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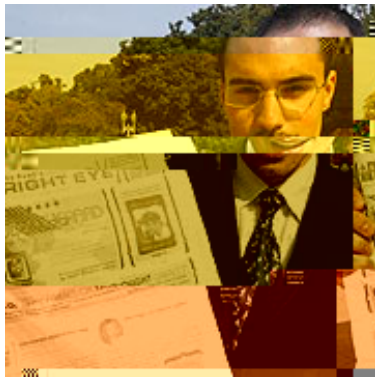
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On campus: Free speech for you but not for me?

By Mary Beth Marklein, USA TODAY

Most college presidents argue that their campuses and classrooms encourage the free exchange of ideas. Where else but here, they say, can difficult issues be debated?



Jason Mattera of Roger Williams University saw his newspaper's funding frozen over controversial articles.

By Tim Dillon, USA TODAY

But as campus officials look for ways to accommodate the growing diversity of their student bodies, an increasingly vocal number of students — most of them white and predominantly conservative or Christian — say there is little room for their opinions and beliefs.

On campuses large and small, public and private, students describe a culture in which freshmen are encouraged, if not required, to attend diversity programs that portray white males as oppressors. It's a culture in which students can be punished if their choice of words offends a classmate, and campus groups must promise they won't discriminate on the basis of religion or sexual orientation — even if theirs is a Christian club that doesn't condone homosexuality.

Colleges "seek to privilege one predominantly leftist point of view," says Thor Halvorssen of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), a Philadelphia-based non-profit founded four years ago. "Universities should welcome all perspectives, no matter where on the political spectrum."

Increasingly, with financial and legal backing from a loose national network of conservative, religious and civil liberties groups, those students are fighting back.

In April, two students sued Shippensburg University in Shippensburg, Pa., arguing that several parts of the school's conduct code and diversity policies intimidated them into keeping silent about their conservative politics and beliefs. Since then, other students have sued Texas Tech University in Lubbock and a California

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community college. All three lawsuits are part of FIRE's campaign to abolish campus speech codes.

Where controversies have erupted

University of California, Berkeley. In a catalog description last year for a course on the "politics and poetics of Palestinian resistance," the graduate student instructor warned that "conservative thinkers are encouraged to seek other sections." The

tower.

"Legislators, taxpayers, tuition payers, and donors have no idea what their dollars are underwriting," says Luann Wright, the parent of a senior at the University of California-San Diego. So outraged was she by her son's 2001 freshman writing syllabus — "basically the whole thrust was on the toxicity of the white race," she says — that she created a non-profit Web site (noindoctrination.org) where students can anonymously post incidents of bias on their campuses.

Conservative students aren't the only ones feeling pinched. In May, Wesleyan University President Douglas Bennet banned a long-standing tradition, particularly popular among gay rights groups, of writing messages in chalk on sidewalks. Some faculty were targeted by name, and increasingly vulgar obscenities, sexual and racial slurs had spurred complaints.

But the most well-oiled attack is driven by conservative and Christian students, "who basically feel they're targets for getting their minds dry-cleaned to think the right way," says Jordan Lorence, a litigator for the Alliance Defense Fund, an Arizona Christian organization involved in several lawsuits.

Speech codes and other restrictions became popular in the late 1980s and early 1990s as campuses looked for ways to address the growing number of racial minorities on campus, along with concerns about sexual harassment. By the mid-1990s, after several courts ruled that certain campus speech bans were unconstitutional, many schools withdrew those policies.

Since then, racial slurs and other incidents have persisted. In 2001, the latest year for which statistics are available, the FBI received 987 reports of hate crimes and incidents at schools and college campuses — about 10% of all hate incidents that year.

And "the level of discourse in the outside world has become more confrontational," says Roger Williams University Provost Edward Kavanagh, whose Bristol, R.I., campus temporarily froze funding for a College Republicans newspaper this month. Kavanagh objected to its Sept. 30 edition, which featured a series of articles opposed to homosexuality, including a description of a crime in which a seventh-grade boy was raped and sodomized. He vowed to strengthen oversight of future publications.

But junior Jason Mattera, 20, an editor of the paper, says, "You're not automatically a bigot if you don't agree with (homosexuality). What they're essentially doing is silencing the only conservative voice here on campus."

The administrative response is typical, some say. Indeed, many schools, including the University of Virginia and Harvard Law School, created task forces in the past year in response to similar incidents on their campuses.

In the process, says David French, the lawyer representing the Shippensburg students, speech codes have reappeared — though often disguised as anti-harassment statements or non-discrimination policies.

Today, FIRE estimates that two-thirds of colleges have speech codes. Other experts disagree: In a recent study of 100 randomly selected institutions, George Mason University professor Jon Gould found that 30% of institutions have a policy that restricts hate speech, but less than 10% would be unconstitutional.

Campuses say civility is the goal

Campus officials say their goal is not to stifle students but to promote civil discourse. "What we attempt to do is try to create a civil democracy, where everybody is respected," Shippensburg President Anthony Ceddia says.

Since 1990, he says, the campus has pledged a commitment to racial tolerance, cultural diversity and social justice, and since 2000, it has required students to take a course that meets a diversity requirement. Students also are strongly encouraged to attend university-funded "Art of Being" programs, which highlight a particular culture — Jewish, African-American and Asian-American were among those offered this semester.

Some students welcome the programs. In a column in the student newspaper, opinion editor Christopher

