

The early articles published by the Discovery Institute mischaracterized my WSJ article. I still appreciate the attention and am glad they got the word out.

The policies advocated are very much in their interest. Academic freedom at secular institutions is why many ID scientists, such as Michael Behe, are tolerated and employed at secular institutions. A more robust protection of academic freedom would have protected William Dembski a decade ago at Southwestern. Institutional protection of dissent from YEC at YEC institutions would protect several vulnerable ID professors from unfair treatment.

As they take time to think about what is at stake, it is possible that other thoughtful voices in ID will understand those advantages and give a more positive response. Regardless of what they do, the ID movement was not my audience either.

Who are you speaking to then?

I am appealing to secular accreditors, CHEA and SACSCOC. Secular institutions are not obligated to accredit or recognize creationist organizations that do not meet their standards.

I am asking them to work with scientists to find a principled compromise on creationism that navigates the conflicting demands of creationist belief statements, national norms, and academic freedom. Of course, creationist groups such as BJU and TRACS are invited to participate in negotiating the right compromise.

If and when such a compromise is reached, creationist institutions may respond by choosing to adjust their policies or to operate without secular accreditation. This is their choice, and they can do as they see fit.

How Can Others Weigh In?

How can comments be made to CHEA regarding TRACS?

The third-party comment period is closed. Between now and October 2021, you may contact [members of the CHEA board](#) with any comments pertinent to their decision regarding TRACS.

How can comments be made to SACSCOC regarding BJU?

SACSCOC has [a way to submit unsolicited information](#). Whether you agree with me or not, ensure your comments are pertinent to

accreditation of BJU, or other colleges they accredit, and submit your comments as the linked document instructs.

On March 29, 2021, “Bryan University” was corrected to “Bryan College.”

On March 23, 2021, this text was correct. Dembski was asked to recant his views on a local flood, not an old earth. Several faculty at SWBTS, including leadership, affirm an old earth.

In accordance with our [error correction policy](#), several corrections to this article were made in the first 48 hours. The spelling of the acronym SACSCOC was corrected. Readability of some paragraphs was improved, and a specific reference to TRACS and SACSCOC were removed from the discussion of BJU.

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