

School Meeting Censorship: A Sense of Belonging

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September 30, 2016*

The goal of censorship at Brooks is to minimize the impact of language that may make students feel isolated, ostracized, or unwelcome. Both faculty members and students encourage everyone at Brooks to express themselves honestly. Additionally, as a small school and tight-knit community, Brooks School strives to create an environment where its community members feel welcome and respected. Different ways the school offers support are visible in many aspects of student life: school meetings, chapel services, clubs, whole form activities, etc. Each of the aforementioned examples demonstrate efforts to bring the community together by appealing to their similarities. School meeting brings people together as Brookians, appealing to the one overarching trait that we share: we are all students who go to Brooks. At school meeting videos are shown with references to current events at our school, funny or interesting news, poetry, music—all uniting us and raising our spirits. On the other hand, there are often sombering videos and messages delivered during school meetings as well, and students are allowed to bring to light their concerns and frustration. All announcements at school meeting must be approved by the deans before they can be made. When the deans interpret something as potentially offensive, or promoting what they see as racism, hate speech, or potentially offensive, they won't let it be shown. Is this censorship? Yes. The following are two examples of decisions concerning censorship.

A student directed Weekend Update-esque segment was one of the most popular recurring videos at school meeting last year. The videos were fully of quippy jokes in reference to DCs, successes or failures of dances, sports promotions—essentially a satirical commentary on day-to-day life at Brooks. The producers of the show, called Good Looks Brooks (GLB), experienced consistent pushback from the deans about what could be in their videos or not specifically material that concerned commentary on DCs. Often, entire segments of the videos were censored from the school meeting.

Last year, a charged atmosphere flooded campus as polarized opinions emerged from school wide discussions of race relations, the protests of the Black Lives Matter movement and the complexities of immigration. This tense atmosphere eventually boiled over into school meeting when a young latina woman stood up in front of the whole school and performed a piece of spoken word poetry expressing the frustrations she felt on a daily basis when she encountered micro-aggressions and other forms of bigotry. Her speech left many members of the white student community feeling alienated, guilty, and wrongly persecuted. Some student believed that the message wasn't appropriate for school meeting citing the feelings it elicited. Even further, some people incorrectly suggested the poem was racist.

It is tense situations such as this, where students feel guilty and upset, that school administrations need to consider the delicate nature of censorship. In this situation, it was appropriate for the deans to approve the poem for school meeting because it was in accordance with the values that the school holds regarding speaking out against injustice and being honest. Furthermore, just because a group of individuals feels persecuted doesn't mean that what is causing their anxiety is hate speech or racism.

The ideas of censorship and voice aren't mutually exclusive. There can be a balance between what is seen as necessary censorship and non-censorship. Students should try to keep in mind the difficult decisions administrators make when deciding to censor (i.e. not revealing embarrassing details of DCs) or not censor something (personal experiences). It's difficult to strike a balance between censorship and non-censorship when trying to maintain a welcoming atmosphere in the diverse boarding school setting.

*DC: Abbreviation for Discipline Committee, a disciplinary system used by many New England boarding schools.