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Don't stifle speech, Hillary warns colleges

By Ann McFeatters
SCRIPPS HOWARD NEWS SERVICE

PHILADELPHIA — Hillary Rodham Clinton struck a blow against political correctness yesterday, wading into a controversy that has rocked the City of Brotherly Love.

Giving the commencement speech at the University of Pennsylvania, which conferred on her an honorary doctorate in law, she said universities must be havens for free thought and free speech.

"Freedom and respect are not values that should be in conflict," Mrs. Clinton said, adding that Americans should listen as well as lecture.

College students in particular, she said, are able to take different philosophical positions on a subject in a single evening as they try out their real values and beliefs.

"What we have to do here at this university and in this country is to find a way to celebrate our diversity and debate our differences without fracturing our community.

"We must always uphold the idea of our colleges as incubators of ideas and havens for free speech and free thought."

She was greeted with sustained applause.

"We cannot debate our differences nor face our mutual challenges unless and until we respect each other, men and women, young

and old, across the ethnic and racial lines that divide us."

Universities must be places of learning not just about books, she said, but about people, and respect for people must be taught.

The University of Pennsylvania is embroiled in a debate over exactly that. A white freshman is awaiting the outcome of disciplinary proceedings for yelling "Shut up, you water buffalo" to a group of black sorority women making noise under his window one night as he studied for an exam. The women said the remark was a racial slur; he said it was not.

Racial tension at the school heightened when black students threw away 14,000 copies of the student newspaper because they objected to a conservative columnist whose commentary was published in it.

The president of the university, Sheldon Hackney, has not taken a firm stand on how the issues should be resolved. His statement that diversity and open expression appear to be in conflict drew criticism from conservatives and others. As President Clinton's nominee to head the National Endowment for the Humanities, he is leaving the university next month.

In his speech yesterday, Mr. Hack-

ney said the "very painful conflict" could not be resolved at commencement, which he said was not a proper occasion to dwell on the issues.

"The tension between individualism and group loyalties is a central motif of American history and

therefore of American culture," Mr. Hackney said. "I doubt that it can ever be resolved in any final way."

Mrs. Clinton took a different tack.

"I know that you share the general distress at any acts of hate — hateful acts, hateful words, hateful incidents — that occur too frequently these days in our communities and even on our college campuses," she said. "In a nation founded on the

promise of human dignity, our colleges, our communities, our country should challenge hatred wherever we find it.

"But we should listen as well as lecture; confront problems, not people; and find ways to work together to promote the common good."

Mrs. Clinton's comments were as direct and pointed in a specific controversy as any first lady's in a long time. Barbara Bush used a commencement speech at Wellesley to

speaking her mind, but it was to say that while women should be free to make choices, they should not underestimate the importance of family. No one ever regretted not attending one more meeting, she noted.

Not publicly known for her sense of humor, Mrs. Clinton made an effort to show a lighter side of her nature. As she watched more than 5,000 graduating students pass by, she said, "Many of you look like you've been celebrating already."

