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Campus censorship

What started out as a foolish prank at several college newspapers has turned into a bad joke for free speech.

Last Thursday, the University of Scranton's student paper, The Aquinas, was among several college papers that published tasteless jokes and jibes — supposedly in the name of April Fools' Day fun. The humor ranged from merely juvenile to outright offensive. But similarly out-of-bounds behavior was displayed by Scranton college officials who reacted to the tasteless taunts by compounding the original offenses.

By Friday, the issue — and The Aquinas itself — was history. Administrators confiscated thousands of papers, fired the student editor and shut down the publication.

The action challenges the First Amendment's guarantee of free speech, which gives publications wide latitude to speak out, make fun and even offend.

It also ignores the fact that press freedom comes with responsibilities. For instance, the authors of mean-spirited parodies should publicly account for their work. That can't happen if a publication is silenced.

Compare Scranton's overreaction to the response by the University of Nebraska at Omaha after its student paper, The Gateway, published a racially offensive April Fool's spoof. The parody's name, "The Ghettoway," says it all.

Civil rights groups and others in the Omaha community filed complaints with the school, and college Chancellor Nancy Belck made clear she wouldn't tolerate such offenses. But even as the storm was breaking, the newspapers' editors publicly apologized on the paper's Web site and on the front page of the next edition.

Letters to the editor, both condemning the issue and defending it, ran, too. Now the paper is considering sponsoring a campus forum on controversial issues, including race and sexuality.

Closing a student newspaper — even a badly run one — sends the perilous message that free-speech guarantees mean nothing on a college campus and that the wrong opinion is too dangerous to utter. Even so, 66 college papers have been censored since 2002, according to the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, a non-profit group that promotes free speech.

The Omaha community — and The Gateway — has learned a more positive lesson. Namely, that offensive

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actions have consequences. And the best way to combat offensive speech is with more speech, not less.

As a private school, Scranton has broad authority to rein in student papers and demand an accounting for stupid press spoofs. Censorship won't provide that opportunity. A boisterous debate in the free press can.



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