

Honoring Wheaton's Honor Code

Student activism reached a higher level last year than at any other time during my presidency. This is good news, I think, because it is an indicator of students who are deeply engaged in learning, both inside and outside the classroom. It also can be a source of controversy, which is why I would like to share with you how Wheaton's values as an educational institution shape its response to these issues.

Campus debate on the war in Iraq received the most attention, regionally and nationally. The Wheaton Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, a group of faculty and students, organized a moratorium on "classes as usual" to discuss the conflict. As reported in the summer *Quarterly*, the majority of students speaking at the rally in the Dimple voiced "strong support for the troops fighting in Iraq and skepticism of U.S. motivation for the war. Many expressed concern both for the U.S. soldiers and for Iraqi citizens in harm's way. Some spoke in support of the war."

The anti-war action by seven students living in the small residence house at 44 Howard Street—hanging an American flag upside down on the front of the house—became the focus of much debate. The action was supported by many students and faculty as a legitimate form of expression. However, many community residents found the display unpatriotic and asked the administration to "fix the flag."

While members of the administration had different personal views on the war in Iraq, we were united in our view that we should not force the students to remove the upside-down flag. This was particularly hard for me since Don's and my son is an F-16 pilot in the U.S. Air Force who had flown missions over both the northern and southern no-fly zones in Iraq before the war. It also was hard because it brought back memories of the criticisms I experienced during the Vietnam War when my father was U.S. Secretary of State.

Freedom of speech is central to democracy and to education. College should



challenge students to delve deeply into complex issues and to think about them more fully and fairly than is typical in a media-dominated world of sound bites, partisan pundits and short attention spans. Our commitment to free inquiry means that we analyze conventional wisdom and reject peer pressure and political pressure.

The Wheaton Honor Code, which was adopted in 1927, provides invaluable guidance in setting the tone for our community. It commits us to "act honestly, responsibly and above all, with honor and integrity in all areas of campus life" and to demonstrate respectful "concerns for the personal dignity, rights and freedoms of all members of the community." We have freedom with responsibility. We have the freedom to express our views and the responsibility to listen to opposing viewpoints with respect.

Two other examples of free speech issues from the past year illustrate how this principle transcends personal and political beliefs.

A new student group, Students for Economic Justice, is part of the larger move-

ment to change what participants see as the evils of globalization, including the policies of international financial organizations. They believe the World Bank harms the environment and fails to fight poverty. The campus group is demanding that the college boycott World Bank bonds until it reforms its policies. [The college does not own World Bank bonds.—*Ed.*]

The college responded by asking the group to investigate the issue more fully. Joseph Stiglitz, the Nobel Prize-winning economist and a distinguished critic of the World Bank, will deliver this year's Tropp Lecture, while other speakers will present other perspectives on the issues.

Another student group, the Nihilists, distributed satirical posters that offended several campus groups, including multicultural groups who called for a ban on the flyers. Our response was that the Nihilists could distribute posters without being censored. When students cross the line between free speech and personal attacks, we find various ways, such as open meetings, to criticize offensive speech without censoring it. The emphasis is on education and reasoned persuasion rather than penalties.

Reasonable people can differ on where to draw the line between protected free speech and actions that can be prohibited and punished. There is a vast body of court decisions that supporters and critics can cite in every situation. In my judgment, none of the examples I've cited above crossed over the line. But the discussions and controversies do serve to connect students to the larger issues of our times and to stimulate deeper thought.

Recognizing the learning that comes from critical engagement with the world, the Honor Code provides an invaluable framework—of civility, respect, tolerance and integrity—for continuing these important and difficult discussions. 

