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BYLINE: SHAUNTI FELDHAHN

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BODY:

When I was in graduate school, political correctness was beginning to rear its head. And one of my biggest frustrations was that although my university --- like others --- presented itself as a diverse "marketplace of ideas," only one sort of idea was welcome. Any dissent from the "everything should be tolerated" worldview was suppressed as narrow-minded. Many university students and staff clearly didn't realize the irony of preaching tolerance while being intolerant of those who disagree.

It's only gotten worse. Today's political correctness movement is so aggressive that it threatens our constitutional rights instead of protecting them.

Several Georgia State University students and organizations recently learned that the hard way. Last semester, two students who came to a hip-hop costume party as their favorite artists --- Snoop Dogg and P. Diddy --- were suspended because their getup included blackening their faces. Although they washed up immediately after being told it was offensive, and although the fraternity apologized to the Black Student Alliance the next day, a fracas followed, complaints were lodged and the university pretty much hauled off and suspended everyone in sight. Although the students and organizations were reinstated (or soon will be), it shows just how messy it can get when a university tries to micromanage something that --- whether you agree with it or not --- should be a function of freedom of speech.

I personally find blackface offensive because of its hurtful history within the civil rights struggle. But although the students may have had poor judgment, they also had First Amendment rights, which were not exactly upheld by GSU.

Some universities are so politically correct that they trample on constitutional rights as a matter of course. Many public schools today --- the University of Georgia, for one --- require student groups to certify that they will not discriminate in admitting members, including on the basis of creed or religion. Ironically, this policy has itself led to a great deal of discrimination, and there's no legal reason for it.

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill recently kicked Christian fraternity Alpha Iota Omega off campus for refusing to certify that it would not discriminate based on religion. Since the only purpose of the group is to train Christian leaders, admitting anyone else --- an avowed atheist, for example --- would destroy the reason for the group. It would also destroy its freedom of association, which was a central victory of the civil rights struggle.

A 1958 Supreme Court ruling on the NAACP said, "Freedom to engage in association for the advancement of beliefs and ideas is an inseparable aspect of [free speech and] liberty."

David French, the president of a watchdog group working on the UNC case, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (thefire.org), notes: "Many universities have such a convention of belief that discrimination is always wrong, that they'll slap these 'nondiscrimination' codes down without thinking whether they make sense. No law requires such sweeping nondiscrimination statements.

"Enforcing nondiscrimination based on creed or religion is silly --- it would mean an environmental group admitting members who wanted to trash the environment, or a gay-rights group being forced to accept members who wanted to spend every meeting explaining why homosexuality is sinful. It means destroying the group --- a tactic already used by activists against groups on several campuses."

The political correctness movement started out with good intentions, but it has taken on a life of its own that threatens the goals it was intended to advance. We must call on our universities to uphold our constitutional rights, not a mutated version of the same sort of discrimination that previous generations fought to correct.

* Shaunti Feldhahn of Norcross is the author of several books. Her column appears Wednesdays.

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