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**Breaking the Silence**

Minnie Quach, September 29, 2004

**Editor's note:** Last month, we ran an article entitled, "[Backlash 101](#)," by GNN contributor **Joshua Holland**, editor of USC's progressive paper, The Trojan Horse. Holland argued that heavily-funded conservative groups were taking advantage of an anti-political correctness backlash to make political gains among impressionable college students across the country.

Not everyone agreed with Holland's analysis. **Minnie Quach**, a program officer at the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), a group mentioned by Holland as having ties to powerful conservatives, contacted us with an alternative view. Here Quach argues that Holland painted a much too simplistic picture of the political and free speech battles taking place on college campuses today:

**Breaking the Silence: Responding to "Backlash 101"**

College students today should fear becoming victimized by a serious, and sometimes subtle, invasion of conscience. The invasion is often the tactic of self-righteous administrators who advocate a superficial, paternalistic, and conformist promotion of "diversity" as a central component of the educational experience. This situation on campus is troubling for all involved, and frequently misunderstood or misapplied by well-meaning, socially-conscious students and faculty. Rather than truly embracing diverse perspectives, the result of such "education" may instead lead to the exact opposite - creating campuses marked by severe student isolation and segregation, where students with strong beliefs fear speaking out, lest they be unfairly branded radical, self-deluded, racially-insensitive, unprofessional, or one of the many other labels used at colleges today to indicate that a person has a viewpoint unworthy of attention. Thus, some students sit in silence, quietly shaping their own ideologies, while others become the unquestioning followers of campus polices supposedly devoted to promoting education. In the mean time, our campuses become intellectually-dead spaces where engaging dialogue is stifled and where it is hoped that everyone will agree on everything or keep their opinions to themselves.

If you think only horribly insensitive or reactionary students are threatened by this campus trend, think again. It is true that on today's college campus you are far more likely to get in trouble and be assigned "sensitivity training" if you mock the university's values, express religiously orthodox points of view, or present conservative ideas; however, left-minded students have indeed fallen prey to the same type of thought reform and re-education.

**Speech Codes 101**

While campuses of higher education should be the ideal places for our nation's youth to learn to think independently, our university administrators have decided to regulate their beliefs, expression, and association by various, dishonestly labeled policies that, in practice, are simply university speech codes. Administrators are co-opting progressive students to support these regulations, often cynically justified as "anti-discrimination" measures in order to enlist their support in censoring other members

of the community. Leftist students would, of course, hesitate to challenge anything called a "racial harassment code" or "anti-discrimination policy." Yet all too often, the language of these policies has nothing to do with real harassment and is only concerned with preventing provocative speech.

Keep in mind, however, that in light of the general corporatization of colleges (managing them to maintain the appearance of peace and quiet rather than to create a reality of debate and candor), administrators often frown upon anyone rocking the boat in any way. They also frequently favor opinions that are popular on campuses, which, at this moment in history, do tend to be more left-oriented. During my own experience as a student as both a Harvard undergraduate and graduate student, I experienced a double reality, where heated conversations I had with fellow students happened in "safe" spaces, often with like-minded friends (i.e. where I was likely preaching to the choir), while chilled (and, in my opinion, boring), over-politically-correct expression was characteristic of classroom participation and most institution-sponsored lectures and discussions.

In one particular example of a speech code gone awry on another campus, the State University of New York at Brockport bans expression that is clearly constitutionally protected. The university's harassment policy, which applies to students and faculty, lists the following among examples of harassment: cartoons that depict religious figures in compromising situations; calling someone an "old bag"; jokes making fun of any protected group; and even "discussing sexual activities." On the other side of the country, at Occidental College in Los Angeles, last spring administrators used non-discrimination language to punish a student radio host by finding him guilty of "sexual and gender hostile environment harassment" for merely using speech on the air that students found offensive. At Rhode Island College, non-discrimination language was used to try a professor for "hostile environment racism," when she simply refused to punish students for expressing allegedly racially offensive speech (something the First Amendment would have barred her from doing anyway) in a conversation she didn't even witness.

If administrators called the enforcement of such policies what they really are - "speech codes" - unsuspecting students and faculty might not be as easily duped. This underhanded abuse of administrative power is detrimental to all students' right to think for themselves.

### **Who Is the Oppressor?**

Oppression is oppression regardless of who's doing the oppressing. Joshua Holland's article, "Backlash 101," posted on August 19, 2004, is far too simplistic in describing the conservative backlash against campus liberalism. Campus culture varies across the nation and across generations. For example, the types of student expression that might get unlawfully silenced at University of Southern California are different than that at Harvard University or University of Texas at Austin. Also, the political faction doing the censoring has shifted dramatically over the centuries - and even more quickly over the past few decades.

For example, last year at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE), the Guerrilla Girls (a bunch of anonymous females who take the names of dead women artists as pseudonyms and appear in public wearing gorilla masks, as described on the feminist group's website) were banned from speaking on campus at a student-organized research conference because they were considered by the administration to be irrelevant to the professional interests of the students, even though the topic being addressed was female empowerment in education. In another instance, the dean (a self-proclaimed advocate of liberal education) complained about student activists by saying that there were students on campus who still think we're living in the 1960's and 70's (a period during which liberal students were more likely to be silenced by the

campuses marked by conservatism). It is this type of administrative micro-managing and official regulation of student expression that severely limits the intellectual vigor and real critical thinking campuses could have if students' rights were fully protected and embraced. It also demonstrates the increasing administrative disdain for allowing students to figure things out on their own through open dialogue and pursuit of differing perspectives, as if university administrations have already figured out the correct conclusions to all of scholarship's essential questions.

