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Tufts tops list of free-speech foes

By **Jason Millman**

Sunday, July 1, 2007 - Updated: 02:07 AM EST

After a year marked by controversial college free-speech cases, Tufts University landed itself on a dubious list organized by a First Amendment watchdog group that monitors U.S. campuses.

The university's reaction and punishment for two articles printed by The Primary Source, a student-run conservative magazine, earned Tufts top company with Johns Hopkins University on the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education's first "Red Alert" list of the "worst of the worst" offenders of speech rights.

Last December, The Primary Source printed "Come All Ye Black Folk" - what the magazine maintained was a satirical Christmas carol about affirmative action at Tufts. Not many were amused.

Controversy struck the campus again in April when the same magazine printed a "fact sheet" about Islam that listed information about fundamentalism and some of the faith's oppressive aspects, such as treatment of women in some sects. That piece ran during Islamic Awareness Week at the university, sparking feelings that it was meant to attack Islamic students.

The Committee on Student Life, a body made up of professors and students, ruled both articles were items of harassment and created a hostile atmosphere on campus, despite whatever intentions the magazine's editorial board had. Primary Source Editor in Chief Matthew Schuster said the ruling is indicative of the campus' unwillingness to allow free debate of controversial issues.

"It's not surprising, because in the intellectually stifled atmosphere of Tufts University, it's quite common for people who disagree with you to brand you as racists and bigots instead of actually trying to understand your point of view," he said.

The issue of whether students were harassed by the articles forms the crux of the free speech argument. The university's harassment code says actions that discriminate against certain groups, even if they are meant as jokes, will be "addressed with prompt and decisive action." But Foundation for Individual Rights in Education President Greg Lukianoff said claims of harassment are often overstated, and the Tufts incidents simply fall into the category of offensive speech.

"You don't have a right not to be offended," he said. "Just feeling harassed doesn't mean you are harassed. Harassment is a particular pattern of behavior directed at a person" as defined by rules.

At Johns Hopkins, a student was found guilty of harassment for a Facebook ad for "Halloween in the Hood," in which he used terms like "ghetto" and "blinged out" to describe a party his fraternity was throwing. After the incident, the university developed written principles barring rude and disrespectful behavior.

Though Johns Hopkins spokesman Dennis O'Shea said the principles cannot be enforced for the sake of punishment, Lukianoff said it underscores an alarming trend to handcuff debate on campuses.

"Satire and parody are not always meant to be nice," he said. "The point is to provoke."



Matthew Schuster, editor in chief of the student-run conservative magazine The Primary Source, holds copies of the articles that started a free-speech controversy at Tufts University. (Herald Photo By Lisa Hornak)

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