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Opinion

College Censorship

By JOHN LEO
May 2, 2007

It's not news that the modern university is censorship-prone, particularly when conservatives wish to speak, but the tactics of the censors keep changing. Here are some of the current ones:

Shrink the audience for unwanted speakers. [Columbia University](#) pioneered this tactic in 1998. Citing the possibility of turmoil by leftist protesters, the university ruled that only [Columbia](#) students could attend a scheduled on-campus event by the conservative group, Accuracy in Academia, thus banning hundreds of students from other area colleges who had paid to be there. Columbia reprised the tactic last fall after threats to disrupt a talk by anti-jihadist, [Walid Shoebat](#), a former terrorist. Instead of beefing up security, the administration cut the crowd, allowing only 20 off-campus guests to attend.

Hit the sponsors with a hefty last-minute fee to cover heavy security. Charging students for an uproar that their detractors might produce is a version of the heckler's veto. In February, an Objectivist group at [UCLA](#) scheduled a debate between a Minuteman official and an open-immigration advocate. But the campus left rarely tolerates open debate. After threats of disruption, campus administrators ruled that the sponsors would have to pay \$12,000 to \$15,000 for additional security. The Objectivists said they couldn't afford the fee and canceled the event. But free speech triumphed. Informed that the Supreme Court had ruled on this, UCLA waived most of the security fee — "Speech cannot be financially burdened ... simply because it might offend a hostile mob," Forsyth County v. Nationalist Movement, 1992.

Use anti-discrimination rules to penalize or ban religious groups. These are student groups that oppose homosexuality on doctrinal rounds. Needless to say, Muslims groups are never the target. Intersarsity evangelical groups often are. The groups are deemed in violation of college rules stating that all students must be eligible to become members and officers of all campus organizations. Applying the rules puts the university in the business of telling students of faith what their beliefs should be. But many groups must be allowed to require shared beliefs or they won't be able to function: Hillel cannot be forced to accept members who deny the Holocaust and science groups needn't have flat-earth members. At [Central Michigan University](#), students who detest the Young Americans for Freedom attempted to join the group in order to destroy it from the inside. This helped open some eyes at CMU. Under pressure from the [Foundation for Individual Rights in Education](#), administrators backed down and granted an exemption for belief-based groups.

Set up one or two "free speech zones." In effect these tiny quarantined areas, almost always far from the administration building or the center of the campus, set aside 99% of the university land as a vast no-protest zone.

Run out the clock on punishing disrupters. When angry leftists shut down a scheduled talk by two Minutemen, Columbia president [Lee Bollinger](#), issued a resonant defense of free speech and promised an investigation. More than 11 weeks later, Columbia announced the vague result of this epic inquiry, releasing it on Friday, December 22, just in time for a long Christmas weekend, when few people read newspapers carefully. After another long interval, it turned out that the agitators who shut down the speeches got a wrist slap with the likelihood of no permanent mark on their school records. Students around the country got the message. In the recent dispute at UCLA, an online protester said, "Let's do what they did at Columbia and shut it down!" Mr. Bollinger could have rescheduled the Minutemen speeches and introduced the speakers himself. He is a First Amendment scholar, after all.

Crack down on satire. More than a dozen campuses have canceled mock bake sales intended as jabs at

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affirmative action policies. In these sales, whites and men pay more for cookies or other pastries than non-Asian minorities or women. Humorless administrators point out that the sales run afoul of antidiscrimination policies by charging different rates based on race and gender — the whole point of the parody. The campus censors have been losing heart, though, partly because students know that similar sales run by feminists, to satirize unequal pay, never run into trouble. Last week, yet another campus lost a satirical battle. During "Conservative Coming Out Week" last fall, college Republicans at the [University of Rhode Island](#) advertised a fictitious \$100 scholarship for white, heterosexual males. The student government voted to derecognize the Republicans for a year over the joke, but FIRE hounded URI president, [Robert Carothers](#), who helped pressure the grim censors to back off. At Tufts University, editors of an independent student paper may be charged with harassment and creating a hostile environment for publishing two satires, one a Christmas carol poking fun at racial preferences, the other a "terrorism-awareness" article satirizing Islamic awareness week.

Applaud the censors. Administrators at Washington State University hailed the disruption and subsequent cancellation of a student play that featured a zombie Jesus and a racist [Pontius Pilate](#). Later it turned out that the administration had subsidized the disrupters, paying for their tickets. In a commencement talk, a former president of Cornell praised students who seized and burned hundreds of copies of a conservative campus paper that had irritated blacks with a parody of Ebonics. The president thought censorship was a legitimate act of free speech. It isn't, of course, but campuses tend to attract officials who think so.

Mr. Leo is a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute and a contributing editor at the institute's City Journal.

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