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WSU ends “hecklers veto” aid but threatens conservative student’s graduation

By Mark Tapscott

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It shouldn’t have taken a threatened law suit and being held up to nationwide public scorn but Washington State University officials have stopped paying student hecklers who shout down speakers with whom they disagree.

Unfortunately, the stench remains strong at Washington State University of a Stalinist suppression of political views that deviate from the politically correct academic liberal orthodoxy.

Regular readers of this space will recall from [this July column](#) that the controversy began when it was learned university administrators were paying students to heckle the production of a controversial play by a student author.

Student playwright Chris Lee warned attendees before his production was staged on campus that it would likely “offend everybody” and indeed some Mormon students who paid their own way to see the play silently protested its content.

But 40 other students repeatedly shouted “I am offended” and did everything in their power to shut down the production, including threatening performers on stage with physical harm. These protesting students were all Black, as is Lee.

It was not merely that the Black students insisted on disrupting the production that set them apart from others like the Mormons in the audience who found Lee’s play disturbing. Guess who paid for the hecklers’ tickets? Washington State University’s very own Office of Campus Involvement, headed by Raul Sanchez. The same office helped organize the heckling. Lane Rawlins, the school’s president, even praised and defended the hecklers.

When university administrators not only refused to stop funding and otherwise aiding the hecklers, but also tried to censor Lee’s future productions, he appealed for help to the [Foundation for Individual Rights in Education](#), a Philadelphia-based non-profit that defends the First Amendment rights of students and others on campus.

FIRE wasted no time in reminding school officials that the First Amendment guarantees every person’s right to speak their mind, but it gives no one the right to shout down those with whom they disagree. Using a public university’s tax dollars to support hecklers and the school’s campus cops to protect them is state-sponsored mob censorship.

Unfortunately, mob censorship by groups of hecklers shouting down a speaker is not an uncommon occurrence on many American university campuses these days, as conservatives like Ann Coulter and Michelle Malkin can readily attest.

David French, FIRE's president, explains why there was no question about the importance of stopping Washington State University. The school's "defense of this vigilante censorship will encourage students to unlawfully silence others whenever they feel offended," he said.

There ensued months of tense negotiations between university officials, student playwright Lee and FIRE's First Amendment experts, as well as extensive coverage in the national media, much of it critical of the school.

As a result, when Lee produced a second controversial play a few weeks ago, university officials warned the audience before each performance: "Please be aware that disruption to this performance, or any program will not be tolerated and will be dealt with accordingly, up to and including participants being escorted from the venue." No disruptions have been reported since the notice was posted.

But elsewhere at WSU the bitter scent of official suppression remains strong, especially in the Education Department where 42-year-old student Ed Swan was recently threatened with failure after allegedly violating two vague "disposition" standards. He was also forced to undergo "diversity training" after expressing his conservative political beliefs.

Not familiar with "disposition standards" on campus? Essentially, that's a purposely vague name for grading standards used by a growing number of university education departments across America to make liberal definitions of diversity and social justice the norms against which aspiring primary and secondary school teachers are graded. Students who don't measure up are failed or re-educated.

"By using such vague and politically charged criteria for evaluating future teachers, colleges all but guarantee that students will be punished for their opinions rather than evaluated on the basis of their abilities," said French.

It's like the old Soviet trick of declaring as mentally ill anybody who dissented from official communist ideology and putting them in psychiatric hospitals for diversity training, er, excuse me, "treatment." Often those treatments involved electric shocks and mind-altering drugs.

After FIRE protested on Swan's behalf, WSU's College of Education Dean Judy Mitchell pledged not to judge his political beliefs, but added ominously "he may not display prejudice in the classroom setting and expect to successfully complete this program."

How much you want to bet Mitchell finds a way to define professing conservative values such as respect for proper grammar and spelling to be a display of prejudice in the classroom?

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