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THE SUN NEWS



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Posted on Sat, Jan. 14, 2006

'OFFENSIVE'

Speech limits hurt purpose of college

RAY WATTERS

GREENVILLE, N.C. One of my funnier stories about college was how I got yelled at by three women the first week of my freshman year.

It works better when you see me acting it out, so I'll just cut to the punch line. My great offense was holding a door open for each of them. In the South. Horrors.

It was a textbook example of what everyone had warned me about going to the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. Of course, all their warnings weren't true. The seven people sharing my first dormitory suite were members of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship.

My sociology professor introduced himself as a Christian on the first day of class. Then he said his beliefs wouldn't affect the curriculum, class discussions or his grading. He just wanted us to know his personal views up front. My geology professor told us he was a nice guy. Days later, he said the Bible was all bunk during a lecture.

At various times, I roomed with a Wiccan, a Christian and an agnostic who turned deist after weeks of debate with me. In short, I met all kinds of people in college, got upset with what they said and offended them with what I said back.

I got to spend a little time browsing in the marketplace of ideas, and now the University of North Carolina needs to make sure other students will be able to do the same.

A report this week from the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education said that most UNC campuses violate the First Amendment with rules that limit freedom of speech.

Here are a few examples from the FIRE report:

Appalachian State University prohibits insults and taunts. That would prevent about 60 percent of the conversations I have with my friends and some I had with professors.

N.C. Central University prohibits "statements of intolerance." I hate it when people do that.

East Carolina University prohibits "obscene, vulgar, loud or disruptive language" and offensive conduct.

The list goes on, but you get the idea. These rules were meant to keep bigots from getting in the way of other people's education. But too often, regulations are used to keep students from offending each other, and that gives school officials too much power.

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Take Fayetteville and ECU, for instance. Who gets to decide what language is vulgar?

When I was going to school, some members of a gay club at UNC-Chapel Hill referred to the group as "queer" in literature around campus. So another group of students tried to stop them because that was intolerant language.

That level of stupidity shouldn't happen on a college campus. But some people have this idea that everyone needs to stay in their own little comfort zone at school.

But it is a violation of the Constitution to chill free speech to avoid offending people.

UNC President Erskine Bowles promised to read the FIRE report and deal with any problems he found. Most could be fixed with a simple rewrite.

I just hope the culture behind the rules gets fixed. A truly liberal society is one that maximizes the freedom of those involved, not one that limits everyone in order to make people feel good.

After all, the point of college is to debate things. It's not a good argument unless everyone gets offended at some point.

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