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Slugline How SUNY Brockport smothers free speech
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By DAN HALL

I doubt that any administrators or professors at SUNY Brockport are conspiring to do away with the First Amendment. But it is easy to believe that Brockport is run by some well-meaning people who have lost track of what freedom of speech really means.

Last month two students in the college Republican Club filed a federal lawsuit alleging that Brockport's web of anti-harassment regulations and other official statements designed to promote "diversity " on campus amount to unconstitutional infringement of their right to freedom of speech. The students enlisted the help of an organization called the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, or FIRE, which has been making a name for itself nationwide by successfully defending students and professors whose rights have been violated by colleges and universities.

Among the incidents at Brockport that led up to the lawsuit, student Republicans distributed flyers calling for "an end to liberal discrimination on campus. " A professor was so outraged that he demanded that the student government withdraw funding for the group under the college's "anti-harassment " policies.

The student government, demonstrating considerably more common sense (as well as respect for the Constitution) than the professor had shown, refused. Nevertheless, FIRE investigated the college's student handbook and anti-harassment policies and found a long list of college rules and other statements which, it claims, amounts to nothing less than a speech code limiting the rights of students and professors to speak their own minds.

For example, the rules prohibit "making fun of any protected group, " or "cartoons that depict religious figures in compromising situations. "

The purpose, no doubt, is to maintain decorum on campus. But the First Amendment doesn't require decorum, and satire is a legitimate weapon. If a conservative student wants to make fun of gays on the marriage issue, or if a liberal professor draws an offensive cartoon attacking the pope for his stance on birth control, well, that's what the

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First Amendment is all about. College rules ought to protect and encourage free speech and rigorous debate, not defend against the possibility of personal offense.

It's interesting to observe the way these fights have changed. When I was a student in the 1960s, it was the liberals fighting legally enforced racial segregation (and later, the Vietnam War) who manned the ramparts of free speech. Now, it's more often political conservatives leading the charge.

Our society, not only in academia but also in the corporate and political worlds, has moved so far toward the ideals of "diversity " and "multiculturalism " that we've followed them right out the window. College students of every generation tend to be a rebellious lot, thank the Lord, and what many of them are rebelling against now is a suffocating layer of political correctness that prevents honest examination and debate of some of our most pressing social issues.

At California Polytechnic Institute, for example, a student group distributed flyers publicizing an appearance it had arranged for a controversial black conservative named Mason Weaver, who argues in his book "Let's Get Off the Plantation " that affirmative action and some welfare programs serve mainly to cement blacks into second-class status. Other students complained that posting the flyers in the college's "multicultural center " constituted harassment. The college ordered the flyers torn down, and inserted disciplinary notes into the permanent records of the students who had put them there. FIRE sued, and forced the college to reverse its decision.

I asked Patricia Simpson, one of the two students who brought the lawsuit against Brockport, whether she had ever actually been disciplined for any of her political views. "I want to graduate, so I watch what I say, " she told me.

In a communications class, for example, she wrote an essay about the Equal Rights Amendment, which she opposes. But she supported it in her essay, out of fear the professor would give her a lower grade otherwise.

I don't often wind up in the same camp as the right wing of the Republican party, but Patricia Simpson strikes me as an extraordinarily level-headed young woman. "We're not suing just for ourselves, " she said, "but for everyone on campus. The Students Against War have been pressured over signs they've put up too. "

I don't buy everything that FIRE claims in its lawsuit. The organization has an obvious ideological axe to grind. And I'd like to hear Brockport's side of the story. (Officials aren't talking yet.)

But there is at the very least at Brockport an atmosphere of false niceties that smothers the free-wheeling debate and exploration of ideas that ought to be the hallmark of the college experience. Brockport's leadership needs to do some real soul searching.

Dan Hall is editorial page editor of Messenger Post Newspapers.

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