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Academia's shame

Many readers with far too much time on their hands have written in and asked: Whatever happened to this column's annual Sheldon award? Well, it's back. It goes to the university president who does the most to look the other way when free speech is under assault on campus.

The Sheldon is a statuette that looks something like the Oscar, except that the Oscar shows a man with no face looking straight ahead, whereas the Sheldon shows a man with no spine looking the other way.

It is named for Sheldon Hackney, former president of the University of Pennsylvania. After minority students in 1993 stole the entire press run of a campus newspaper, Hackney refused to discipline the thieves. But the guard who pursued them was reprimanded - a nice touch.

A strong contender this year is William Cibes, chancellor of the Connecticut State University system. One professor, fed up with one-sided seminars and guest lectures, asked the university to endorse airing a full range of views. Cibes said no, on the grounds that such a statement could justly be seen as "invading academic freedom." He is believed to be the first college administrator to oppose intellectual diversity as a threat to academic freedom.

A furor erupted at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas when the student newspaper ran an abrasive Columbus Day article celebrating Christopher Columbus and rejecting the multicultural notion that all cultures are somehow equal. Nearly all copies of the paper were stolen, and the author, Alexander Marriott, was fired on a charge of plagiarism, since discredited. No word yet from UNLV President Carol Harter, who is believed to be busy looking the other way.

Also a Sheldon contender is Warren Baker, president of California Polytechnic State University-San Luis Obispo. A number of black students were offended when a white student at the Multicultural Center attempted to post a flyer advertising a speech by black writer Mason Weaver, author of "It's OK to Leave the Plantation," an argument that dependence on government harms black Americans. The student, Steven Hinkle, offered to discuss the flyer but was met by threats to call police.

The Cal-Poly judicial affairs office found Hinkle guilty of "disruption of a campus event." The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) entered the case, sending two letters to Baker explaining his legal and moral obligation to the First Amendment and academic freedom. No dice. He refused to act.

Gerald Turner, president of Southern Methodist University, has made one of the strongest bids for the Sheldon by allowing subordinates to shut down a student bake sale that mocked the unfairness of race and gender preferences: Identical cookies were offered at different prices for whites, minorities and women.

The director of the center said the issue wasn't free speech but "a hostile environment being created that was potentially volatile."

Hostile-environment charges are a traditional campus way of saying, "I am offended, so silence those who disagree with me."

And if violence is threatened, says University of California-Los Angeles law Prof. Eugene Volokh, a university should respond "by protecting the speakers against the would-be thugs, rather than by shutting up the speakers and letting the thugs win." Turner, however, declined to intervene, letting the censors win.

The presidents of SMU and Cal-Poly are clearly way ahead of their Sheldon-seeking rivals. Since there is little difference between them, the Sheldon judges are awarding two trophies this year.

Congratulations to Gerald Turner and Warren Baker, Sheldon laureates of 2003.

Originally published on November 2, 2003

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