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First Lady Defends Free Speech

Penn Graduates Urged To Respect Diversity

By Dale Russakoff
Washington Post Staff Writer

PHILADELPHIA, May 17—Hillary Rodham Clinton, delivering the commencement address at the University of Pennsylvania today, called on about 5,000 graduates to find "meaning" by tackling society's troubles, in which she prominently included Penn's recent struggles with racial tension and free speech.

Plunging confidently without a prepared text into a debate causing deep division on Penn's campus and nationally, she said to loud applause: "We must always uphold the idea of our colleges as incubators of ideas and havens for free speech and free thought. . . . Freedom and respect are not values that should be in conflict with each other."

In so doing, Clinton made a stronger stand for free speech than did outgoing Penn President Sheldon Hackney, her husband's nominee to head the National Endowment for the Humanities. Last month when black student protesters trashed a full production run of the daily student newspaper, Hackney said, "Two important university values, diversity and open expression, appear to be in conflict."

Hackney has said since that he did not mean to understate the importance of free speech at a university but to emphasize a need to understand grievances of minorities on a predominantly white campus. It is a common bind among university officials facing racial tension on many campuses.

Clinton left no question about the primacy of free speech in her eyes.

"We must be careful not to cross the line between censoring behavior we consider unacceptable and censoring," she said, again to loud applause. "We have to believe that in the free exchange of ideas, justice will prevail over injustice, tolerance over intolerance and progress over reaction."

Penn has drawn national attention for its racial difficulties after the newspaper protest and a racial harassment case against a white freshman for yelling at five black women making noise outside his dorm at midnight: "Shut up, you water buffalo." The women contend that the freshman violated the school's speech code against using

The term "water buffalo" has no known racial connotation, however, and national commentators have seized on the case as an illustration of the dangers of using speech codes to regulate race relations.

"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," Clinton said.

She urged the students to embrace the idealism that comes with youth, recalling the idealistic commencement speech she delivered at Wellesley College in 1969. She touted the president's national service program as a way for students to "find meaning by helping others" and her own work on overhauling the health care system as part of an effort to fashion "a healthier country" built on mutual concern.

Without disclosing how she would propose to pay for it, Clinton said she aims to make health care more secure for employers, employees, the unemployed, the elderly and the health care industry. Outside Franklin Field, where commencement took place, and out of earshot, a cluster of AIDS activists chanted: "It's single-payer, stupid," attacking her preference for so-called managed competition as a health care model.

She called on the students to help "make our diversity a source of strength and not weakness . . . We are all in this together. As the president has said, we don't have a person to waste."

The students and their families gave Clinton a standing ovation. As she made her way through campus during the graduation procession, greeting students from a receiving stand before her speech, "kids were screaming like they'd seen Mel Gibson," said Phyllis Holtzman, a university spokeswoman.

She also used her address to respond to the hubbub about her new haircut. "I need to get this out of the way," she said. "It is, after all, the No. 1 issue. When the president called for sacrifice and asked everyone at the White House to take a 25 percent cut, I decided to go for a 50 percent cut to do my part."

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