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## Jamie France | High marks for free speech

**College is the time for students to find their voices, not to have them silenced in the name of political correctness**

[Jamie France](#)



Last week, five Residential Assistants from Long Island University were fired for creating and posting a YouTube video that the university deemed inappropriate.

Their short film was meant to parody terrorist "hostage films," as the students fashioned ski masks and imitated Middle Eastern accents. The chosen hostage was their hall's unofficial mascot: a rubber ducky.

As a result of what appears to be a harmless contribution to the YouTube phenomenon, these five students have lost their RA status and will soon face a campus disciplinary hearing.

Fortunately, while LIU and various other American universities are displaying attitudes of intolerance for free student expression, Penn is being recognized for its consistent conservation of free speech.

According to the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, a free-speech advocacy group, the University

of Pennsylvania is one of the only Ivy League schools to fully protect free speech.

The evaluation process is explained on FIRE's Web site: officials review the Speech Codes employed by each college and make an assessment of tolerance.

Green lights are awarded to schools "whose policies nominally protect free speech;" yellow lights are given to institutions with "at least one ambiguous policy that too easily encourages administrative abuse and arbitrary application;" and red lights are given to universities that have "at least one policy that both clearly and substantially restricts freedom of speech."

Only Penn and Dartmouth were granted green lights.

FIRE justifies this evaluation by citing the University Honor Council's Code of Student Conduct: "The University [of Pennsylvania] condemns hate speech, epithets, and racial, ethnic, sexual and religious slurs. However, the content of student speech or expression is not by itself a basis for disciplinary action."

But, as shown by the recent LIU case, some schools believe that the content of student speech and expression is sufficient grounds for punishment.

Even Harvard, recipient of a red light in FIRE's assessment, has lashed out at seemingly innocuous forms of student expression.

According to an article in *The Crimson*, in 2002, the editor in chief of the Harvard Business School's student paper was threatened with disciplinary action when a harmless editorial cartoon "provoked administrative response." The cartoon was intended as a critique of Career Link, the computer program that Harvard students use to post resumes and find job interviews.

Apparently, students at the time were frustrated by its persistent bugs and unreliability. However, when Career Services staff took personal offense to the cartoon, Harvard admin came down on the editor with an iron fist. Fearing expulsion from the university, he was forced to resign from his position on the paper.

The editor was warned by several people that "these guys play hardball and you're not necessarily safe." This is not an ideal environment for college students to be living in.

Evidenced by events of previous semesters, Penn has had its share of unseemly student expression. In some cases, our student offenses were even guided by the same humor that motivated the unfortunate LIU students (read: Saad Saadi).

Yet our faculty and disciplinary committee decided to not press disciplinary charges because, essentially, we've all been conscious of the U.S. Constitution's first amendment since junior high. We do have the right to free speech and free expression, and the institution that is supposed to help us develop into reflective adults should uphold these values.

Colleges that choose to challenge free speech are limiting the growth of their students. While it may be difficult to withstand the pressures of political correctness, universities should assume a policy of tolerance that parallels that of the 'real world,' which we'll all be hurled into sooner or later.

When we enter said world of freedom and independence, where our actions are not mandated by a vigilant disciplinary committee, we want to be ready. We want to test boundaries and take risks. This is the only way we can grow, both personally and professionally.

By allowing us to do and say what we want, within reason, Penn is fostering our potential to become the innovative minds of the future.

During a time when so few people have the confidence to voice heretical opinions, colleges must be responsible for instilling attitudes of boldness, in its students. Students who graduate with the ability to express themselves - who don't feel constrained by a fear of being punished or, worse, misunderstood - will one day achieve far greater success than those who sit on the silent sidelines.

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