

Things that seem too dumb to be true usually aren't

by Chancellor Tony Frank

My dad used to say, "Things that seem too dumb to be true usually aren't." We've all heard nasty rumors about a friend or neighbor – but we check it against what we know of them, and then we seek the truth before rushing to judgment.

Last week, I watched as Colorado State University – a university I trust and love, having served as her president for more than a decade – became the subject of a "too dumb to be true" rumor. I'll admit, I might have laughed at the story myself if it were written about some other university. But I know the people involved, and I know CSU, and they don't deserve to be a punchline.

People – and organizations – tend to be who they have always been. Colorado State University is the school of choice for Colorado students, enrolling more Colorado high school students than any campus in the state. These students come from a wide range of backgrounds with a wide range of viewpoints, but they tend to be hard-working and down to earth – in character with the campus. CSU has one of the most respected ROTC programs in the nation. It's consistently ranked among the best universities in the country for veterans. This is a university that has consistently led on free speech – actually fighting to allow white supremacists the right to express their hateful views (under the idea that bright light kills bad ideas) even as we used our First Amendment rights to disagree – while also holding off violent anarchist counter-protestors whose deformed calculus led them to believe that hate + hate = good. For the past two years, we have offered training in fundamental constitutional law to thousands of our faculty and staff to ensure they have the knowledge to uphold the First Amendment and free speech in our classrooms, online, and in our public spaces.

Does it seem in character, then...does it seem plausible...that such a university would go to the trouble of trying to tell people what words to use or not to use, restricting their speech in a fundamental manner?

Well, that's how the story unfolded through countless media outlets last week – you probably heard it framed something like this: A public university appoints a task force to decide which words students will and won't be allowed to use. America is one of those words. PC run amok. It's the kind of thing that makes us angry because we love this country and policing language runs against the independent streak embedded in America's DNA. We know the story is true because people we respect in trusted media outlets repeat it.

But whatever colleges do or don't teach today, they have always taught the importance of seeking truth -- of being critical. There's plenty of criticism in this saga, but sadly not much critical evaluation. Anyone taking a moment to reflect on what they know about CSU would have to wonder how likely this was to be true, even while reading the inflamed stories.

And that's where this story takes a sad turn, because many of the people retelling it were not as interested in the truth as they were in the story. The way this story has been retold gets an 'A' in rhetoric and persuasive speech. On fact-checking content? That grade's not so good.

There was no task force. No university official ever charged a group of people with coming up with a language guide. There never was a document intended to be distributed to or discussed with students. Any student at the University can write the Chancellor and use every one of the words in question and exactly nothing will happen.

Here's the truth: A group of staff members mutually agreed to develop an internal resource for people who don't want to unintentionally offend someone in the workplace. These staff members work with people from many different backgrounds and nationalities, and they were simply asking for advice on how to be polite and respectful. Respect for others – hard to see that as such a sin.

Yes, an initial draft of the document recommended using "US Citizen" or "person from the U.S." instead of "American/America," to add more geographical clarity, since the Americas encompass 42 countries. . In the end, that suggestion got rejected and was left out of the final document. That old version, mistakenly not labelled as a draft, was left up on one staff member's website, an artifact from last fall when there was active discussion about the topic among the engaged staff. That's where things got a little sloppy: The final document – released a few months later -- was online, too, but on a password-protected site -- because, again, it was only ever intended for use by a small group of people who wanted guidance to help them do their jobs.

If you're a reporter or blogger who was actively seeking truth, it was pretty easy to find that out. You could, for example, call the University for comment. But if you missed that day of journalism school, you just run with the story because it's simply too juicy to pass up -- and the truth can sort itself out later. Then, if you want to run a stirring op-ed critical of the story without, again, trying to find out the truth, do so. The truth isn't the issue now – it's about the story!

Do I think CSU did everything right here? No. Do I think a University needs a guide on words and language? No. I never dreamed in grade school that pronouns would ever get this complicated. Do I think several of the suggestions in the list are just plain silly? Sure. Do I wish there had never been any debate about the use of the word "America"? Of course – it makes me personally sick because I and everyone I know at our University is proud of our country. (Still, as an American, I'm not going to tell anyone what they can and can't debate, even if it personally offends me -- especially on a college campus where free and open debate is our job.)

I'll own every one of those criticisms of Colorado State University because they happened on my watch. But what I won't own is the narrative that has arisen from the original inaccurate and untrue story. To quote my dad again, "You can say it more often and more loudly, but that doesn't make it more true."

Free speech and truth. They go together like a baseball and a hot dog; like root beer and vanilla ice cream; like a cool breeze on a warm sunny day. But all of these things are better as a pair – just as free speech is at its best when accompanied by the truth – and a desire to find it before exercising your First Amendment rights.