

Unlearning Liberty: Campus Censorship and the End of American Debate, by Greg Lukianoff. New York: Encounter, 2012, 288 pp., \$25.99 hardbound.

Teaching Tyranny

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Vanderbilt University has an Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action Policy assuring students and employees that the “University does not discriminate against individuals on the basis of their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.”¹ In April 2011, Vanderbilt invoked the policy to deny approval of the Christian Legal Society (CLS), a student group that required the group’s officers (not all members) to affirm its “Statement of Faith”

and to lead prayers at meetings. To the administration, this requirement amounted to an exclusion of individuals on grounds of religious belief, a violation of the university’s “open-to-all” rules. It particularly objected to CLS’s renunciation of “immoral conduct such as using pornography and engaging in sexual relations other than within a marriage between one man and one woman.”²

Greg Lukianoff cites the action in *Unlearning Liberty: Campus Censorship and the End of American Debate*, a dismaying survey of censorship on college campuses itemizing one abominable suppression after another. Among the conditions it demonstrates is the sad reality that long after political correctness and speech codes have become routine objects of mockery in popular media and losers in court, the forces of identity politics and victimology continue to prevail. Most of the targets are conservatives, but Lukianoff speaks not from the right or from the center—he’s a professed liberal—and he aims his review at audiences committed simply to basic rights of speech and association, basing the case on consensus American

¹“Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action,” Human Resources, Vanderbilt University, rev. April 12, 2012, <http://hr.vanderbilt.edu/policies/HR-001.php>.

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²See the “Community Life Statement” on the Christian Legal Society’s website, <http://www.clsnet.org/page.aspx?pid=494>.

standards of fairness and common sense.

The stories are compelling, the language sometimes breezy—no clever distortions of ordinary social contact such as “critical race theory” and “repressive tolerance.” Indeed, if the book presupposes an ideal reader, it would be the nonacademic, conservative or liberal, who is unaware of just how arrogant, arbitrary, power-mad, and illiberal so many campus administrators, professors, and students themselves have become after a few years in the (often) unreal campus enclave.

The antagonists don’t divide so much politically as they do emotionally, pitting ordinary citizens who know how to shrug off a slight against what we might call “sensitivity totalitarians,” people who amplify touchy exchanges that have been and always will be part of an open society into ego-crushing harassment and discrimination. After Lukianoff penned a *New York Times* op-ed derived from the book, a good example of this appeared in the Letters section by the head of an “anti-street-harassment organization” and the chairwoman of Students Active for Ending Rape that included this paragraph:

Students at college campuses across the country are routinely

subjected to sexual harassment and racist and homophobic bullying, often under the guise of “humor” and free speech. On American college campuses, 51 percent of men openly admit to sexually harassing their classmates. While the behavior ranges from careless to cruel, harassment effectively robs students of their right to a safe learning environment.³

You see? Bullying is “routine,” and more than half of male students are frank, self-described sexual harassers. In such a victimizing climate, we must assume, speech codes and hyper-vigilant administrators are a just and necessary restraint.

In the cases Lukianoff cites, however, nothing reaches that degree of racist, sexist, or otherwise vicious conduct—one couldn’t construe the Vanderbilt Christian group as the aggressors—and he has the authority to say so.

Lukianoff heads the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), a free speech watchdog group, and FIRE responded vigorously to Vanderbilt, sending a letter to the chancellor reviewing the case

³Emily May and Selena Shen, letter to the editor, *New York Times*, November 2, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/02/opinion/harassment-on-campus.html?ref=opinion>.

and concluding that Vanderbilt's "stipulation" that religious groups cannot prevent those who disavow basic doctrines of the religion from striving to lead them "is impossible for religious groups to follow."

Vanderbilt held to its position, however, despite widespread student anger, hostile media coverage, objections from national church organizations, and a condemnation statement signed by twenty-three members of Congress. But that isn't the most annoying or surprising aspect of this case and so many others. (Another example of a university targeting a Christian group lost its shock value long ago.) Instead, it is the sheer balderdash that administrators propound to justify their punishments. The speech codes and conduct rules cover so much ground, magnify ordinary slights so extensively, and deny acts of speech and association so commonplace that deans and provosts—ever mindful of grievance parties—end up defending the indefensible and rationalizing the absurd.

