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Schools of Scandal

by Simon J. Dahlman

I'm getting so tired of articles about left-leaning political correctness. A quick Web search will offer thousands of references to speech-controlling, freedom-sapping, conservative-bashing actions on campuses around the United States. You can find a few of them in the *Boundless* archives.



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The most recent scandal emerged from Tufts University in Massachusetts, when the Tufts Christian Fellowship, an evangelical group affiliated with Intervarsity Christian Fellowship, was "derecognized" in April by a student judicial panel, cutting off its meeting privileges and funding from the school. The TCF offense was to refuse a senior leadership role to Julie Catalano, a TCF member who had led Bible studies in the past but recently came to believe the group's views about homosexuality are wrong. Calling herself bisexual, Catalano wanted the option of starting an open lesbian relationship, even though TCF consistently maintained its reliance on the Bible for its teaching and its belief that homosexual acts are sinful.

In other words, TCF wanted to exercise its right to choose its own leaders, ones who would agree with the group's beliefs. Catalano filed a complaint with the university, and the school newspaper publicized the case, accusing TCF of discrimination because Catalano was bisexual. TCF consistently claimed the issue was her beliefs, which



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I'm getting tired of reading about PC battles, especially since they sound so similar. I get the feeling I've read the same stories over and over again.

Victims of PC are caught in a Wonderland world of nonsense and self-contradiction

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contradicted the group, not her sexual orientation. Nevertheless, the Tufts Community Union Judiciary ruled against TCF, citing university policies against discrimination.

TCF appealed the decision, and that's when the PC watchdogs hit the media outlets. "[T]he politically correct left now relies far more on coercion than on persuasion or moral appeal," thundered John Leo in *U.S. News and World Report* (May 15, 2000). "The long-term trend is to depict dissent from the gay agenda as a form of illegitimate and punishable expression." The word was out: Tufts was trampling the religious rights of evangelicals in the cause of political correctness.

A few weeks later, on May 16, the Tufts Committee on Student Life voted 12-0 to overturn the previous decision, restoring the Christian group among religious groups on campus.

That's not the end of the story. Jody Chang, an affiliate chaplain at Tufts and an Intervarsity staff member who helps lead TCF, says the appeal was successful mainly because of the procedural problems; the Tufts administration may yet revive the issue. TCF is in conversation with the Tufts administration about its future role.

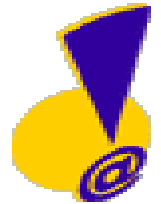
As the Tufts story spread, a little scratching revealed other private universities that had restricted or already banned evangelical Christian groups, including Grinnell College in Iowa and Whitman College in Washington. In Vermont, Middlebury College is on the brink of issuing new guidelines that would compel religious student organizations to allow unbelievers or those opposed to a group's core beliefs to run for office in the organization. The language has passed muster with the school's legal counsel and is now being considered by the school president, who has the final word.

Coincidentally — or not — all these cases involved homosexual students in conflict with Christian organizations. For example, the Christian fellowship at Middlebury refused to put the name of a gay student on its leadership ballot because of his views about homosexuality. His charge of discrimination prompted the review of organization guidelines.

All of these cases are clear examples of the insidious nature of political correctness. "This kind of thing has been going on for 15 years or more," says Thor Halvorssen. Halvorssen experienced it firsthand as a student at University of Pennsylvania, where he edited a conservative newspaper and served as a judicial adviser in the 1990s. He is now executive director of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), a recently formed nonprofit organization devoted to issues of free expression on college campuses

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Simon J. Dahlman is
associate professor of
communications at
Milligan College,
Tenn.



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(www.thefire.org). Political correctness, he says, is "the politicization of every aspect of student life. It is totalitarianism at its finest."

Incidents connected with political correctness are well documented. Protestors have shouted down and otherwise violated the free-speech rights of conservative lecturers — without being penalized by the administration. Freshmen students are rammed through "sensitivity training" courses that force them to publicly role-play being gay or lesbian. (Has anyone suggested students role-play being fundamentalist Christians?) Conservative student newspapers have been stolen from distribution points — again, without penalty.

