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Well shut my mouth!

Tufts and Brandeis muzzle student newspapers — at students' urging

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Are today's college students thinner-skinned than were previous generations? That may be the sad truth emerging from Tufts and Brandeis Universities, where campus ideologues and their faculty enablers are purging student publications that used parody to comment on religious and race-relations issues. The real danger, of course, is not that today's students are emotionally frail, but that they are willing to sacrifice freedom of speech and academic freedom to protect themselves from mere offense, never mind intellectual challenges.

On May 10, a Tufts student-faculty judiciary board found the student-editors of conservative student magazine the *Primary Source* guilty of "harassment" and of "creating a hostile learning environment" by publishing satirical articles that offended some black and Muslim students. Later that same day, the editors of *Gravity*, a long-running non-partisan campus humor magazine at Brandeis, tendered their resignations after a similar attempt at parody backfired.

For the *Primary Source*, the nightmare began when it published a mock Christmas carol, in December 2006, titled "[O Come All Ye Black Folk](#)." Written from the viewpoint of a college admissions officer, the carol hymned: "O come all ye black folk, boisterous yet desirable. . . . no matter what your grades are, F's, D's, or G's/Give them privileged status/We will welcome all/O come let us accept them . . ."

Parody is an inherently risky art form, but here the magazine's intention was reasonably clear: the authors deployed obviously exaggerated racist stereotypes in order to rehash the as-old-as-affirmative-action counterargument to affirmative action — namely, that affirmative action operates on an assumption of black racial inferiority.

"The carol was intended as a satirical criticism of affirmative action and was, in fact, intended as an anti-racist statement," the editor-in-chief at the time wrote in an [apologetic public statement](#). "It is not the opinion of the *Primary Source* that there are no qualified black students at Tufts University or that any of the other generalizations in the song are true."

Never mind the question of whether it is appropriate to pressure, much less require, students to apologize for engaging in parody on a liberal-arts campus devoted to academic freedom. The *Primary Source's* mea culpa did not satisfy offended students, who maintained that the magazine's editors were using the "parody" label to disguise their racist tendencies.

Emotions ran high at a campus rally to denounce the magazine, as well as in a series of published letters that called the *Primary*

Source's editors "agents of hate" and accused them of "slander."

Even after the [local media began reporting on the controversy](#), university president Lawrence S. Bacow prudently demurred at campus pressure to punish the *Primary Source*. And it appeared that the Tufts administration, which has [a poor record of protecting free speech](#), planned to use this particular controversy to demonstrate the importance of combating contested speech with more speech, rather than censorship. Following the *Primary Source's* voluntary apology it seemed as if conservative and liberal students might return from winter break and stand together against racism and for free speech.

Alas, David Dennis, a self-described gay black student frustrated with the *Primary Source's* continued presence on campus, breathed new life into the saga this past month. Dennis filed harassment charges with the Committee on Student Life (CSL), a judiciary panel composed of faculty and students, arguing that the three-stanza Christmas carol was a "psychological attack" that caused him to "question [his] own intelligence and capability as a student." (The horror — the horror! — of having to undergo critical self-examination in college!)

Given the *Primary Source's* unpopularity among the left-leaning student body, the complaint resonated. The Muslim Student Association, upon hearing of the upcoming trial, filed a matching complaint about an article from the latest issue, which parodied a flyer for Islamic Awareness Week. (Censorship, it seems, is contagious.) The mock flyer contained sinister factoids about fundamentalist Islam — for example, "The seven nations in the world that punish homosexuality with death all have fundamentalist Islamic governments," and "Most historians agree that Mohammed's second wife, Aisha, was nine years old when their marriage was consummated."

The Muslim Student Association's reaction is particularly disturbing from an academic-freedom point of view, since the parody contained a list of assertedly factual statements regarding radical Islam. As such, it clearly qualifies as political speech — the category of speech on which the Constitution confers the highest level of protection. It's troubling, then, that these students reflexively pushed for formal sanctions against their political adversaries, since it raises grave doubts about the next generation of students' ability to engage in debate without resorting to appeals to censorial authority.

Outsiders following the Tufts fiasco understood that the offended students would not have had a case had these same events unfolded at a public university bound by the First Amendment. After all, the Supreme Court, in its famous 1988 *Hustler v. Falwell* decision, ruled unanimously that a vile parody, in which the recently deceased Reverend Jerry Falwell described drunkenly losing his virginity to his mother in an outhouse, [constituted protected political speech](#). Similarly, every competent judge knows that the charges against the *Primary Source* — specifically, that it stereotyped blacks and Muslims — falls far short of the legal threshold of "harassment."

Sadly, the judiciary board at Tufts had little patience for arguments about the First Amendment or academic freedom. Instead, it excoriated the editors for their unpopular stances. The young journalists were reportedly chastised for their insensitivity by Tufts professor Barbara Grossman, the faculty chair of the Committee on Student Life, feeding a frenzy against the magazine's exercise of its free speech. During the five-hour hearing, which the magazine's editor, Douglas Kingman, described as an "embarrassing show trial," audience members hijacked the agenda and vented their anger at the *Primary Source*. It ended, as show trials inevitably do, in a conviction.

No laughing matter

Similarly heated student forums took place at Brandeis last week after *Gravity*, a campus humor publication, ran [a fake ad](#) in which a white CEO testified that, for three-fifths the price of a Blackberry device, he bought "Black Jerry" — an African-American man named Jerry to drive him around. The *Gravity* editors explained that the satire was a commentary on the racist attitudes of white CEOs, meant to show how white privilege — which is rooted in the original Constitution's three-fifths-of-a-person formula for counting America's slave population — exists in our society.

Unfortunately, powerful campus groups did not find any humor (much less understand, apparently, the parodic point) in that article, and successfully lobbied the student government to issue a series of demands, including "diversity training" sessions for the malefactors. ("Diversity training," is a thinly-veiled form of Orwellian thought-reform becoming increasingly common in higher education, as well as in the world of commerce.) The editors of *Gravity* capitulated to most of the demands of the student government, even though an unscientific online poll conducted by the Justice, the undergraduate newspaper, showed the silent majority of students thought that the sanctions were too strict. All but one of the editors have since resigned, with the remaining editor pledging to implement "a more effective editorial hierarchy" in the future.

Of course, casual disregard for free speech is not a new development at Tufts or Brandeis; both universities have a history of failing to protect free speech and academic freedom. In fact, in 1989, a male sophomore at Tufts who produced and sold T-shirts with the slogan WHY BEER IS BETTER THAN WOMEN AT TUFTS prompted administrators to adopt a "speech zones" plan, which divided the campus into areas where speech was restricted. The censorship plan was ultimately abandoned when students protested this attack on their freedom (and when the student protests gained prominent notice in the *Boston Phoenix*, the *Boston Globe*, the *New York Times*, and the *Village Voice*). Similarly, Brandeis came under scrutiny this past year for removing a student art exhibit that featured paintings by children in a West Bank youth center, arguing, rather incoherently, that the exhibit did not evenly present both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The alarming difference between those past incidents of campus censorship and what happened to the *Primary Source* and *Gravity* is that last week's purges were almost entirely student-engineered. This past week's disciplinary proceedings demonstrate that the students, far from protesting encroachments on their academic freedom and free-speech rights as they have in the past, are now enabling their own repression. The Tufts and Brandeis administrations, for a number of years engaged in a war with students' fighting for their freedom, have finally prevailed. The students might now proudly boast, to quote the late Walt Kelly's *Pogo* comic strip popular with an earlier generation of students, "We have met the enemy, and it is us."

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