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Stop Squelching Speech

By Tara Sweeney & Chris Perez

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A free speech controversy has hit Columbia's campus—even if some refuse to admit it. On Wednesday, the Office of Athletic Communications released a statement announcing a reduced punishment for the men's ice hockey club. While we are pleased the club has regained its season, even the remaining punishment is disconcerting. Administrators and student government representatives have eschewed the free speech issue at the heart of the controversy, instead clinging to the club's procedural errors and disciplinary history as being the reasons behind the punishment. But would the club be facing any punishment if its flyers did not contain the phrase "Stop being a pussy?"

The reactions to the flyers indicate that their content sealed the hockey club's fate. On Sept. 21, Columbia's four undergraduate student council presidents sent a joint letter to administrators protesting the language in the flyer. One student council president told the Spectator that the flyer was "completely inappropriate," while another told the Spectator she hopes that Director of Club Sports Brian Jines will "promote a club sports ethic that does not espouse offensive ideologies" and create "a respectful community."

Columbia administrators have tried to avoid the appearance of trampling students' free speech. In the statement announcing the original punishment, Director of Intercollegiate Athletics and Physical Education M. Dianne Murphy said, "This disciplinary action is not related to free speech, but rather the abdication of leadership responsibilities by senior members of the club." Yet, the University initially told the club that its apology must address "the offensive nature of the recruitment poster."

On Sept. 27, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) sent a letter to Columbia President Lee Bollinger and other administrators to say that "The procedural issue is merely being used as pretense to punish these students for their 'offensive' speech—something Columbia knows it could not do outright without significant backlash from the students and those in the public who take Columbia's commitment to free speech seriously." The New York Civil Liberties Coalition sent a similar letter to Bollinger on Oct. 1, urging him to rescind the punishment.

President Bollinger has repeatedly extolled the virtues of free speech and has promised Columbia students the freedom to express their ideas. In 2004, he sent student leaders a letter stating, "In order to maintain an atmosphere of free and spirited inquiry and discussion, we must choose to forego our natural instinct to punish those who are intemperate and even offensive." One wonders if Columbia administrators bothered to read this letter before deciding to punish the hockey club for using a single word that some students found offensive.

This situation has lasting consequences for the Columbia community and for other institutions that follow Columbia's lead. One Columbia student unaffiliated with the hockey club even asked FIRE to weigh in, realizing the pervasive ramifications for the entire community. Those who doubt the far-reaching effects of this incident should reread Jake Olson's sports column on the hockey club controversy in the Sept. 26 issue of the Spectator. In it he attributes the controversy to Columbia's politically correct attitude, "an attitude that tells us that if someone somewhere might under some circumstances be somewhat offended by something, then whatever they're offended by needs to be immediately removed and whoever is responsible for it needs to attend mandatory sensitivity training." He virtually predicts the administration's latest statement, which both says that "the Club acknowledges that the recruiting poster may have caused potential insult to some members of the Columbia community" and sentences the team to mandatory "leadership training."

Students should be further concerned by the joint letter issued by the four student undergraduate council presidents, which, according to the Spectator, stated that student council leaders are working on a "'Community Principles document' to promote civility on campus." One person's definition of "civility," when enforced, inevitably spells repression for others; say goodbye to South Park, to numerous scenes from the Vagina Monologues, and to almost all of Shakespeare's bawdy puns.

Columbia's overreaction to the flyers represents an attempt to enforce a Victorian notion of civility and decorum upon its students, the vast majority of whom are adults capable of setting their own moral guidelines. As one of America's leading universities, Columbia should not punish students for saying "bad words," nor attempt to control the content of their speech. Until these most basic principles are understood and honored, Columbia's commitments to free expression are empty promises.

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