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On campus, free speech causes indigestion



BLUMNER

By ROBYN E. BLUMNER, Times Perspective Columnist
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What's the cost of reverse discrimination? College students across the country have been cooking up some clever satire to demonstrate the answer.

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The guerrilla theater takes the form of a bake sale. Cookies are sold at varying prices depending on the buyer's race and gender. White males may pay \$1 for a cookie while white females are charged 75 cents, Hispanic students 50 cents and African-Americans 25 cents. The price list makes the political statement that certain groups don't have to meet the same academic standards to gain college admission.

Whatever you might feel about affirmative action, these bake sales are a humorous, creative and highly effective way of expressing one side of the debate. So effective, in fact, they spark college administrators to shut them down.

Political correctness has no sense of humor.

Last year, Southern Methodist University ended an "affirmative action bake sale" organized by the Young Conservatives of Texas after just 45 minutes. A school official was quoted in the Dallas Morning News as saying it created "a hostile environment."

Similarly, bake sales have been shuttered at the University of California at Irvine, Northwestern University, the College of William and Mary and the University of Washington.

At Northwestern, after the campus Objectivist Club had its bake sale ended prematurely, the group was sanctioned by the student government for not having an approved cash box (for the 39 cents of profit the group took in) and for failing to disclose that the sale was really a political protest.

Will Coggin, co-founder of Sons of Liberty, a libertarian group at the College of William and Mary in Virginia, said his bake sale in early November was closed down after he received a call from Mark Constantine, a student affairs official.

"He told me he wanted me to take down the pricing sign because the prices were a

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violation of the campus' discrimination policy," Coggin said. "I told him that we were trying to make a point and this was protected free speech. His response was, "No it wasn't. "

These reactions are in stark contrast to how college administrators react to the "pay equity" bake sales organized by student chapters of the Feminist Majority Foundation. The premise is precisely the same: Cookies and other baked goods are sold at differing prices based on the sex of the customer - \$1 for men and 80 cents for women. The point here is to raise awareness of the gender wage gap.

Crystal Lander, director of campus programs for the Feminist Majority Foundation, says their bake sales have been "well received" at the more than a dozen schools where they have been held. None has been shut down. In many cases, Lander says, "they have the backing of the women's studies program."

Use satire to illustrate a politically popular position and whole departments rush to your aid; use it to poke fun at affirmative action, the sacred cow of academia, and college officials use every pretext to make it go away.

Here again is evidence of the way the political left is just as dangerous to freedom of expression as is the right. Virtuecrats may take aim at indecency and flag burning, but the diversitistas of the world have no tolerance for those who would question why white and Asian students are held to higher standards in college admission. They conflate speech with action, believing that vocal opposition to affirmative action is the same as a discriminatory act.

They don't get the Constitution at all. (Of course, only state schools have a legal obligation to respect the free speech rights of students, but many private colleges guarantee their students expressive freedom in school policies.)

In light of the way this repression has infested college campuses, affirmative action bake sales would have stood little chance had it not been for a civil liberties group devoted to championing students' rights. The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, or FIRE, has been tracking school responses to the bake sales and intervening when necessary. Through letter writing and public embarrassment, FIRE has had a number of successes. Coggin at William and Mary, for example, was recently able to hold a second bake sale without being hassled. But there are campuses that continue to resist.

Greg Lukianoff, director of Legal and Public Advocacy at FIRE, says the culture on modern college campuses exalts preventing hurt feelings above free speech. "I think that students come in and are essentially told they have a right not to be offended and if they are offended they should run and seek an administrator," Lukianoff says. "Being offended just means having your deepest beliefs challenged; and having your deepest beliefs challenged is essential, not incompatible, with a real education."

Satire is the way thinkers can inspire reform. Jonathan Swift's famous 1729 satire, A Modest Proposal, suggested eating children as a way of addressing the hunger and overpopulation in Ireland. Here, the modest proposal is to buy cookies - a parody that has driven college administrators into such a tizzy that free speech is something they can no longer stomach.

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