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Office of the President - Tufts University

Freedom of Expression at Tufts

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Today, Dean of Undergraduate Education James Glaser [ruled on an appeal](#) by *The Primary Source* of a decision by the Committee on Student Life. Specifically, Dean Glaser set aside that part of the decision requiring *The Primary Source* to include bylines on all future articles. Since Dean Glaser's decision leaves open other issues raised by the CSL decision, I thought I would take this opportunity to express to the community my own views on freedom of expression at Tufts.

First, some background: Twice last year, *The Primary Source* published articles that many in this community, myself included, found incredibly offensive. The first article, allegedly a satire of affirmative action, suggested that African-American students admitted to Tufts were academically unqualified. The second article, published in response to Islamic Awareness Week, strongly implied that all Muslims were violent and intolerant.

After the publication of the first piece, the community responded collectively. In rallies, meetings, and pieces published in the student press, people strongly voiced their own opinions. The editors of *The Primary Source* withdrew the article and apologized.

After the publication of the second piece, I wrote a Viewpoint for *The Tufts Daily* in which I strongly took issue with the substance of *the Primary Source* article about Islam. Although *The Primary Source* had once again offended a discrete minority within our community, I opposed any attempt to censure or limit the publication. I repeated a statement I have made often since coming to Tufts: The appropriate response to offensive speech is more speech, not less.

Following publication of the second article, a student organization and an individual student petitioned the Committee on Student Life, asserting they were harassed by the publication of the two articles. The CSL held a hearing and ruled that *The Primary Source* had harassed these students given the definition contained in our student handbook, the Pachyderm. In response, the CSL imposed the byline policy which Dean Glaser vacated today.

In retrospect, I think that the CSL was ill-advised to hear this case.

Universities are places where people should have the right to freely express opinions, no matter how offensive, stupid, wrong headed, ill-considered, or unpopular. To say that people have the right to express such views does not mean that we condone them or that they should go unchallenged. Rather, it means that the responsibility to respond is shared collectively by all members of the community and not vested in the action of any administrative body.

We modeled an appropriate response to offensive speech after *The Primary Source* published its parody of a Christmas carol questioning the academic qualifications of our minority students. This approach – people speaking strongly and clearly in response to offensive speech – was far more powerful than any decision of a student-faculty committee. It was through our collective voice that we affirmed our community values.

While Tufts is a private institution and not technically bound by First Amendment guarantees, it is my intention to govern as President as if we were. To put it another way, I believe that students, faculty, and staff should enjoy the same rights to freedom of expression at Tufts as they would if they attended or worked at a public university. With the exception of the recent CSL decision, we have operated in the past as if such rights applied. I will work with the Board of Trustees to formalize this policy.

During the McCarthy era, a number of university presidents in the United States failed to defend the principle of freedom of expression. Students, faculty, and staff paid for this equivocation as the government sought to purge college campuses of those expressing particularly unpopular opinions. We must be vigilant in defending individual liberties even if it means that from time to time we must tolerate speech that violates our standards of civility and respect.

Lawrence S. Bacow
President

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