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## How useful are campus speech codes?

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How useful are campus speech codes?  
By LOU MARANO

WASHINGTON, June 1 (UPI) -- In defending a proposed sexual harassment code, the president of George Washington University used an example from municipal government to illustrate how GWU faculty would be protected against frivolous charges from hypersensitive students. But a parallel incident at another university resulted in the abolition of a campus speech code, calling their usefulness into question.

In a telephone interview, Stephen Joel Trachtenberg minimized the concerns of some "faculty purists" who "see a conflict between being accountable for what you say in a classroom and free speech and academic freedom." He referred to the principle that every dog is entitled to one free bite.

In order for somebody to be found culpable under the contested code, the violation has to be repeated and flagrant, the president told United Press International. "Anybody can have a slip of the lip," Trachtenberg said, "but if a student comes forward and says, 'I find that objectionable,' and if you say it three, four, five times, then you're doing it with forethought."

Trachtenberg was asked about the possibility of charges from hypersensitive students with highly subjective standards of what constitutes offensive speech

"That's right. You could have an overly sensitive student. I get that all the time," he said.

Trachtenberg then cited what he called "a wonderful case" that exemplifies hypersensitivity. UPI culled the following account of the incident from published reports.

On Jan. 15, 1999, David Howard, a white aide to Washington, D.C. Mayor Anthony Williams, explained to staffers that he would have to be "niggardly" in the administration of a certain fund.



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Of course, the word means "stingy" or "miserly."

Some of the staffers took offense, one implacably. Williams -- a light-skinned, Yale-educated public official who had been accused by some of his constituents of not being "black enough" -- accepted Howard's resignation, saying the aide had shown poor judgment even though Howard "didn't say anything that was itself racist." Williams later rehired Howard in another capacity.

"I thought that what happened in the city (Washington) was crazy," Trachtenberg said. Both the interim GWU code, adopted in 1999, and the proposed code -- rejected on April 27 by a vote of 15 to 0 in the Faculty Senate but now under amendment -- would make that impossible. "There could be no excess of that sort in the university," the president said.

But a closer, academic, parallel that took place 10 days later contributed to the elimination of a campus speech code. On Jan. 25, 1999, University of Wisconsin literature professor Standish Henning read a passage from a book in his Chaucer class that contained the word "niggardly." Amelia Rideau, a junior English major and vice chairwoman of the Black Student Union, took offense. Hennings told Rideau that he had no intention of offending her, but he thought it was appropriate to quote the passage.

In the next class session, the professor led a discussion on semantics and the meaning of the word. According to an account published in the Chronicle of Higher Education, Rideau told a meeting of the Faculty Senate that she was so upset she left the room in tears.

University of Pennsylvania History Professor Alan Charles Kors related the rest of the story in the July 1999 issue of Reason. " 'I was in tears, shaking,' she told the faculty. 'It's not up to the rest of the class to decide whether my feelings are valid.'

"Rideau's plea was a reality check," Kors wrote. "If the proper use of a Chaucerian term while teaching 'The Canterbury Tales' could be construed as harassment of a student who did not know the word's spelling or meaning, then the code was teaching some interesting expectations indeed."

On March 1, 1999, the Faculty Senate voted to abolish the University of Wisconsin's academic speech code by a vote of 71 to 60.

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