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## Under the Radar

*Political correctness never died.*

**Cathy Young**

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These days, talking about political correctness in academia makes you sound like a quaint throwback to the 1990s. It seems utterly irrelevant to the post-9/11 era, a threat dwarfed by (depending on whom you listen to) either terrorism or losing our liberties to the war on terrorism. Eric Wasserman, executive director of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), says many people have a knee-jerk reaction to the very phrase *political correctness*, seeing it as an old story.

But in fact, says Wasserman, the phenomenon is very much alive. On campuses across America, the censorship of speech and ideas in the name of sensitivity continues unabated.

In April, for instance, the faculty council of Oklahoma State University approved a "racial and sexual harassment policy" that amounts to a far-reaching speech code. According to a report in *The Daily O'Collegian*, the policy's definition of harassment includes "a hostile environment that unreasonably interferes with the work or academic performance of those of a particular race, color, ethnicity or national origin," even if such "interference" is "unintentional." It covers "verbal and nonverbal harassment, as well as print and electronic harassment."

The policy does purport to exempt any "presentation or inquiry falling within justifiable academic standards covering course contents and pedagogy." But *justifiable* is a nebulous term, and the policy as a whole is so broad and so vague that it would surely chill the legitimate exchange of ideas, particularly outside the classroom -- in student papers, for instance.

Some recent incidents involving student journalism bolster these concerns. Around the same time that Oklahoma State approved its harassment policy, a controversy erupted at Oregon State University after the student paper, *The Daily Barometer*, ran an article by staff columnist David Williams titled "A message from a white male to the African American community." Williams argued that one reason for the social ills disproportionately afflicting blacks is that character and accountability in the black community are undermined by a tendency to rally around prominent African-Americans behaving badly, from O.J. Simpson to singer R. Kelly, currently facing child pornography charges on the basis of a videotape allegedly showing him having sex with

an underage girl.

Williams went out of his way to qualify his message, saying he realized his article could be seen as "picking on the worst" of the African-American community and that his judgment on the issue might be suspect because he is not black. "I have never been the victim of racism," he wrote. "I am a white male. This all is very easy for me to say."

Williams nonetheless concluded that blacks "need to grow beyond the automatic reaction of defending someone because he or she shares the same skin color and is in a dilemma."

Maybe it was a good column making a necessary point, and maybe it was tired and condescending. But the reaction went far beyond criticism of Williams' arguments or tone.

Following a protest rally, *The Daily Barometer* ran a groveling editorial that repeatedly apologized for printing the column and called its publication "an inexcusable mistake." Williams was fired from his position as columnist.

At a campus forum held a few days later, university president Ed Gray called the incident a "teachable moment" - the teaching in question, of course, being about diversity and institutional racism, not about freedom of the press. *The Barometer's* Forum editor, Christina Stewart, offered yet another apology for letting the offending article appear. (In a twist, it was subsequently revealed that Williams' column had been inspired by an article on a similar subject by the Pulitzer Prize-winning syndicated columnist Leonard Pitts Jr., who is black.)

This case is one of many recent examples of politically correct censorship of campus journalism. April, apparently,

is the cruelest month for student papers: April Fool's Day editions are especially likely to incur the wrath of the sensitivity police. At Carnegie-Mellon University, a joke edition of *The Tartan*, which contained admittedly (and intentionally) offensive racial and sexual humor, resulted in the paper suspending publication for the rest of the semester and agreeing to future content review by the administration.

Thanksgiving, it seems, can be risky too. In 2003 the South Missouri State University student daily, *The Standard*, got in trouble for a cartoon in which a pilgrim on the second Thanksgiving complained to his wife that the Indians "brought corn...again." This joke was deemed offensive to Native Americans. The administration is still investigating *The Standard's* editor-in-chief, Mandy Philips, and faculty adviser, Wanda Brandon, with possible sanctions pending. It is worth noting that SMSU, unlike Carnegie-Mellon, is a public institution bound, under current law, by the First Amendment.

Litigation by FIRE and other groups has resulted in some victories for free speech. In February of this year, the University of California at Irvine and the University of Colorado at Boulder reversed their bans on "affirmative action bake sales," protests in which cookies were sold at higher prices to Asians and whites than to blacks and Hispanics in order to illustrate the absurdity of awarding extra points to minority college applicants. In March, Shippensburg University in Pennsylvania revised a student code of conduct under which any speech that "annoyed" or "alarmed" someone became a potential target. FIRE and its legal networks had filed lawsuits in both cases.

But larger problems remain. A survey conducted by FIRE last year found that more than half of college students at both public and private institutions believe that a student club espousing traditional beliefs about women's roles should not be allowed on campus; this view is also shared by a quarter of administrators at public universities and nearly half the administrators at private ones. Other results from the survey confirm that when it comes to unpopular views on such issues as abortion or homosexuality, many college students and administrators hold freedom of expression in fairly low regard. One recent trend is for Christian student groups to be denied recognition if they "discriminate" by requiring their leadership to subscribe to the Christian faith.

In fairness, there have been some egregious instances of right-wing censorship as well. At the University of Scranton, a Catholic institution, the April Fool's Day edition of the student daily *The Aquinas* was confiscated and the paper itself shut down because of a parody of *The Passion of the Christ*. At Forsyth Community College in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, writing instructor Elizabeth Ito did not have her contract renewed after some students complained about her anti-war comments in class on the day of the ground invasion of Iraq.

But these examples remain few and far between. Two years ago, when "the new normal" was still new, I argued that despite some attempts to suppress "unpatriotic" speech, the greatest threat to free speech on campuses still came from the left. That remains true today.

In April, a few days after football star Pat Tillman was killed

in action in Afghanistan, *The Daily Collegian*, the student daily at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, ran a column by graduate student Rene Gonzalez mocking Tillman as a "Rambo" and an "idiot" who "got what was coming to him." Gonzalez's attack on Tillman sparked widespread outrage and was denounced as "disgusting" and "intellectually immature" by university president Jack M. Wilson.

Nonetheless, Wilson emphasized that Gonzalez had the right to express his opinion, and *The Daily Collegian* stood by its decision to run the column as a matter of commitment to "the backbone of journalism: The First Amendment." The contrast to *The Barometer's* handling of Williams' column is revealing.

Maybe the editors of the *Collegian* simply have more backbone. Or maybe in the groves of academe, not all offensive speech is created equal.

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