Articles like "Backlash 101" ironically demonstrate a distressingly narrow and increasingly common tendency to view the world through oversimplified binary oppositions, suggesting that all of creation can be understood by America's current definition of what makes one "right" and another "left." The fight for basic rights on campus is far from a simple battle between liberal and conservative viewpoints. The narrow-minded activist with a hypocritical way of thinking supports protecting the rights only of those who agree with him. This narrow-mindedness is a terrible affliction, causing him to treat others as dehumanized caricatures based on an overly simplified examination of the world. Viewing anyone who disagrees with you as stupid, evil, or less than fully human results in furthering oppression, not ending it. Members of the campus community have stopped listening to each other just because they disagree, and the colleges' and universities' regulations further reduce the dialogue on important societal issues to a mere murmur.

### **Prompting Critical Dialogue**

As part of the foundation of true learning, critical dialogue requires the existence of difference of opinion to fuel the creation of knowledge. Any revolution on our nation's campuses should be based on a love of debate, dissent, and self-reflection, and the recognition of the humanity of each individual that makes up the campus community. It should not be fueled by hate and anger that may perpetuate the oppressive system rather than change it. One of the basic concepts of critical theory is that knowledge is synthesized by opposing viewpoints, and nowhere should this be more clearly understood than on college campuses.

The ultimate goal in critical dialogue and education should be to create new knowledge - not to isolate and negatively label those with dissenting beliefs and opinions. Achieving this goal requires public dialogue, and therefore the expression that may prompt it.

### **The FIRE Burns**

One educational, public advocacy, and watchdog organization, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), has stepped up to protect the basic rights to free expression, freedom of association, and freedom of conscience and religion on our nation's campuses. Through its work, FIRE protects the right of students and faculty to create spaces for reflective dialogue among diverse perspectives. Acts of censorship and repression that take place on campus, regardless of the political ideology of those carrying them out, work completely against critical pedagogy, practice, and progressive change. The long run outcome of protecting First Amendment rights on campus is to restore and maintain the free exercise of conscience for students, many of whom will be the nation's future leaders and educators, and to prevent the oppressed of today from becoming the oppressors of tomorrow.

On a daily basis, FIRE helps people fight abuses of power. FIRE has helped students who are forced to adopt policies for their organizations that contradict the mission of the group as a pre-condition to be recognized. At Catholic University of America, for example, FIRE is defending the right for students to organize a chapter of the NAACP on campus. FIRE also has helped professors who are punished for exercising academic

freedom in the classroom. FIRE defended the First Amendment rights of Professor Richard Berthold at the University of New Mexico, who was being disciplined for joking that "anybody who can blow up the Pentagon has my vote" on September 11, 2001. FIRE has also been virtually alone in defending Elizabeth Ito, a professor in North Carolina, who lost her job after denouncing the war in Iraq. FIRE also has helped student newspapers who get punished for publishing satirical political cartoons. At Southwest Missouri State University and Harvard Business School, FIRE defended the right of student newspapers to publish cartoons that administrators found "offensive." FIRE has even helped student organizations exercise their right to free expression online, as it defended the right of a student group, the Che Café Collective, whose mission is to advance "radical social change," to post links endorsing revolutionary groups' sites on its own website.

FIRE's track record shows that it has adamantly defended the rights of those with viewpoints across the political spectrum, as well as those whose situations have nothing to do with their political ideology.

### **Stand Up for Free Speech, Speak Out for Real Change**

Students can call themselves liberal, progressive, leftist, democrat, socialist, or whatever label they choose in the gamut of political rhetoric; however, they should not blindly adhere to ideology in a way that ignores the interactive, organic, human component of higher education and the historical context of their campus culture. Progressive (or any other) students should never be coerced into altering their beliefs and behavior for the sake of conforming to institutional dogma enforced by administrators in the name of liberal education, nor should they condone the actions of administrators who censor those with whom they disagree.

In 1943, when the world was torn between numerous radical and racist ideologies, Supreme Court Justice Robert Jackson stated in *West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette*, "Those who begin coercive elimination of dissent soon find themselves exterminating dissenters. Compulsory unification of opinion achieves only the unanimity of the graveyard." The issues of free speech, free minds, and basic rights transcend America's current arena of political ideas and alignment and is much more nuanced than just a polarized "left versus right" way of thinking.

Progressive students should be organizing and speaking out both locally on campus and nationally; however, they shouldn't do so for the sake of silencing others - they should do so for the sake of real synthesis of knowledge and progressive change. If you believe in the strength of your ideas, you should not fear having those ideas compete with opposing ideas in open debate and expression, and when you meet with ideas that completely contradict your own you should welcome the opportunity to demonstrate why those ideas should fail and yours should succeed. Progressive students must live up to their rich legacy and stand up for free speech, even when the speech rejects the core of everything they stand for. As Noam Chomsky simply put it: "If we don't believe in freedom of expression for people we despise, we don't believe in it at all."

**Minnie Quach** recently graduated with an Ed.M. in International Education Policy from the Harvard Graduate School of Education, where she fought for students' rights and faculty diversity as Student Government Association President and co-founded an independent study course exploring critical pedagogy and democratic education called Student-Initiated Teaching (SIT). She is currently a FIRE program officer.

Students should contact FIRE when they encounter possible infringements of their basic rights. FIRE will continue to apply the same principles it always has and challenge the censors in college administrations no matter who they may be. Visit FIRE's webpage: [www.thefire.org](http://www.thefire.org)

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