

NEW YORK CIVIL RIGHTS COALITION

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Dr. Lee C. Bollinger  
President  
Columbia University  
202 Low Memorial Library  
535 West 116th Street  
New York, New York 10027

Dear President Bollinger:

I was shocked and chagrined to learn about the suspension of Columbia's Men's Ice Hockey Club on the alleged basis that they did not follow established protocols of posting their flyers, flyers that some at Columbia, including University officials, deemed objectionable on the basis of the use of the word "pussy". It is my understanding that few if any found the use of that same word-"pussy"-offensive when others used it in 2004 at Columbia, notably on T-shirts distributed by the Student Council. So what is so offensive about the word "pussy" today?

What is happening at Columbia that even student leaders are apologizing for the use of a perfectly good word, a word that is not only in the dictionary but a word that was cleverly used in the Men's Ice Hockey Club's flyers as a play on words, used to recruit and advertise for the team known as the Columbia Lions? What can possibly be so offensive or objectionable to the phrase on a flyer, "Stop being a pussy," in this context?

Nor am I persuaded that the Men's Ice Hockey Club was punished simply because they supposedly did not follow the rules for postings. Had the flyers in the eyes of the thin-skinned, prudish and fragile egos at Columbia contained laudatory phrases, or neutral or even positive expressions about Columbia activities, clubs, and events or about issues germane to campus life, would any one, would student leaders, would Columbia officials actually insist that the posters be pulled down, and that the people who put them up be found and punished for violating the procedures for posting? I truly doubt that. And I know that you know better than that. Indeed, as a former resident of Harlem, and a lifelong New Yorker, I know the history and traditions of Columbia and of the posting of flyers there without permission, and of the Free Speech Movement that could not possibly have been contained, much less suppressed, by an administrative nicety like prior approval for the posting of flyers.

There must be something else at work here, and we suspect that that something else is the speech itself that has offended some in the Columbia community and which has led to the Men's Ice Hockey Club's suspension.

Quite frankly, Dr. Bollinger, we find quite implausible the University's claim that it is merely defending its prior approval rules for the posting of flyers. Prior approval for free speech seems to us rather absurd on its face. The hockey team might have distributed their flyers by hand. Are you suggesting that the same people who complained about the posting of the flyers would not have complained or taken offense if the flyers were only handed out, with the "offensive" word pussy on them?

If the facts are as we believe them to be here, then the university seems to have put itself in the unfortunate and inappropriate business of banning certain words, which is not the university's mission or in keeping with a free speech culture that has been forged at Columbia University through students' struggles. Notwithstanding that it is a private university, Columbia University and enlightened, modern-day university presidents such as yourself have a responsibility to embrace and cherish the Bill of Rights and the First Amendment in particular as the model or code of conduct for a free people who seek to exercise free inquiry and to foster debate and discussion of controversial ideas.

It may sound crude to some, but "Stop being a pussy" is a commonly used phrase, in street lingo, in media, and even within the ivy walls of academia. The free speech advocates and civil rights activists of the '60s, including the Columbia student leaders who insisted on free speech on campus decades ago, would be ashamed of those student organizations and student leaders who have called for censorship and for the punishment of those who engage in free, supposedly "offensive" speech. In this regard, while I am not surprised-given the hefty pressures for conformity on campuses today-I am nevertheless saddened to learn that student leaders have embraced censorship there and have because of the use of the phrase "Stop being a pussy" on the Ice Hockey team's flyers have even sought punishment of the team. Had I been a member of the Ice Hockey team, or a student at Columbia today, my response to such wimps would have been swift and blunt-"Stop being a pussy. You ought to be standing up for free speech. You ought to embrace the use of puns and word play and unapproved repartee and bold, unapproved advertising, not seeking to ban words!"

It is our view-and of those who started the Student Free Speech Movement-that college students should and must be free, and no special permission should be required, to distribute flyers or recruitment materials for their teams and clubs. The university should not deny them financial support or impose any punishment on its clubs and teams that so exercise their free speech rights. Moreover, regulations governing student conduct should be in harmony with and essential to the fulfillment of the college's educational objectives to foster free inquiry and free speech and dissent and to protect controversial speech on campus. The heckler's or the censor's veto is not something that I thought you favored, sir.

We join our sister civil liberties/civil rights organization-FIRE (the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education)-in urging you to promptly rescind this punishment of the Men's Ice Hockey Club immediately. Let those who find offense in the phrase "Stop being a pussy" speak up and take exception to those words, but without the official club from Columbia officials aimed to flatten and punish the free speech interests and rights of those who used that phrase on their flyers.

I urge you to speak up for free speech.

All the best.

Sincerely yours,

Michael Meyers  
Executive Director