

Neo-McCarthyism in the Academy

Fifteen years ago, this newspaper for the first time employed the phrase "political correctness" to describe a then-emergent movement in the academy. The term had previously been used by Communist Party officials in the USSR to attack party rivals. The Soviets' attempts to monopolize political discourse resembled those of various campus "activists," administrators, and faculty who sought to silence voices they deemed "offensive" to disadvantaged groups.



By
**Steven
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It now appears that the PC crowd at Dartmouth has a term of their own. Last week, an e-mail message entitled "Are We Civil?" arrived in the in-boxes of student organizations and their officers. The message was authored by Sena Ku '01, intern to the Committee on Civil Discourse headed by Dean Brown of the Tucker Foundation.

"If you or any members of your organization recall any incidents on campus when civility or civil discourse was particularly weak at Dartmouth," Ku inquired, "could you give me a blitz?" She's hoping to "put out an interim report on the state of community at Dartmouth."

The new, agreeable idiom "civil discourse" is nothing but a false face for the tired dogma of political correctness. Is there really any doubt that the report will, once again, uncover "insensitivity," "mean-spiritedness," and "prejudice" on the part of those who dissent from prevailing campus orthodoxies?

Institutions of higher learning of all stripes have, in recent years, been sterilizing campus speech, ostensibly to enforce "principles of community" or to avoid the creation of a "hostile environment" for "historically disadvantaged" groups. The effect has been the creation of neo-McCarthyite campus speech codes, which threaten disciplinary action for improper statements or even "inappropriately directed laughter." The PC regime has thus initiated a dangerous chilling effect on free speech on campus that threatens the existence of any discourse, let alone a civil one.

What is especially pernicious about PC codes is the degree to which they belittle free speech. In his time, Joe McCarthy and his supporters intimidated many into silence with the question, "Why would you want to protect the speech of a Red if you are not a Red?" Today, the neo-McCarthyite academy chastises defenders of free speech by incessantly telling them that they are fighting to safeguard the campus for "racism," "classism," "homophobia," and "sexism." Why would you want to protect the speech of a bigot if you are not a bigot? Many are bullied into silence for fear of being labeled or ostracized.

What's more, members of "disadvantaged" groups —

sity of Pennsylvania and civil liberties attorney Harvey Silvergate in their new book, *The Shadow University: The Betrayal of Liberty on America's Campuses*. "What an extraordinary power to give to administrators and tribunals: the prerogative to punish the free speech and expression of people to whom they choose to assign the stains and guilt of historical oppression, while being free, themselves, to use whatever rhetoric they wish against the bearers of such stains."

Princeton's speech code holds that the University "attaches great value to freedom of expression and vigorous debate" and then, in the same document, bans offensive language: "Abusive or harassing behavior, verbal or physical, which demeans, intimidates, threatens, or injures another because of his or her personal characteristics or beliefs is subject to University disciplinary sanctions."

For the uninitiated, "verbal behavior" is what is commonly known as talking.

Regulating action is one thing; regulating speech is quite another. Murder is illegal; talking about murder isn't. By masking censorship with ominous language about preventing "verbal harassment," colleges claim to support free expression while simultaneously silencing dissenting opin-



ions.

The concept of "verbal behavior" is nonsensical. We can all tell the difference between speech and action. When we lose that distinction, freedom is threatened.

Speech regulations at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology define harassment broadly to include "any conduct, verbal or physical, on or off campus . . . which creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive educational, work, or living environment." Once again, the same document proclaims a commitment to free expression. All of that seems very reasonable — until one realizes that "verbal conduct" is speech.

"What we're saying is everyone has the right to freedom of speech," MIT Associate Provost Samuel Keyser told the *Boston Globe*, "but there are consequences to that right. We're just asking them to think about those consequences before they speak." Those consequences, according to the MIT code, include "termination of employment or student status."

The University of Michigan's speech code prohibits "any behavior, verbal or physical, that stigmatizes or victimizes an individual." The University of Wisconsin at Madison prohibits "racist or discriminatory comments." Stanford University bans "personal vilification," which is defined broadly to include offensive speech and "non-verbal symbols."

These three schools have been subject to court rulings that struck down their speech codes as unconstitutional. Despite the rulings, though, many institutions continue the practice of outlawing certain speech.

"I am really shocked and depressed at the number of campuses that have speech codes which are in defiance of the law," says Nadine Strossen, President of the American Civil Liberties Union.

"Political discussion naturally becomes offensive to people who care about these issues. Perhaps the most insidious aspect of campus speech codes is their creation of a right not to be offended — the notion that free expression must be limited by the egos of certain students."

Since the law frowns on institutional censorship of speech, colleges usually have internal judicial procedures for enforcing their codes. Silvergate describes these tribunals as "kangaroo courts which allow [the accused] few rights and there is usually a presumption of guilt."

A lack of due process should not be surprising, however, since most codes do not include any objective criteria with which to judge a student's guilt. The City University of New York informs students that "sexual harassment is not defined by intentions, but by impact on the subject." Therefore, a student is guilty simply because an accuser believes him to be guilty.

The University of Minnesota-Twin Cities finds students and faculty guilty of harassment if they cause women and minorities to feel "uncomfortable." "No one," warns Bowdoin College, "is entitled to engage in behavior that is experienced by others as harassing."

Universities thus condemn students as bigots regardless of those students' intentions or the unreasonableness of the victim's accusation. The University of Connecticut even outlaws "attributing objections to any of the above actions to 'hypersensitivity' of the targeted individual or group." Consequently, "even if you believed that a complainant was overreacting to an innocuous remark," writes Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "the attempt to defend yourself in this way would only serve as proof of your guilt."

Colleges have thus instituted a repressive neo-McCarthyite regime, justified by the Orwellian premise that restrictions on free speech actually promote free speech by preventing a "hostile environment." These regulations are not, nor are intended to be, content-neutral. The codes prohibit discussion deemed offensive to certain privileged groups and not others.

People are offended by racism, communism, criticism of Affirmative Action, gay pride buttons, pro-choice T-shirts, NRA bumper stickers, and virtually all political expression. Political discussion naturally becomes offensive to people who care about these issues. Perhaps the most insidious aspect of campus speech codes is their creation of a right not to be offended — the notion that free expression must be limited by the egos of certain students.

By preaching tolerance while maintaining strict intolerance of unpopular or "hateful" views, colleges are not only hypocritical, but damage the educational enterprise. The process of shared inquiry depends on an atmosphere of openness that supports intellectual honesty. Liberal education demands tolerance for the ideas and opinions of others, even when those opinions are hateful or offensive.

Arguments for "civil discourse" would be more persuasive if they included equal restraints on all sides. Regulations on the mode of expression are often invoked to maintain ideological hegemony.

Surely, "civil discourse" often resembles last year's incident at Cornell University. In April 1997, many students took exception to an "insensitive" article appearing in *The Cornell Review*. In protest, they burned hundreds of copies of the newspaper in a large demonstration.

When he visited Dartmouth during the McCarthy era, President Dwight Eisenhower enjoined students not to "join the bookburners." Today, as then, the proper response to "offensive," "hateful," or "dangerous" speech is not the force of repression, but the freedom of more speech. Compromising free speech ultimately threatens everybody's rights. Students should deny the neo-McCarthyites control over what they say. ■

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certain minorities, women, and gays — are informed at orientation that there is a bigot under every bed, seeking constantly to violate their "right" to not be offended.

"What an astonishing expectation (and power) to give to students: the belief that, if they belong to a protected category, they have a right to four years of never being offended," write Professor Charles Alan Kors of the Univer-

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