

PC seen as threat

by David Upham

In the March 14th edition of the Campus, Daniel O'Neil wrote about the dangers posed by the increasing intolerance at Middlebury College towards opinions that are not "politically correct." In the March 21st edition, two letters were published attacking his opinions. In particular, they defend the legitimacy of the college's policy prohibiting "negative comments concerning sexual orientation." I would like to respond that policies such as these constitute real threats to the free exchange of ideas which is essential to liberal education.

Obviously, the college can legitimately impose restraints on speech. The college can restrict speech in regard to the circumstances of speaking, but certainly not in regard to the ideas expressed. The PC movement does just that. It classifies certain opinions as politically incorrect and prohibits them.

The college has threatened to punish any student who expresses a negative opinion concerning homosexuality. This coercion of thought and discussion stifles the intellect and turns education into indoctrination.

Prohibiting the expression of certain ideas does not "cause

us to think about our society,” as Jeffrey Spencer writes. It does exactly the opposite.

The college harassment policy is particularly extremist in regard to its ban on speech opposed to homosexuality. In the pursuit of “diversity,” it prohibits the expression of the religious tenets of Roman Catholicism and of religions that regard homosexual acts as immoral. Moreover, it prohibits the free discussion of a major question within psychology: whether the homosexual orientation constitutes a mental disorder.

It is said that the expression of certain opinions can be prohibited because such opinions are “offensive.” (Melissa Ryan and Cynthia Stillinger even refer to such opinions as “immoral.”) But any opinion is offensive to those who disagree with it. Such people, however, must respond with persuasion, not coercion. If a person is sure that homosexuality is perfectly legitimate, then he should not be afraid of rational argument. Rather, he should welcome the opportunity to persuade others. At any educational institution, such an atmosphere of intellectual freedom is essential.

I must add that I am completely in favor of campus policies designed to protect students from intimidation and violence. The college must not, however, classify certain offences as especially abhorrent because of the politically incorrect opinions!

of the offenders. In effect, such policies would punish the offenders for their beliefs. Furthermore, such policies deny equal protection to students who are harassed for any reason other than the political incorrectness on the part of the offender.

Someone being harassed on account of his eye color is no less victimized than someone being harassed on account of his sexual orientation.

What the current college policy regarding harassment amounts to is coercion of the mind. Although I know of no students who have been punished for expressing their opposition to homosexuality, I see no reason why such punishment could not occur. As Daniel O'Neil pointed out in his letter, there are many within the Middlebury community who would like to further suppress freedom of speech at the college. They seem eager to introduce mandatory classes of political indoctrination, such as "Cherishing the Earth." Moreover, I have noticed that in many of my classes, many professors and students—usually those who refer to themselves as "open-minded"—choose to intimidate and ridicule, rather than attempt to persuade, those who hold opinions which are less than politically correct.

All of this amounts to a threat to liberal education. In respect to other institutions, Middlebury remains fairly free of intellectual coercion. Nevertheless, the suppression of politically incorrect opinions

seems to be the wave of the future. Everyone at the college who cares about intellectual freedom and who recognizes the importance of the free exchange of ideas in an educational institution, must resist the tendencies of the current phenomenon known as political correctness.