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Most colleges defend campus free speech



Columnist

There was a time in American history when intolerance and suppression of free speech were the province of the right wing, in the days of McCarthyism and anti-Communist witch

hunts.

Today the assault on free speech and free press comes from the left and especially from one of its strongholds, higher education.

It is fair enough for liberal academics to say, as they often do, that if more bright conservatives got Ph.D.s instead of MBAs and went into college teaching rather than business, then American colleges would be quite different places.

It should be OK to disagree

The problem, however, lies not in what they believe but in how they treat those who disagree with them. The nation has recently been regaled by a series of incidents which illustrate just how repressive some — repeat, some — on the left, students and faculty both, can be.

Only 14 out of 57 college newspapers would print a much discussed paid ad opposing reparations for slavery (thought many had previously been willing to run ads denying the Holocaust), and many of those who ran it were confronted by violent demonstrations and newspapers seized and burned, involving both black and white students, supported by many faculty members. The ad was not given to any college papers in Mississippi.

The arguments against open debate on this subject were that the message was so "hurtful" and "insensitive" that it constituted harassment and verbal assault, that it was racist "hate speech" and that black students must be protected from exposure to ideas they do not like.

A more recent national ad from a conservative women's organization presented statistics to refute "the 10 most common feminist myths," among them that 25 percent of college women in America are victims of rape or attempted rape. The ad argued the number was closer to one percent than 25. The usual campus protests and demonstrations followed.

A similar response has confronted speakers and newspaper columns that question campus orthodoxy in the third of the great left-wing triad of race, feminism and gay rights.

Seek a more comfy setting

Efforts to allow open campus discussion by psychiatrists, ministers or scholars discussing the view that many gay and lesbians can and do change their sexual preference are greeted by cries of "homophobia," "bigotry" and "insensitivity," along with speakers shouted down, objects thrown and literature burned.

A major tool for campus intolerance nationally has been the presence in student handbooks and regulations of "speech codes." A survey of regulations gives a clean bill of health to Mississippi State University, Ole Miss, the University of Southern Mississippi, Delta State University, Mississippi University for Women and Alcorn State University, as well as Jackson-area private colleges Millsaps, Mississippi College and Belhaven.

Jackson State University and Valley State University, however, still retain in their student handbooks language which presents a clear and present danger to free speech. These schools have almost identical wording, outlawing "derogatory comments or remarks, sexist remarks, racist remarks, or any behavior that places another member of the university community in a state of fear or anxiety."

Thus freedom can end when any student claims to feel "anxious" or "fearful" about a professor's or public speaker's or fellow student's political opinions.

A solution: Those students whose emotional systems cannot tolerate exposure to ideas they disagree with should seek a more comforting and secure environment than higher education.



David Bowen is a former member of Congress, who has taught at Millsaps College, Mississippi College and Mississippi State University. He is a regular contributing columnist to *The Clarion-Ledger*.