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Campus rules overreach

Following the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, several students at Shippensburg (Pa.) University put up posters in their dorms depicting Osama bin Laden in a rifle's crosshairs. But school officials ordered the posters removed. The students said they were told the signs might offend other dorm residents.

In response to that bit of political correctness run amok, a group representing the students sued the university, claiming its code of student conduct limits free speech. A federal judge agreed. Last week, the school revised its code, which had banned "any unwanted conduct which annoys, demeans or alarms."

The case illustrates how colleges' efforts to promote campus harmony can violate constitutional rights to free expression by squelching all but the most bland and conformist comments. While some views may be offensive, the best way to confront them is by encouraging open dialogue, not giving veto power to those most easily offended.

Yet, many colleges still prohibit provocative speech protected by the First Amendment, according to the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), which sued Shippensburg and other colleges that attempted to censor debate.

Examples of campus restrictions the group has challenged:

- * Officials at the College of William and Mary in Virginia, University of Colorado and University of California at Irvine prevented some students from holding bake sales with discount prices for minority students as satirical protests of affirmative-action policies. They relented after FIRE threatened to sue.

- * Last year, Gonzaga University in Spokane, Wash., took disciplinary action against a student group that posted fliers about a speech by the author of the book *Why the Left Hates America*. Offended students and administrators had complained that the title could be considered a form of hate speech. Gonzaga reversed itself after FIRE protested.

- * A writing instructor at Forsyth Technical Community College in Winston-Salem, N.C., claims she was let go last year after criticizing the Iraq war during a class. FIRE is working to have her reinstated.

Some universities argue that speech codes are needed to comply with federal rules that ban sexual or racial harassment. But the head of the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights says the regulations don't "impair the exercise of rights protected under the First Amendment." The rules are intended to protect students from discrimination, not regulate speech, he said.

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Encouraging students to show sensitivity to others is laudable, but it's better achieved through persuasion than coercion of those who express disagreeable views. After all, a free exchange of ideas is supposed to be an integral part of the college experience.

Universities can support civility without tearing down posters or limiting speech. Free expression will make some uncomfortable, but that's not sufficient reason to block it within the ivy-covered walls of academia.



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