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BUCCing the Bucknell Liberals

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The Bucknell University Conservatives Club, like so many other conservative clubs on America's campuses, has grown accustomed to its political minority status on campus and having to fight the good fight for equal treatment. Yet, Bucknell's administration has outdone itself in violating BUCC's freedom of speech over the past several months.

Bucknell, a private university in Pennsylvania, promises free expression to its students. But it has flouted this commitment and bent its policies in order to shut down BUCC's affirmative action bake sale and a protest of President Obama's economic stimulus.

The latest outrage began in March, when BUCC members attempted to distribute "Obama stimulus dollars," which featured an image of President Obama and a line stating that the federal stimulus would make citizens' money "as worthless as monopoly money."

Administrator Judith Mickanis shortly arrived on the scene to shut them down, saying, "You're busted!" She said that BUCC was violating Bucknell's "Sales and Solicitation" policy, despite the fact that nobody was selling or soliciting anything. When asked later to verify what she had done, she insisted on the inflexible, wide-ranging ban. The rule, she said, was there to protect students from such inconveniences as people distributing free Bibles (God forbid).

Then in April, BUCC held an "affirmative action bake sale" to satirize practices that treat people of different races differently, such as in university admissions. Students can participate in the satire of racial preferences by paying different amounts for baked goods on the basis of race. (Progressives hold similar "wage gap" bake sales to satirize different average earnings by race and gender.)

It's perfectly legal, as colleges have acknowledged nationwide. Conservative or liberal, the bake sales are usually met with minimal, if any, resistance. And that's the way it

should be, because it is clear to all that the groups just want to bring attention to social and political issues, not to pad their bank accounts.

But, as BUCC was about to find out, such uncomfortable topics are not acceptable objects of satire at Bucknell. Associate Dean of Students Gerald Commerford relied on a paperwork discrepancy to take the “opportunity to shut you down.”

BUCC dutifully reapplied to hold the bake sale again, taking special care to get the paperwork exactly right. This time, however, Commerford said that the bake sale violated Bucknell’s discrimination policies -- even with optional, satirical pricing -- and that BUCC would never, ever be able to hold such an event at Bucknell. In a conversation BUCC recorded, Commerford said, “It’s a political issue, ok; it needs to be debated in its proper forum, ok, and not on the public property on the campus.”

Bucknell is certainly no “marketplace of ideas” like universities are supposed to be. Commerford insists that BUCC may never raise any kind of discussion on affirmative action unless it occurs in exactly the time, place and manner that Bucknell dictates. By controlling the forum, Bucknell is trying to control the message, too. Affirmative action, it seems, may not be the subject of spontaneous debate at Bucknell.

As these outrages mounted, BUCC contacted the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), which has written Bucknell President Brian Mitchell twice. Each effort resulted in a curt letter from Bucknell General Counsel Wayne Bromfield, repeating the distortions of policy and misrepresentations of the facts that have characterized Bucknell’s unconscionable defense of its suppression of BUCC’s speech.

Apparently it didn’t matter to Bucknell that FIRE had all the documentary evidence and had successfully defended such bake sales at several public and private universities. Bucknell hasn’t even budged after FIRE took the case public and drew the interest of national publications including the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Philadelphia Inquirer*.

President Mitchell has yet to utter a public word on Bucknell’s shameful behavior, choosing to let Bromfield’s revisionist pen do the talking. FIRE has written the former chair of Bucknell’s board of trustees, Susan Jean Crawford, a name that readers might recognize from the U.S. Department of Defense. Crawford knows a thing or two about constitutional rights and ought to know about the rights that Bucknell promises its own students. FIRE has also written the new chair, Ken Freeman, and has placed Bucknell

on its six-member “worst of the worst” list of campus censors.

It is a sad day when universities use speech codes and other means to make student debate less free on campus than on the public sidewalk. It is even worse when they do so selectively, as Bucknell has done with its singling out of conservative speech for censorship.

Perhaps worst of all, however, is the condescension that Bucknell has shown its own students by deciding they just aren’t adult enough to openly debate important issues. Are we really to believe that the students of this well-regarded university are so brittle that they must be protected from such upsetting controversies?

Bucknell’s cowardice reminds us of the shrill parent at PTA meetings who, at the slightest hint of offense, screams, “The children! The children! Will somebody please think of the children!”

Bucknell is getting a new president next year, and BUCC plans to keep engaging students on issues that affect them. In the meantime, citizens who care about freedom of speech should join the many alumni and others who have written President Mitchell at brian.mitchell@bucknell.edu urging him to truly level the playing field for conservatives on campus.

Mr. Eaione is President of the Bucknell University Conservatives Club. Mr. Bonilla is a Program Officer at the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, based in Philadelphia. For more information on this story, visit www.thefire.org.

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