

# Straitjacketed at the University of Oregon: Editorial

By The Oregonian Editorial Board  
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Despite Donald Trump's ascension to the presidency, political correctness has risen nationally in recent years and placed a choke hold on communities that depend most on free speech and the freedom to fruitfully resolve differences. It's a damaging irony that's come home to Oregon.

In Eugene, at the University of Oregon, a law professor held a Halloween party at her off-campus house this year and wished to provoke a discussion about racism in society and some of its premier institutions. One of those institutions is Brown University, on the other side of the country, where the law professor's daughter attends medical school and had noted a lack of diversity. So University of Oregon School of Law Professor Nancy Shurtz, a tax specialist who'd previously chaired the law school's diversity committee, decided to "play" the protagonist in Dr. Damon Tweedy's memoir, "Black Man in a White Coat," by greeting visitors in a white coat, stethoscope and blackface. Happy Halloween.

It didn't play out. Bad idea? Check. Miscalculation? Check. Offensive? In every way. Stupid, even? Yes. Black face is a relic of 19th Century theater and correctly viewed as a modern form of racist stereotyping. It's ugly. It's no joke. And it's no way to open a conversation, not even on Halloween: Putting on blackface is to grab the third rail against tolerance.

But was Shurtz' action malevolent? No. Racist? Unwittingly. Harmful? Yes, but not because it was so wrong-headed or because there was evidence offered by aggrieved individuals. Instead, the incident has become harmful to the brand of the law school, 23 of whose faculty members were so cowed by the event that they asked Shurtz to immediately resign. In shame. As an idiot. Significantly, as in: not one of them.

This is dangerous, hive-minded stuff. It carries the whiff of fascistic decrees that act, over time, to crush individuals and tamp down fruitful disagreement. Meanwhile, it coddles the privileged: faculty, law students and prospective law students, whose protection both real and promised places them in a padded world immune from even perceived discomfort. Who now would dare speak provocatively in a climate in which a distinguished colleague is asked by peers to quit because, well, she made a mistake? If Shurtz finds herself needing a lawyer, may it be a U of O-minted sharpshooter who could show cowering faculty members what decency, tolerance and diversity really look like.

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The law school is right to build an environment in which students and faculty are unthreatened and in no way marginalized because of race or gender or sexual preference. But so many of its teachers should hit the pause button before deciding to kill a career without evidence of harm.

Shurtz is on administrative leave as the incident is investigated. She has apologized and in her apology shows she is mystified by her own capacity to get it so wrong. Meanwhile, there is no publicly available record of behavior by Shurtz that would indicate she is a racist. Reasonably, Shurtz has not resigned. And she should not resign.

The Oregon Association of Scholars issued a welcome rebuke to the university on Thursday. "This attack on Dr. Shurtz's academic freedom is a direct consequence of the environment of politically correct partisanship and the ideological narrowing of higher education in the state ... ," Bruce Gilley, a Portland State University political scientist, wrote. He demanded that U of O administrators issue an apology to Shurtz for their mistreatment, even bullying, of her. And he said his association "reminds university officials that they undermine the purpose of higher education when they cower before ideological enforcers on campus...."

Ease up, U of O. Take a deep breath. One of your own messed up, but not so badly things can't be set right in such a manner as to edify both students and faculty. Generosity and wit, not tyrannical brow-beating, typically characterize healthy, diverse and free communities.

-The Oregonian/OregonLive Editorial Board