

# At area colleges, a disturbing trend on hate speech

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**H**ate-speech incidents at Boston College and Tufts University raise the question as to whether college administrators, in their zeal for sacrificing free speech, are playing into the hands of bigots and enemies of liberty.

Two weeks ago, 13 minority students at Boston College received anonymous e-mail messages saying, among other things, that "BC is for white men." Two weeks earlier, Tufts students were angered when a student at a campus party called an Asian woman student a "Chinese Ho Chi Minh bitch."

Boston College police are investigating who sent the offensive e-mail, and if they can determine it was a student, expulsion or suspension is the penalty. Tufts officials say they are "weighing various disciplinary actions that may be taken."

It is not surprising that these apparently bigoted communications are the subject of the campus equivalent of criminal investigations. However, it should be surprising because both BC and Tufts present themselves as liberal arts campuses dedicated to free speech and other attributes of academic freedom.

Hate speech or other such offensive communication that does not directly threaten the recipient with violence or other illegal action would be, in the world outside the college gates, indisputably protected by the First Amendment from official censorship or punishment, though not from censure or moral witness. Why and how, one must ask, should college administrators assume that they have the power to punish such bigoted speech on campus?

Historically, liberal arts colleges have been more, not less protective of unfettered speech than the outside society. What has happened in the past decade or so to have reversed this state of affairs?

The sad fact is that about 15 years ago, colleges began to take it upon themselves to impose "harassment speech codes" on students – and, incredibly, upon faculty as well – that prevent one set of students from directing offensive speech to another set of fellow students who fall within certain "protected" groups designated by administrators.

Our campuses, instead of welcoming students as indi-

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## We shouldn't battle bigotry by prohibiting speech.

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viduals, place them in categories defined by race, ethnicity, or sex, and the right of others to offend members of certain of those categories is curtailed. Speech deemed to create "a hostile educational environment" is, on most American campuses today, the subject of a prohibition rather than an opportunity for dialogue, learning, debate, or protest.

The notion that undergraduates should use their college years to come to terms with life and with their fellow human beings through a process of mutual enlightenment and education has been replaced by an authoritarian system that robs students of their liberty to think and speak as they wish.

This regime is backed up by Draconian punishments meted out by disciplinary tribunals that seem never to have heard of fairness and due process. This assault on

liberty has been carried out in the name of fighting bigotry and achieving a dubious "equality" – a state of affairs ironically designating some students whose speech is freer than others.

Wholly aside from the question of whether it is acceptable for college administrators to seek to battle bigotry by prohibiting speech ("Shut up," he reasoned), there is the practical question of whether such an approach accomplishes anything useful.

As the former president of Brown University, Vartan Gregorian, said in a 1991 Rolling Stone interview in explaining his opposition to hate-speech codes at colleges, "I don't want people who come here to take their prejudices away with them. It will be far more strident prejudice if people are not allowed to discuss it. We should not allow people to discuss their prejudices only with their psychiatrists." (This did not stop Brown, alas, from implementing a hate-speech code.)

To restrict the free speech and academic freedom of an entire campus, on the provocation of either a bigot or an attention-seeking psychotic, is to allow civilized society to be held hostage to fanatics and to sacrifice its freedom to the basest instincts of its miscreants. It is a doomed and misguided effort to achieve toleration by intolerant and repressive means. What power to give a cretin or a provocateur!

Just as terrorists should not be allowed to derail peace efforts in the Middle East or in Northern Ireland, so practitioners of hate speech should not be used as an excuse to destroy the intellectual freedom and uninhibited discourse of the college campus.

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