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ON EDUCATION

**Film Portrays Stifling of Speech, but One College's Struggle Reflects a Nuanced Reality**By **JOSEPH BERGER**

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A new documentary is making the rounds that argues, with vivid examples, that the nation's colleges are squelching freedom of expression and are no longer free marketplaces of ideas.

The film carries the striking title "Indoctrinate U," and was made by Evan Coyne Maloney, who describes himself as a libertarian and is looking for a national distributor.

The film borrows the technique of ambush interviews from an ideological opposite, [Michael Moore](#), and tells how at California Polytechnic State University, a student underwent a daylong disciplinary hearing for posting a flier publicizing a black speaker whose talk was titled, "It's O.K. to Leave the Plantation."

A white student at [Michigan State University](#) recalls a dressing-down by her professor for questioning why her adopted Hispanic brother should benefit from racial preferences. Marx, the film contends, is taught, but not Adam Smith.

Does the film offer a fair picture of campus life in 2007, or is it just a pastiche of notorious events? One answer might be found here at Vassar, which faced its own dispute over what some called hate speech and others "political correctness," and emerged with its integrity more or less intact.

The Imperialist, a publication of the school's Moderate, Independent and Conservative Student Alliance, published a contributor's article in 2005 that criticized social centers for minority and gay students. The article called such centers "ghettos" and said they turned Vassar into a "zoological preserve."

Students complained that the language was insulting and called for banning The Imperialist. For weeks, the issue was debated by the student association, which finances the publication. Ultimately, the group withheld its money for one year and publication was suspended.

Students like Victor Monterrosa, a son of Salvadoran immigrants who recently graduated, still thinks that the question of whether students should be clustered by race or sexual orientation does not deserve a forum since Vassar "is supposed to protect diversity" and "these discussions ended up making us more polarized."

"There are students who feel comfortable putting us on the back burner who ended up fighting for free speech on campus," he said.

Others, like Randall Stuebner, a senior who describes himself as [a Republican](#) who votes Democratic, feel speech should be unfettered. "It's my duty to be as provocative as possible," he said.

What was notable was that Vassar, a college of 2,360 students founded in the 19th century on progressive ideals — and a place where conservatives remain a distinct minority — hashed out the matter without violence and did not trash or burn newspapers as has happened at other campuses.

The Imperialist is publishing once again. Vassar seems to have made a distinction between forbidding publication of an idea and not allowing

gratuitous racial insults to be hurled while examining that idea.

"Ultimately, free speech was respected," said Mark Goreczny, 20, a student. "There was a dialogue, polarized as it may have been."

A spectrum of professors, administrators and students say the national picture is far more complicated than that pictured in "Indoctrinate U," a point the dust-up at Vassar illustrates. Yes, periodically there are embarrassing incidents, like the disruption of speakers at Columbia last October who opposed illegal [immigration](#). But most colleges are still places where unorthodox ideas are explored and debated.

Free speech groups like the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, a campus watchdog, and individuals like Peter Salovey, dean of Yale College, contend that offensive speech should be answered with counterpoint speech, not the Vassar-like suspension of publication.

"One goes down a very slippery slope when one tries to define certain kinds of speech as able to be banned," he said.

Still, Vassar deserves credit because, as students explained, the dispute was not focused on whether The Imperialist could argue that a center exclusively for minority students fragmented the community; it was over whether the language used to express the idea was offensive.

The wider society, after all, has not resolved the issue of abusive language. Limits are evident in hate crime laws, the firing of [Don Imus](#) and this week's [Supreme Court](#) ruling against a high school student who displayed a "Bong Hits 4 Jesus" banner.

GREG LUKIANOFF, president of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, acknowledged that campus freedom of expression has improved since the low points of the 1990s. One such nadir, free speech advocates say, was in '97, when administrators at [Cornell](#) defended as a "symbolic" protest the burning of conservative newspapers that printed a provocative cartoon.

Some academics think campuses are still too repressive. John McWhorter, a linguist and frequent speaker against affirmative action, chronicled a number of visits in which he had been treated with less than hospitality.

"When I give a talk on race," said Mr. McWhorter, who is black, "I don't know of any more intolerant environment than a university. There is a bitterly indignant conviction that there is only one way of looking at race."

Amy Wax, a professor at the [University of Pennsylvania](#) Law School who specializes in social welfare law, said there is still a lingering reluctance on campus to grapple with certain subjects. Undergraduates, she finds, are taught about the economic roots of poverty, but not about debatable cultural causes like single motherhood. She said her students' ignorance of such ideas leads her to believe they received a "skewed education."

At liberal Vassar, Peter Leonard, director of the school's field work programs, admitted that some students and faculty members are uneasy taking unpopular positions on delicate questions like race or the war in Iraq. "You would have to be not completely awake not to realize that there's a social disinclination to voice a conservative opinion," he said. But he said the reluctance results from social pressures of "going against the grain" rather than an administrative prohibition.

That's why a view stated by Jessica Belasco, a student active in rights for the disabled, is so reassuring. She observed how appalling she finds the ideas of [Peter Singer](#), a professor of bioethics at Princeton who justifies euthanasia for severely disabled infants.

Nevertheless, she said, "I have trouble saying he's not allowed to say it."

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