Those policies extend from vicious harassment to normal adolescent banter, and cover anything from a drunken sophomore punched in the face to a hypersensitive minority youth devastated by an off-hand

joke. Lukianoff cites dozens of them, including:

- Rhode Island College's declaration that "it will not tolerate actions or attitudes that threaten the welfare of any of its members." [Just how would a college propose to monitor attitudes?]
- NYU's ban on "insulting, teasing, mocking, degrading, or ridiculing another person or group." [Need it be said that banning teasing reduces college to the level of schoolyard rules?]
- Harvard's requirement that freshmen must agree, in writing, "to sustain a community characterized by inclusiveness and civility." [Think of how many common behaviors can be construed as exclusive and adversarial.]

The acts that such codes criminalize would be laughable if they didn't cause the perpetrators so much misery and strain. More examples from *Unlearning Liberty*:

- A student at Valdosta State University was expelled from campus because he protested on Facebook against a costly

parking garage. Authorities interpreted his post as dangerous because he named it “[President] Zaccari Memorial Parking Garage”—“memorial,” they said, signified a death threat.

- Young Americans for Freedom at Penn State (University Park) were informed that they must delete “God” from their mission statement—it mentioned “God-given” rights—because that constituted religious discrimination.
- A Brandeis professor was punished for explaining the origin of the word “wetback,” even though he did so to criticize the term. An assistant provost sat in his class to monitor the lectures for as long as necessary to ensure that the professor “not engage in further violations of the nondiscrimination and harassment policy” (so said a letter from the provost).

And so on.

Faced with having to explain these fantastical crimes and overreaching punishments, administrators spew bureaucratese and forsake classical liberal values. In the Vanderbilt case, the administration maintained that it only insisted that student groups allow anybody to run for office within that

group, and that members could always vote for someone else. Common sense replies that obligating a church group to admit anybody with any opinions as a candidate, even if that candidate is supposed to lead prayers and espouse religious beliefs on which the group is based, undermines its operations.

In Vanderbilt’s universe, though, a conservative Christian organization must grant a gay atheist the floor so that he may announce, “I’m running for president of this organization, and I stand for gay marriage, a godless universe, and the renunciation of the Catholic Church as the most murderous institution in human history. Vote for me.” In a January 2012 town hall meeting attended by students and administrators (FIRE posted the transcript: <http://thefire.org/public/pdfs/2b631891757eb7b77cdb224dbb44ef8.pdf?direct>), the provost opened the discussion with solemn guarantees that no student can be “excluded based on belief” from any organization. He added fatherly devotions such as “We worked too hard to get you to come here” and “We will not accept two classes of membership among students at this university,” plus Orwellian turns such as “I want you to understand this policy is not an attempt to single out particular student groups or to limit freedom of belief or expression on our campus.” Instead, he expressed a

high-minded pledge “to promote equal opportunity for all.”

The students knew better. When administrators insisted that the open-to-all policy was aimed at enhancing campus “unity,” a student leader noted that the policy had, indeed, united the students—*against* the policy. The student asked everyone who opposed it to stand, and every person in the room stood up. The provost answered with a cheap dismissal: “May I point out the obvious? We have 13,000 students. We have about 220 in this room. That is not a random sample of our 13,000 students.”

Things got worse. Another administrator added, “I would also say, Parker [the student leader], you could have had that same question when they decided to integrate this university and you would have got the same result, but we integrated anyway.” Note the connection: Allowing a gay atheist to run for office to lead a religious group that opposes gay marriage parallels the noble historic effort to overcome Jim Crow and allow blacks to attend university.

What a low blow, and the student leader drew the reasonable inference, replying: “First of all, sir, I don’t like being called a racist.” The administrator denied it, but that’s how campus administrators operate in the

episodes cited here—with insinuation and denial, one moment doling the heavy hand of authoritarianism followed by claims of tolerance, the moral high ground, and absolute equality.

