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The death of free speech in higher ed

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If you don't have kids in college, you may not know how the war on terrorism is being received by the elites in the world of higher ed. It's frightening -- a truly scary Halloween story.

It's as if they forgot the First Amendment. Statements of patriotism or support for the U.S. airstrikes in Afghanistan have been banished on some campuses. Jokes about bombing the Pentagon have led to disciplinary action. Professors have been suspended for saying things about the war with which their bosses disagree.

Speech suppression has occurred on all sides of the political spectrum, but predictably most cases have involved speech that is pro-war or pro-American. The liberal bias in academia is as strong as ever.

The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, which works to advance freedom of expression on campuses, has compiled a list of incidents. Here is a sampling.

*** In Costa Mesa, Calif., Orange Coast Community College suspended Professor Kenneth W. Hearlson after he argued, during a lecture on contemporary politics, that silence on crimes against Christians and Jews in the Middle East was consent to terrorism. Several Muslim students complained to Vice President Robert Dees that Hearlson had called them terrorists.**

*** An administrator at Central Michigan University told students to remove various patriotic posters (an American flag, eagle, etc.) from their dorm. A residential adviser said the display was offensive.**

*** At the College of the Holy Cross in Massachusetts, sociology department chair Royce Singleton demanded that a secretary remove an American flag from her office. The flag was in memory of her friend Todd Beamer, who died on the hijacked United Airlines Flight 93 over Pennsylvania.**

*** Zewdalem Kebede, a foreign student at San Diego State University, heard other students, speaking loudly in Arabic, express delight about the terrorist attacks. Kebede challenged the students in Arabic, and was accused by a university official of abusive behavior. He was told another incident would result in punishment.**

*** At Florida Gulf Coast University, Dean of Library Services Kathleen Hoeth told employees to remove stickers saying "Proud to be an American" from their workspace for fear of offending international students.**

*** At Duke University, the administration shut down a Web site after Professor Gary Hull posted an article that called for a strong military response to the terrorist attacks. Faced with heated public criticism, Duke reinstated Hull's Web page, but required him to add a disclaimer that his views were not those of the university.**

*** In a rare example of administrators responding to an anti-American sentiment, the University of New Mexico began disciplinary action against Professor Richard Berthold after he joked to his morning class on Western Civilization that "Anyone who can bomb the Pentagon has my vote." He even apologized after concluding the statement was inappropriate. "These cases are the tip of the iceberg because most faculty and students submit meekly to repression of their speech," says Thor L. Halvorssen of FIRE (see its Web site at www.thefire.org). In the name of preventing offense to some, Halvorssen says, "they seek to stifle the views with which they disagree."**

Here's what's especially troubling about the thought police in academia: They are hypocrites.

On the one hand, they turn to the First Amendment whenever they are criticized for the kooky ideas they peddle to impressionable students. "The invention of homosexuality" and "sexuality and space" are just two examples of what's commonly offered at colleges today. (Footnote: The Sarah Lawrence College course catalogue/Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies division). On the other hand, they create a stifling campus atmosphere in which conservative students say they're reluctant to state their true views for fear of being laughed at or even being given bad grades.

Folks: The First Amendment works both ways. You can mock this country or you can express devotion to it without fear of persecution.

Except in American academia, it seems. This is not only scary, but downright harmful to our children.