Even Phil Benoit, director of public affairs at Middlebury College, admitted that there is some element of politically correct thinking involved in that school's current dispute, quickly adding, "It hasn't been cast as 'let's get this unorthodox thinking.' " (Nice turnaround on what constitutes unorthodox thinking, by the way: The Christian group, which holds a view that the church has maintained for two millennia, is now considered unorthodox.)

So, there's no disputing the reality of PC action on college campuses. (Private colleges seem particularly plagued, since state universities are not allowed to impose extraordinary limitations on religious groups, thanks to the Supreme Court.)

I'm getting tired of reading about PC battles, especially since they sound so similar. I get the feeling I've read the same stories over and over again. Names, places and a few details change, but the stories are the same: unjust decisions, such as at Tufts; offensive courses that are required and sometimes federally funded even at private institutions; Stalinist protest tactics; speech codes that George Orwell would have had trouble imagining. Each story carries with it, understandably, a deep sense of anger and frustration. Victims of PC are caught in a Wonderland world of nonsense and self-contradiction so convoluted that it is hard to even know where to start looking for arguments and defenses. The outrage factor is off the charts. So far, however, outrage has not stopped the PC movement. I can only imagine how tired people are who must live with it.

I can think of only four ways to get out from under the burden of these stories. The first is to ignore them, to pretend they don't exist. The second is to throw up our hands in frustration and hopelessness: the PCites are too many, the movement too strong, and so it's best just to go along to get along and not pay much attention. Either of these options won't change anything, unless it's for the worse, but at least we can ignore it.

A third option is to actively confront the excesses of political correctness when they appear — in public debates, through student committees and judiciary bodies, in newspaper columns and, when necessary, in courts of law. Force the issue, in other words.

This was the Tufts approach, with the help of FIRE and people like David French, a lecturer in law at Cornell University who provided pro bono legal counsel to TCF during its appeal. This activism was successful in part because the case focused on a specific issue: religious freedom.

That may be the key to fighting PC extremism: to deal with each case one at a time, rather than trying to unravel the whole maddening mindset of political correctness at once. The list of PC intrusions seems endless: freedom of religion, freedom of expression, freedom in the classroom, coercion, the use of student fees, discrimination. That is why fighting political correctness all at once is futile, like trying to kill the mythical Hydra, the nine-headed beast that grew two heads back whenever one was cut off.

But by tackling each issue as it arises, opponents of political correctness can concentrate on core principles, help observers (including reporters and judges) understand what a consistent application of a new PC rule would produce, and perhaps even gain a few unlikely allies. This has happened at Tufts, where the Unitarian chaplain, who often takes contrary views to the evangelicals, is upholding their right to free religious expression.


The successful appeal at Tufts shows what can be done, according to Halvorssen. "All it takes is for students to organize and let their voices be heard," he says.

The final option is to simply bear witness to what's going on, regardless of the prospects of change. (In the old Soviet Union, people like these were called dissidents. In the Old Testament, they may have been called prophets.) Bearing witness works hand-in-hand with activism, but it recognizes that the situation on campus may not change, at least not for a long time.

One strategy of bearing witness is to hold institutions accountable to their own statements, in public. ("Most universities cannot bear the light of media exposure," says Halvorssen.) For example, universities and colleges that play host to extreme political correctness invariably describe themselves as welcoming of various ideas and values. In its mission statement, Tufts explicitly claims to "value a diverse community ... of different races, religions ... where differences are understood and respected." How does that square with the

attempt to effectively exile a group based on its religious beliefs? At best, Tufts is guilty of false advertising. At worst, it undermined its own value system. After all, as a private school, Tufts isn't required to welcome all points of view and religious beliefs. But its own vision statement says otherwise — and the school should be held to that standard.

Standing as an activist or a dissident is a risky, hard choice to make, especially since extreme political correctness is on the rise, with more speech codes, sensitivity seminars and actions against disfavored groups than ever. But the rewards can be worth the risks.

"When a Christian group stands firm, God honors that," says Jody Chang of TCF. "I think there will be a new vitality. Issues like this compel people to make a choice. [They realize] 'I'm going to be known as a Christian.' There's a power that goes with that." 



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