

Free Speech and Academic Freedom

Letter to the Editor by Harvey A. Silverglate

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I FOUND AMHERST COLLEGE PRESIDENT TOM GERETY'S OCT. 30 OP-ED ARTICLE ("A point is made about free speech") moving, especially when he applied to campus controversy over the current war on terrorism, the call of Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes to honor free thought - "not free thought for those who agree with us but freedom for the thought that we hate."

Unfortunately, when Gerety is addressing his campus rather than a general reading audience, his position is quite different. Amherst College's Website tells us that under the college's "Statement of Student Rights and Responsibilities," a student may be disciplined for engaging in speech that conveys "disparagement" or "abuse" to "any member of the community for reasons that include, but are not limited to, race, color, religion, national origin, ethnic identification, age, political affiliation or belief, sexual orientation, gender, economic status, or physical or mental disability."

It is difficult to imagine how students could possibly have an honest, much less a spirited, debate about the current war without expressing views that somehow are found offensive by some students on the basis of, for example, religion or ethnic identification. These characteristics are, after all, at the center of much of the current conflict. This demonstrates precisely why the type of speech code found at Amherst (and at about 90 percent of colleges and universities in the nation) is utterly incompatible with free speech and academic freedom. If Gerety really agrees with Justice Holmes, he will promptly seek the repeal of Amherst's speech code.