

Freedom of Expression and Open Discourse in High School

September 12-14, 2019

Conference Pre-read Case Studies

Case Study 1: Valedictorian Barred from Program

Brian is graduating senior at a school in Tampa, FL. He is also the class valedictorian and was asked to provide remarks at graduation. Brian prepared a speech that addressed some of the issues and bullying he encountered as an openly gay student. One of the incidents he referenced in his speech was the time he was barred by the administration from joining the dance team (an all-female team), despite the approval of the dance coach. Brian also wanted to address how specific passages from the Bible regarding homosexuality were outdated or misinterpreted.

The principal told Brian the speech was unacceptable and did not align with the school's values. The principal offered Brian an edited version of the speech with all references to his struggles or beliefs removed.

Brian, unhappy with the edits and determined to bring certain issues to light, offered to work with the principal to create a version of the speech they would both be happy with. In response, Brian was told he would be unable to speak at graduation and the salutatorian would deliver a speech instead.

Brian openly complained on Twitter regarding the issue and garnered a lot of support from individuals on the internet who sympathized with his position. Brian posted his original speech in a series of tweets.

Case Study 2: Rescinded Acceptance

Delilah has been accepted to an ivy league school with a scholarship for rowing. She worked extremely hard for four years, getting straight A's, participating in several clubs, volunteering on the weekends, and rowing every morning.

Unfortunately for Delilah, the admissions committee became aware of some offensive tweets Delilah posted when she was fifteen. The tweets contained anti-Semitic remarks and racial slurs. The admissions committee felt that these tweets did not uphold the values of the institution and decided to rescind Delilah's admissions offer.

Delilah was devastated and reached out to the committee to offer an explanation. She attempted to explain she had changed as a person since she was fifteen and deeply regretted her choice to post that. She offered a sincere apology and asked for the admissions committee to reconsider their decision.

The admissions committee did not reconsider, and Delilah lost her offer of admission.

Case Study 3: Censorship in the Classroom

An English teacher assigns Richard Wright's novel "Native Son" to students. "Native Son" is the story of Bigger Thomas, a Black youth living in utter poverty in Chicago's South Side in the 1930s. The book contains many racial slurs.

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When David gives his presentation on Bigger as a sympathetic character, he repeatedly uses the n-word in his presentation. The teacher does not say anything while David is giving his presentation, but he asks to speak with him at the end of the day.

The teacher expresses to David that his use of a racial slur was offensive and other students in class were upset as well. David argues he was not using the word as a slur, but rather he was using it in an academic context. The teacher sends David to the principal's office and they contact his parents. There is talk of suspension or expulsion.

Case Study 4: Limited Viewpoints

At a university in Boston, MA the campus Young Republicans invited a conservative pundit to speak. Prior to the event, signs began cropping up all over campus calling for the beheading of the Young Republicans and the conservative pundit. The Young Republicans went to the administration regarding the issue, and while the administration did not release a statement to the campus, signs were quietly removed by maintenance.

The Young Republicans went to the school newspaper and wrote a strongly worded op-ed about how the university ignored their abuse but came out in support of liberal students who felt "endangered" post-Trump. The Young Republicans felt Trump's election was treated like a "natural disaster", while their plight was ignored by the administration.

The administration had no comment.

Case Study 5: Yearbook Mishap

At a high school in Syracuse students submitted a controversial pre-prom photo to the yearbook. The photo, which made it into the yearbook, was of a group of male students with their right arms raised in what looked to be the "sieg heil" or Nazi salute.

Parents and other students were upset the photo made it into the yearbook and demanded the administration reprint the yearbooks and take disciplinary action against the students pictured in the photo. The students in the photo denied they were making an anti-Semitic gesture and argued that the photographer had asked them to "wave goodbye" for the photo.

The issue grew murkier when a student found a tweet from one of the boys where the photo was pictured with the caption, "We even got the black kid to throw it up".

The administration did not reprint the yearbooks and declined to discipline the students pictured in the photo. The principal cited the students' First Amendment right to free expression and remarked that it was "impossible to know" the intent behind the photo.

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Case Study 6: Course Materials

At a university in Los Angeles, a professor teaches a course each year that requires reading a specific book written by a self-proclaimed Holocaust denier. The course is required by the university as part of its core program.

This year, a group of students banded together to protest the course and have taken to marching outside of the classroom while the class is in session to disrupt the professor. They don't believe they should be required to support the work of a known Holocaust denier, even though the book is on an unrelated subject.

The professor argues the author is the premier expert on the subject, and that what he believes in doesn't make the book any less important. He also feels that these protests are disrupting other student's class time. He reports the protestors to the administration, and the administration says the professor can fail any student that does not attend his course, but they can't do anything about protestors.

The professor sends an email to all students enrolled in the course telling them if they do not cease protests and attend class, they will not be able to graduate. Students resume attending the class, but they still refuse to purchase the book or participate in discussions on the subject. The professor has threatened to fail them, but the students refuse to budge.

The administration is considering getting involved and asking the professor to remove the book from his syllabi because it is becoming a distraction for students around campus.

Case Study 7: Dorm Doors

At a college in Nevada, students have moved into the dorms for the year. In one of the dorms, Leonard Hall, an issue has arisen over a student with some potentially objectionable signs on his door.

Jason is a freshman from Alabama, and he's hung several signs on his door, including a confederate flag and a pro-gun sign. Some students have complained to RAs about the signs, saying they are offensive and make them feel unsafe. The RAs have said there is nothing they can do about the signage since it does not present a direct threat to anyone.

A few students have addressed Jason personally, telling him to take down his "offensive" signs. But Jason responded by stating we have a right to bear arms in America, and that the Confederate flag is a symbol of his heritage. When called a "conservative racist", Jason defended himself by saying he had no problem with minorities, he just didn't want to be around them.

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Tensions have escalated on the floor, and no one is speaking to Jason. People have taken to ripping down his signs when his door is closed and leaving hateful messages on his whiteboard. Jason has spoken to the RAs about it numerous times, but they've just told him to take down the "offensive" signage.