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THE REVIEW | OPINION

By *Jeffrey Aaron Snyder*

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At the start of the Winter Olympics earlier this month, a set of posters went up on the George Washington University campus. At first glance, they looked like they could be official advertisements for the Beijing Games. Look closer, though, and you see the snowboarder is perched atop a surveillance camera, the hockey player is body-checking a bloodied Tibetan monk, and the biathlete has their rifle trained on a blindfolded Uyghur man.

The George Washington University Chinese Students and Scholars Association [said](#) the posters were “racist,” a “naked attack on the Chinese nation” and called for a “public apology” and “severe punishment” for those responsible.

GW’s interim president, Mark S. Wrighton, who [said](#) he was “personally offended by the posters,” directed university staff to take them down and promised to “undertake an effort to determine who is responsible.”

After a flurry of public criticism, including [pressure](#) from the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, Wrighton [reversed course](#), admitting he had erred in having the posters removed and that [no university investigation was underway](#). He had learned, he said, that “the posters were designed by a Chinese-Australian artist” and that “they are a critique of China’s policies.” He continued: “I want to be very clear: I support freedom of speech — even when it offends people.”

Before this minor fiasco is swallowed up by the next news cycle, we should pause to consider what it tells us about the inevitable tensions between free expression and the kinds of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives taking root on college and university campuses. After all, as Wrighton wrote, concerns about the posters at GW [arrived](#) through “official university reporting channels that cited bias and racism against the Chinese community.”

Like [hundreds](#) of other colleges and universities, George Washington University has a [Bias Incident Response Team](#), or BIRT. Designed to “support students who are targets or witnesses of hate or bias incidents,” GW’s BIRT reporting form includes more than a dozen options under the “nature of the alleged bias” section, ranging from “age” and “disability” to “personal appearance” and “political affiliation” to “national origin” and “race.”

In a remarkable [open letter](#), the George Washington Chinese Cultural Association exploited the logic of DEI to make their case against the posters. The images “offended” many Chinese students, the association said, and violated the university’s commitment to “equality and inclusion.” Moreover, by potentially inciting “Asian hate,” the posters posed a risk to the safety

of Chinese students, including “verbal and physical violence.” “We hope everyone at the university can feel safe on campus.”

These arguments persuaded a staff member from the Office for Diversity, Equity, and Community Engagement who [reportedly](#) told students she recognized the “negative impacts” that the “hurtful and offensive posters” had on the Chinese-student community.

In their attempt at suppressing critique of China’s human-rights abuses, the Cultural Association drew quite shamelessly on the rhetoric of social justice. “This egregious act,” the Cultural Association wrote, “took place in early February, during Black History Month, a time when black people in the United States are reminded of their tragic experiences through longstanding oppression and exploitation.” “Underrepresented groups,” they continued, “should join together to fight racism and stand together against prejudice.”

Born in China, now residing in Australia, the artist who goes by the pseudonym [Badiuca](#) to avoid unwanted attention from the government of China, acknowledges that some people regard his Olympics images as “controversial” and “violent.” “I have to remind the people,” he said, “that what happened in China is a thousand times more terrible and violent, and art is merely showing the tip of the iceberg of all this crime and tragedy.” Responding to the charge that his work promotes “anti-China racism,” he underscores that his work critiques “the state, not the people.”



COURTESY BADIUCAO

This distinction is often conveniently overlooked by ideologically motivated students who invoke diversity mantras to try to shut down political speech. Last year, when the student government at the University of Michigan released a statement [accusing](#) the Israeli government of war crimes, Hillel [responded](#) by saying that the “inflammatory” statement hurt many Jewish students, making them “feel unseen and unrepresented.” Tactics like these speak to a growing [trend](#) in recent years to “equate criticism of Israeli state policies with anti-Semitism.”

There is a fundamental tension between political activism and the commitments made by colleges and universities to “belonging” and “inclusion.” Civil discourse should be the norm inside classrooms. But political speech on quads, in student centers, and elsewhere should not be expected to be all sweetness and light. Activism, Harry Belafonte [reminds us](#), is “supposed to make people feel uncomfortable.”

Since the 1960s, students in the U.S. have been at the forefront of the most significant social movements, from the struggle against the Vietnam War to Black Lives Matter. Along the way, student protesters have offended all kinds of people, including college faculty members; staff and administrators; reverends, ministers, and preachers; politicians; government officials; members of the armed forces and the police; their own parents; and, of course, their peers.

We should bear this in mind as higher education ramps up DEI measures like Bias Incident Response Teams, which have the potential to radically chill free expression. GW's Chinese Cultural Association says they believe in freedom of expression but that "misleading and offensive propaganda" is not "within that scope." Speaking truth to power usually sounds like "offensive propaganda" to the people holding power. It is shameful — and terribly ironic— that DEI initiatives meant to advance social justice are being weaponized to clamp down on activism and political protest.

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.

OPINION

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