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MSU pursues Orwellian thought

reform

'Early intervention' program crosses line into 'psychological re-education'

Greg Lukianoff

The new year of 2007 has arrived -- but at Michigan State University, it feels more like 1984. MSU students, be warned: Your school is engaged in a program of thought reform reminiscent of George Orwell's classic dystopia.

The program is called Student Accountability in Community (SAC), and its lack of respect for the constitutional rights of MSU students is shocking.

The program defines itself as an "early intervention" into the lives of MSU students who are observed using "power-and-control tactics" in their interactions with other students.

Thought control program

One example given at a seminar about the program explained that a girl who slammed a door in a fight with her boyfriend was sentenced to "mandatory" SAC training -- which means if she did not complete it, she would be effectively expelled.

The list of behaviors that could get students sentenced to "accountability training" include "sexist" or "homophobic" remarks, "insulting instructors" or using "derogatory gender slurs." While derogatory remarks may not be nice, MSU is a state school and is therefore bound by the First Amendment.

Thankfully for all of us, the First Amendment does not only protect courteous speech, but rude speech as well. Excluding insults would swallow the right.

The theory of SAC is that if MSU can identify slightly misbehaving students early on, it may prevent the students from engaging in

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criminal behavior down the line. A SAC seminar included a graph that implied a direct correlation between those students who engage in practical jokes and those students who commit assault and rape. Thus, the bizarre logic goes, it's necessary to force these pranksters to undergo mandatory "accountability training" before they turn into violent rapists.

Relearning how to speak

Students sentenced to SAC training are required to attend four sessions with a campus administrator acting as counselor where they learn to speak "correctly" about whatever alleged wrong they had committed.

During training, students are required to answer a series of questions. Students must confess their understanding of the incident, but the SAC training materials make it clear that the student's perception of what he or she did wrong is almost always incomplete. To better appreciate their misbehavior, students are given a "Power and Control Wheel" and asked to recite the ways in which they employed "privilege," "obfuscation" or "honeymooning" in their actions.

If the offense is being rude to a dorm receptionist, the student cannot simply state he or she should have been more polite. Rather, the correct response is "I feel entitled to be in the residence hall and that's wrong." (Never mind that the high cost of room and board at college may justify a certain sense of entitlement.)

No proper anger allowed

The SAC sessions continue, with the student repeatedly being told the "right" way to feel and talk. There appear to be no appropriate situations for anger; indeed, in the seminar on the SAC program, participants were told that even religious beliefs may be "a form of obfuscation." Adding insult to injury, students are required to pay for this service.

The SAC program is a legal minefield. Possible constitutional claims against it include enforcing an unconstitutional speech code, compelling students to speak against their will and the basic denial of due process, as well as contractual claims stemming from MSU's promises of free speech and due process.

Yes, state colleges may punish students for inappropriate or abusive behavior, but this program goes well beyond these bounds into pseudo-psychological re-education. Free societies do not tell people what they must say or feel under threat of punishment, and our universities should respect the fundamental right to private conscience.

Michigan State claims to be reviewing the program. I can think of no means of rectifying its many faults short of abolishing it.

Greg Lukianoff is an attorney and the president of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education in Philadelphia. E-mail: letters@detnews.com.

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Program referrals

Any instructor or university staff member can make a voluntary referral of a student for "problematic behavior" that does not violate university rules. Mandatory referrals are made when students violate university rules and repeating the violation would be detrimental to others.

Source: Michigan State University

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