Lukianoff scans the national terrain soberly and objectively, his clear-sighted grasp of the First Amendment contrasted to the fudging, bullying bad faith of the censors. Consistent with his watchdog mission, he proposes a simple answer to the problem: exposure. The media are an ally—Lukianoff notes how often administrators back off once they sense publicity on the way—so too are parents, politicians, and principled organizations such as FIRE. In classes, high school and college students should study the First Amendment, partly to understand the nature of U.S. citizenship and partly to counter the tolerance-and-diversity-inflict-no-offense ideology, often seasoned with white male American guilt, heaped upon them from grade school upward.

It’s the right commitment, and FIRE has compiled a praiseworthy record of standing for freedom and conscience since its founding in 1999. But the very existence of so many illiberal and illegal codes, the numerous and astounding instances of administrative high-handedness,

the repetition of comically flimsy rationales for overt abuses beg a question that *Unlearning Liberty* doesn't address. *Why does it all keep happening?*

National embarrassments such as the "water buffalo" incident at Penn and the Duke Lacrosse debacle haven't restrained campus illiberalism at all, as Lukianoff asserts in "Campus Censorship: Alive and Thriving," a subheading in the introduction. Indeed, in a 2010 poll conducted by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, only 19 percent of higher education personnel believed that it was "safe to have unpopular views on campus."

Lukianoff ponders one motive (an administrator's desire to get back at a troublesome teacher or student group), but that doesn't account for all the cases that lack any evidence of score-settling. It also doesn't stop administrators from uttering patently false statements with the casual air of declaring, "The earth is round," for instance, casting women as an "underrepresented group" even though they comprise 58 percent of college enrollments and earn as many doctorates as men do. It also doesn't keep them from applying double standards in apparent obliviousness, for instance, regularly censoring Christian groups on grounds of sexual discrimination while overlooking Muslim groups

that share a hetero-centric outlook on marriage. (Lukianoff states that he has encountered only one de-recognition of the latter while "dozens" of the former have been censured.)

This is a question for institutional psychology. Twenty-five years ago, we might have attributed the illiberalism of administrators to craven obedience to political correctness. Back then, the anger of "historically-disadvantaged" groups could destroy a provost's career. But in 2012, with thorough popular awareness of PC silliness and sensitivity melodrama, one would think that administrators would resist the lingering remnants of grievance-peddling.

PC departments such as women's studies and black studies have slid steadily into marginal status, many courses on racism and sexism have been exposed as tendentious exercises, and the public in general is sick of special pleading and double standards. Why are administrators still captive to ridiculous complaints and touchiness? Why, for example, did Larry Summers apologize seven times after his infamous yet thoroughly legitimate speculations about women and science? Why are campus denizens so fearful?

Unlearning Liberty doesn't set out to examine the psyches of

campus bureaucrats and victims, and we should appreciate it for its “digest” intent, that is, as a summary assessment of campus speech at the present time. The data and anecdotes it collects, however, underscore the need for a deeper diagnosis. It would have to focus in detail on one situation and proceed as follows, offering

1. in-depth profiles of the administrators in charge, including the sequence of those individuals’ promotions and advancements.
2. a recent history of the campus, especially any prior incidents or existing tensions marked by race, gender, or sexuality.
3. the specific source of the complaint—a student blocked from access, a student objection to a statement uttered in class by the professor, an RA’s report on an incident in the dorms, etc.—in other words, who brought the case to the attention of administrators and in what form?

4. a microscopic reconstruction of the initial decision-making process: who participated, how did the deliberations proceed, what fears were expressed?
5. a microscopic reconstruction of the response process: how did administrators decide to answer publicity, student anger, etc.?

We need to develop case studies of academic censorship, not just the broadcasted evidence, but the behind-closed-doors occurrences, too. Someone once hinted to me that Duke University decided to settle with the lacrosse players when lawyers asked that emails sent by Group of 88 professors be entered into the evidence, and the last thing Duke wanted anybody to see was the naked thoughts of Houston Baker and others on the allegations and the accused. Academia runs on confidentiality, but in cases such as those cited by Lukianoff, confidentiality likely facilitated bad decisions and a corrupt process. If we knew more about them, we might stop them.