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SPEAKING UP FOR CAMPUS SPEECH

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February 2, 2004 -- Censorship is alive and well on America's college campuses.

You doubt it?

Then check out some of the speech codes at www.speechcodes.org - a Web site set up recently by the First Amendment guardian-group FIRE.

FIRE, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, is a non-partisan, non-profit organization that defends basic American liberties - freedom of speech, due process, religious freedom and so on - in places where they really ought to be taken for granted.

Alas, they're not.

The speech codes highlighted on the FIRE site all exploit notions of "harassment" and "offensiveness" to chill, if not outright outlaw, debate and dissent.

For example:

* The University of Connecticut has outlawed "inconsiderate jokes," "stereotyping" and even "inappropriately directed laughter."

* Colby College forbids speech that causes "a vague sense of danger" or a loss of "self-esteem."

* Brown University has banned "verbal behavior" that produces "feelings of impotence, anger or disenfranchisement," whether

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"intentional or unintentional."

As FIRE points out, these rules, if applied to the letter, would silence public criticism, satire, commentary and debate.

And on college campuses, no less.

FIRE's current "speech code of the month" features Macalester College in St. Paul, Minn., which ominously declares that "freedom of expression does not include the right to intentionally . . . ridicule another person."

Whatever would they have made of, say, Mark Twain or Jonathan Swift - or even Shakespeare himself - at Macalester College?

FIRE founders Harvey A. Silverglate and Alan Charles Kors - co-authors of "The Shadow University: The Betrayal of Liberty on American Campuses" - join the little band of heroes, like columnists Nat Hentoff and John Leo, who are waging a lonely and largely unheralded fight for the core civil right on which all other rights depend.

This battle has become especially urgent now that traditional civil-liberties watchdogs like the ACLU have essentially given up defending free speech in favor of promoting left-wing causes.

The urge to ban unpopular speech is a strong and perennial one.

It is to America's shame that politically correct university administrators all across the land are so quick to indulge this dangerous urge - most often in the name of ethnic harmony or to protect the delicate feelings of self-professed "progressive" students.

So is the way that the whole issue of politically correct speech restrictions has slid off the media radar screen.

After all, though much of the mainstream press either ignores the totalitarian quashing of allegedly "offensive" speech, the fact is that speech restrictions make U.S. college campuses some of the least free institutions in America.



This makes organizations like FIRE all the more necessary - and precious.

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