



Contributors

Robert L. Shibley: Fighting for free speech on 2 R.I. campuses

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ROBERT L. SHIBLEY

PHILADELPHIA

IT'S NO SECRET that the climate on America's campuses for fundamental rights such as freedom of speech and religion can be grim. College students often face opposition to exercising their rights that most Americans never encounter in their daily lives.

Consider two recent and well-publicized controversies in the Ocean State. While these incidents should never have happened, they certainly offered students, administrators and the public valuable lessons in American liberty.

Brown University was home to one of the most mysterious cases that the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) has ever seen — mysterious because the university never explained why it decided to trample on its students' freedom of religion. Brown's Reformed University Fellowship (RUF) was suspended in September 2006 for "non-compliance" with university policy. When the RUF asked what it had failed to comply with, the strange saga began.

First, Brown claimed that RUF's off-campus sponsor church had withdrawn its sponsorship of the group — an assertion denied only minutes later by e-mail from the pastor of the church, who highly praised the group. Brown ditched that explanation and next explained that the group had forgotten to fill out a form in 2005 and was therefore not a recognized group. This made no sense since the group had been allowed to reserve meeting space, which only recognized groups could do.

Those justifications gone, Brown finally asserted that the RUF "had become possessed of a leadership culture of contempt and dishonesty that has rendered all collegial relations . . . impossible." RUF had no idea what Brown was talking about, and contacted FIRE for help. FIRE wrote to Brown, asking it to justify its suspension of RUF and explain what it meant by a culture of contempt. Yet no explanation was forthcoming. Once FIRE exposed the case to the public, outcry ensued, and in February 2007 Brown reinstated RUF without ever explaining what the group was supposed to have done wrong.

Did RUF step on the wrong toes? Did Brown administrators have a religious problem with the group? What would impel Brown to come up with so many easily disproved reasons for suspending RUF?

We'll probably never know. But what we do know is that at a prominent private university that promises religious freedom to students, in a state founded on the very principle that religious dissent should be

tolerated, Brown's actions were inexcusable.

That Brown was forced to reverse a decision it defended for months and refused to explain is a sign that it learned that violating its own promises and punishing religious groups are things the public won't stomach.

Creative campus protests can also get you in trouble, as the College Republicans at the University of Rhode Island found out in 2007. As a protest of affirmative-action policies, the College Republicans offered a satirical \$100 WHAM (white heterosexual American male) "scholarship" that one applied for through a 100-word essay and a quite silly application. College Republicans President Ryan Bilodeau explained that the point was to use satire to protest scholarships awarded on the basis of race, gender or nationality. Over 40 URI students applied for the "scholarship," many submitting equally satirical application essays.

The URI Student Senate committee in charge of student organizations didn't think it was funny. It demanded that the College Republicans publish an apology in the campus newspaper. Angered by the idea that they could be forced to say something they didn't believe, the group's members refused. FIRE got involved, informing the Student Senate in a letter that as an agent of a state university (it exercises authority over student groups that the administration would otherwise exercise), it could not force people to say things they don't believe — just as, for instance, your state representative cannot force you to apologize to anyone. Yet the Student Senate committee failed to get the message, repeatedly voting to violate the group's right to be free from coerced speech.

In early April, FIRE was joined by URI President Robert Carothers, who also ordered the committee to drop the apology demand. FIRE and Carothers were then joined by students, professors, the public and the media in insisting that in America, no state authority can force people to say things they don't believe. Yet it took more than a month before the Student Senate finally put an end to the rogue committee's unconstitutional crusade.

While painful for the College Republicans, the lesson for the Student Senate was clear — when it has a share of state power, it is forbidden to do things the state can't do. And URI learned that it must guarantee the freedoms of all its students even when some students vote to take them away.

Here's hoping that the lessons Brown and URI learned in 2007 will keep them from making the same mistakes in 2008.

Robert L. Shibley, a lawyer, is vice president of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education.