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OPINION



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DON'T LAUGH TOO HARD

By F.I.R.E.

May 21, 2007 -- HOW would you feel if you got in trouble not for *telling* an off-color joke, but simply for *laughing* at one? Sounds inconceivable, right?

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Not at Drexel University in Philadelphia, where school policy prohibits not only "inconsiderate jokes" but also "inappropriately directed laughter." Not only won't they let you *tell* certain jokes, they promise to punish you for *finding them funny*.

Drexel is not alone in its prohibition of what can only be described as typical college student interaction.

Northeastern University in Boston, apparently the self-appointed arbiter of good taste, prohibits sending any e-mail message "which in the sole judgment of the University is offensive." Attention Northeastern students: before you forward that e-mail to your friends, you had better try to discern whether "the University" might deem it offensive.

Johns Hopkins University prohibits any "rude, disrespectful behavior"-a regulation that sounds more suited to Victorian-era England than it does to a major institution of higher learning in 2007.

Speech codes on campus are laughably ridiculous until you realize they have a very serious side. They are so broad that they cannot possibly be enforced across the board - imagine the resources it would take to punish every instance of "inappropriately directed laughter" on campus. And they are incredibly common: between September 2005 and September 2006, we surveyed over 330 schools and found that an overwhelming majority of them - 69 percent - explicitly prohibit speech that, outside the borders of campus, is protected by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

Speech codes are completely inconsistent with the role of the university as a "marketplace of ideas," and are often used to stifle speech that the university or students simply dislike. Campus speech codes place a stranglehold on campus dissent and should be put to rest.

Authored by the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (thefire.org).

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