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EDITORIAL

Penn campus is the 'home' where the 'buffaloes' roam

The case of Eden Jacobowitz, a freshmen at the University of Pennsylvania, is a dramatic example of a high-minded institutional effort to be sensitive to minority rights gone crazily awry.

The university administration, seeking to be responsive to its minority populations and affirm its commitment to cultural diversity, developed an anti-harassment policy over several years. One aspect of that policy was designed to curb verbal abuse, with the emphasis on racial or ethnic slurs.

So far, so good. No one who is reasonably civilized is out to defend such behavior. The problem, of course, comes when one tries to apply such a code and enforce such prohibitions. Then, the element of personal opinion comes to the fore, and unreasonable actions and decisions become more than just occasional possibilities.

Eden Jacobowitz was studying and his roommate was sleeping shortly before midnight on Wednesday, Jan. 13, when about a dozen sorority members began raising a ruckus outside his dorm.

The Penn freshman, a former yeshiva student from Long Island, recalls shouting at the noisemakers, "Shut up, you water buffalo, and if you're looking for a party, there's a zoo a mile from here."

At this point, the ponderous wheels of Penn's campus bureaucracy began turning, creating a situation that would be farcical if a young man's academic career and reputation were not seriously threatened. Penn's Judicial Inquiry Office has brought racial harassment charges against Jacobowitz.

The sorority women involved happen to be black. It is no secret that racial tensions on the nation's major campuses are running high.

Jacobowitz has vehemently denied any racial intent as he shouted at the noisy crowd outside his dorm. He has understandably refused to go along with the settlement package offered by Penn judicial inquiry officer Robin Read that instructed him to apologize to the five women who have charged him with racial harassment, conduct a sensitivity session in his dorm and accept probationary status and a negative notation on his academic record.

The "water buffalo" incident has caught the attention of the local and national media, occasioning a long overdue discussion of "political correctness" within the campus community. Just what is

and what ought to be included in a commitment to cultural diversity?

Penn originally scheduled a hearing for this past Monday and then postponed it until the fall because of the publicity. With the identity of his accusers a closely guarded secret, Jacobowitz is left twisting, twisting in the wind. For him, justice delayed is clearly justice denied.

Young people are caught up here in a ridiculous situation. If they have erred at all, they have behaved with the immaturity that campus leaders, among all other groups, should understand and respond to with some thought and reason. Thought and reason, however, are notorious by their absence at Penn today.

In an exercise that would constitute a hilarious scene in a theatrical farce, learned scholars have been debating the mad question of whether and when "water buffalo" became a racial slur. One of the scholars has suggested that the phrase is the English translation for *behemah*, a Hebrew word that can mean water buffalo but can also connote a thoughtless person or fool.

It would not be amiss to suggest that too many supposed adults at Penn are behaving like "water buffaloes" as they stumble toward a resolution of this incident.