

# Ignorance and Knowledge:

The Goal of a University Education?

# Troubling Statistics

- Drawn principally from Susan Jacoby, *The Age of American Unreason* (2008)

# National Science Foundation Poll

- 2/3 of Americans can't identify DNA as key to heredity
- 9 out of 10 don't understand the effects of radiation on the body
- 1 in 5 adults is convinced the sun revolves around the Earth
- 1 in 3 believe in a literal interpretation of the Bible
- Over 50% of Americans believe in ghosts
- 1/3 believe in astrology
- Nearly 60% of Americans believe that the bloody predictions of the Book of Revelation will come true

# Pew Research Poll on evolution, 2005

- Nearly 2/3 of Americans want creationism to be taught alongside evolution in public schools
- Only 48% accept any form of evolution, even if driven by God
- Just 26% accept Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection
- 42% said all living beings, including humans, have existed in their present state since the beginning of time
- 1/3 of Americans MISTAKENLY believe that there is substantial disagreement about evolution among scientists
- Misconception of what a scientific theory is:
  - Not a guess – it's a set of principles designed to explain phenomena
  - It is supported by observation, subject to peer review, and testable
  - Other theories: plate tectonics and relativity

# Other stats I've come across by reading the news

- 20% of Americans think Obama is a Muslim
- New York Times Poll, December 2010
  - 58% believe Obama was born in this country
  - 20% believe he was NOT born in this country
  - 23% DON'T KNOW
- In 2003, 70% of Americans believed Saddam Hussein had a hand in the 9/11 attacks
  - Today, the figure is still around 34%
- US is only western, industrialized democracy to have a major political party (the Republicans) that disputes the science behind global warming

# Why is the American public so mis-informed?

- Media? Creating false debates, always having to present “both sides” creates false objectivity
- Who do we trust to make policy?
- What does Susan Jacoby identify as responsible for the recent rise of American anti-intellectualism?
  - Resurgence of evangelical fundamentalism
  - Media – television and video games
  - Local control of schools
    - Texas School Board: replacing Thomas Jefferson with Phyllis Schlafly
  - What is overall message of the textbook?
  - What is the point of a university education?