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UNC’s alumni publication reports (http://alumni.unc.edu/car/weekly/story.asp?sid=252) that students are suing to stop the university’s Summer Reading Program from forcing incoming freshman from reading sections of the Koran. They claim that this goes against the Establishment clause of the Constitution (the government shall establish no religion…) by endorsing and promoting the religion of Islam.

Regardless of the constitutional issues, the suit has economic implications. Economics emphasizes that people respond to incentives; that is, they respond to changes in the costs and rewards of making choices. The lawsuit increases the costs to professors and the university of teaching controversial or sensitive subjects, even if the motives are to expose students to new ideas, stimulate thinking and promote intellectual curiosity. Costs increase in the sense that professors will worry about negative publicity, or have to use more resources to justify readings and assignments. University administrators would fear future liability and lawsuits. Economics would predict that professors, facing higher costs, would “economize” on assigning controversial and provocative readings – and might therefore assign readings having less intellectual value to students. Ultimately, these costs would reduce academic freedom and have the effect of reducing learning and intellectual activity at the university.