At least once a month, the same guy shoved a flier in my face as I walked to my classes at Northwestern University.

"Jews for Jesus," he shouted.


Northwestern allowed this protester 20 years ago, and in May, the suburban Chicago school permitted the same kind of bake sale that caused a stir at Southern Methodist University last week. A conservative group advertised different cookie prices based on a person's race and gender to make a political statement against affirmative action.

But while my alma mater and

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Campus protests part of learning?

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about a dozen other schools around the country let the event continue, SMU shut down the bake sale on its campus after 45 minutes.

SMU officials said the Young Conservatives of Texas event created a potentially hostile and volatile situation. One other school, Illinois State University, asked students to remove the sign that others found offensive.

It all goes to show that, when it comes to rules on protests, universities choose different recipes, and it’s up to officials to strike the right balance between students’ rights and their safety.

In the 1960s, protests were commonplace at universities as students clashed over the Vietnam War. But in the last two decades, college campuses have become more diverse in race, ethnicity and political views, universities have faced more challenges in deciding what they will and won’t allow.

They created free speech zones, designating areas for protests. Some established strict rules. In 2001, Stanford University approved an Acts of Intolerance Protocol, putting campus police in charge of dealing with incidents that target a specific group.

Other schools, including the University of Texas at Austin, have allowed almost any type of protest, as long as it is peaceful. Back-and-forth shouting is OK.

Scott Bartlett, an SMU philosophy professor who happened by the so-called “affirmative action bake sale,” regrets that SMU stopped the event.

“One of the reasons I think we should tread lightly on silencing hateful speech is the person who is silenced becomes the martyr,” he said.

National news networks, after spotting local coverage of the event, interviewed the chairman of the SMU conservative students group.

The scene at SMU, Dr. Bartlett said, was mild compared with what he saw in the early 1990s at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale. Then a graduate student, Dr. Bartlett said he regularly spotted the leader of a white supremacist group handing out fliers. Members of the Black Panthers and Nation of Islam confronted the group on campus. The students debated loudly and heatedly, more so than SMU students did last week, Dr. Bartlett said.

“That experience suggested to me that college students are more mature than we think,” Dr. Bartlett said. “They can handle competing views, even when they offend them.”

James Caswell, SMU’s vice president of student affairs, said SMU encourages free-flowing debate. But, in his view, the event was getting too heated. The right place to deal with such a volatile topic is the student-organized forum already planned for next month, he said.

UT’s bake sale of the same ilk this month didn’t register a blip on the outrage scale. School officials said the sale went almost unnoticed, perhaps because it was among dozens of political activities on the West Mall.

UT students who ran the sale at their school said they got a variety of reactions — laughter, debate, complaints or no comment.

Texas A&M had some staff members and students who wanted the school to stop the conservative group’s sale this month, but the school legally had to allow the students to speak out, said Bill Kilber, the university’s interim vice president for student affairs.

Public schools are restricted in the action they can take. Private schools are not, said Philip Klinkner, a government professor at Hamilton College in Clinton, N.Y. Dr. Klinkner, who writes about First Amendment issues, said private schools may limit public displays in any way they want.

“It’s up to SMU to decide what kind of school they want to run,” Dr. Klinkner said. “SMU is a big place, and there’s going to be a variety of views.”

Dr. Bartlett said students and university officials should view a campus as an extended classroom. Learning to deal with views different than your own is a part of the experience, he said.

Still, SMU officials would argue, there’s a delicate balance between providing that experience and watching out for students’ safety.

Back at Northwestern, I could have stopped to listen to the Jews for Jesus pitch, then presented my side. Who knows if the interaction would have been peaceful or not.

In the end, it didn’t matter. I had class to attend.

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