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# University presidents battle for honors in spinelessness

By John Leo

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It's time for this column to announce its Sheldon Award, given annually to the university president who does the most to look the other way when free speech is under assault on campus. As all Sheldon fans know, the prize is a statuette that looks something like the Oscar, except that the Oscar shows a man with no face looking straight ahead, whereas the Sheldon shows a man with no spine looking the other way. The award is named for Sheldon Hackney, former president of the University of Pennsylvania and a modern legend in looking the other way.

College presidents who say and do nothing about newspaper thefts or unconstitutional speech codes usually make it to the Sheldon finals. But not this year. The competition was too keen. At least five colleges suffered thefts of newspapers in April 2006 alone, too many for even the most relentlessly silent president to make much headway toward a Sheldon.

In earlier years, Georgia Tech's president might have won for allowing a speech code that prohibits "denigrating" comments based on "characteristics or beliefs," as in, "You must be out of your mind to disagree with the professor." What would happen to the character of campus life if universities suddenly allowed beliefs to be challenged openly? Sad to say, it's very possible that feelings might be hurt.

John C. Hitt, president of the University of Central Florida, drew attention for his awesome silence when a student was brought up on charges for a campus Web site calling another student "a jerk and a fool." But Hitt gave up his bid for a Sheldon when FIRE (the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education) forcefully called his attention to the First Amendment.

Penn State president Graham Spanier caught the eye of Sheldon judges when his campus's School of Visual Arts canceled an exhibit on Palestinian terrorism because it "did not promote cultural diversity" (i.e., it irritated campus leftists and Muslims). Oddly, with the Sheldon nearly in his grasp, Spanier caved to free-speech pressure. He restored the exhibit and came out for freedom of expression. This is like a leading contender for the papacy announcing that he thinks Jesus was a fictional character.

President V. Lane Rawlins burst onto the Sheldon scene when his university, Washington State, organized and financed the disruption of a controversial student play. FIRE showed that the university had paid for the tickets of students who shouted down the actors and stopped the performance. The play, "Passion of the Musical" by Chris Lee, was a satire starring Jesus and Lucifer among others. It managed to offend gays, Jews, blacks, Christians and other groups on campus. Rawlins defended the disrupters, saying they had "exercised their rights of free speech in a very responsible manner." Moist-eyed Sheldon judges said admiringly, "Anyone who defends the stopping of a play as a free speech right, and finances the operation, has our full attention."

Rawlins broadened his Sheldon appeal in the highly publicized case of student Ed Swan, who was threatened with expulsion from the Washington State teacher-education program after he expressed conservative religious and political views. Swan was told he could stay if he underwent mandatory diversity training and special faculty scrutiny. Instead, he called FIRE. Rawlins and the university backed down.

Another heavyweight Sheldon contender is the Rev. Dennis H. Holtschneider, president of DePaul, a Catholic university in Chicago. Though in office only 22 months, Holtschneider has already presided over three Sheldon-attracting controversies:

- The college Republicans were found guilty of violating a campus prohibition against "propaganda" after handing out fliers criticizing an upcoming lecture by radical professor Ward Churchill.

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- Sponsors of a mock bake sale satirizing affirmative action were hauled on the carpet. They were found not guilty of harassment, but then censured because the university said their application for table space was faulty. Holtschneider denounced the sale as "an affront to DePaul's values of respect and dignity."

Judges agreed they had never seen two candidates as eminently qualified as Rawlins and Holtschneider. Calling the pair "the Ruth and Gehrig of modern Sheldonism," the judges awarded the golden no-spine statuette to both. Congratulations, Sheldon laureates 2006.

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