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Did Assignment Get Too Political?

Lawyers at the Alliance Defense Fund have filed a [complaint](#) in federal district court on behalf of a former Missouri State University student who says that the university punished her for failing to take part in a class assignment that went against her beliefs as a Christian.

Emily Brooker, who graduated from the university's School of Social Work last spring, took issue with a project in which students were asked to draft and individually sign a letter to Missouri legislators that supported the right of gay people to be foster parents, according to the complaint.

The assignment was eventually shelved, but the complaint says officials in the social work school charged Brooker with the highest-level grievance for not following guidelines on diversity, interpersonal skills and professional behavior. According to the complaint, during a hearing before an ethics committee, faculty members asked Brooker: “Do you think gays and lesbians are sinners? Do you think I am a sinner?” and questioned whether she could assist gay men and women as a professional social worker.

David French, a senior legal counsel with the ADF and the director of their Center for Academic Freedom, says the class assignment was more than a case of political role-playing — it amounted to a restriction of students' free speech, he said.

“A person was forced to publicly state a position on a hot-button cultural issue to her own government that she disagrees with. You can't get a more fundamental violation of the First Amendment than that,” French said. “[Brooker] objected, and then she was subject to investigation and punishment.”

That punishment, French said, included months of scrutiny and close faculty supervision by school officials. ADF attorneys are seeking punitive damages, but French said this case is less about collecting money than about setting a precedent.

The legal group has yet to serve Missouri State with a lawsuit. John Black, the university's general counsel, declined to comment on the facts presented in the complaint, saying that an internal investigation is just starting. He said only that the university “is committed to protecting the rights of all of its students, faculty and staff.”

Don Hendricks, a university spokesman, said Missouri State has no official response. None of the faculty members mentioned in the complaint returned calls or e-mails for comment.

Brooker is working full-time and had intended on doing her graduate work at Missouri State, French said. After the months-long saga, she decided otherwise, largely because she felt her record at the university was tainted, he added.

Brooker, who began at Missouri State in 2002, took a required welfare policy and services class in spring 2005 taught by Frank G. Kauffman, an assistant professor of social work. During the class, the complaint alleges that Kauffman stated that he is a “liberal” and that social work is a “liberal profession.”

According to the complaint, Brooker spoke out against Kauffman’s ideologies on numerous occasions. She received a ‘C’ in that course, a grade that, according to Booker, Kauffman was unwilling to reconsider. Brooker said the professor told her that she was marked down for tardiness and an unprofessional classroom demeanor. (Her grade was later changed to a ‘B’ upon appeal, the complaint says.)

Brooker took another course with Kauffman in the fall. As part of a social work advocacy project, Brooker joined a group that planned to focus on homelessness. But according to the complaint, after a class visit from a gay advocacy group, Kauffman suggested that the whole class work on the letter-writing project supporting the right of gay people to be foster parents.

Brooker told the professor that she was happy to learn about the topic, but that — along with other students — was uncomfortable signing the letter because of her religious convictions, the complaint says. Kauffman allowed Brooker to write and sign a letter on an alternative subject, and the original project was later thrown out, according to the complaint.

About a month later, Brooker received notification that she had violated School of Social Work standards. In December, before an ethics committee, Kauffman said that Brooker “resisted instruction,” the complaint says. Brooker said faculty members told her that her values conflicted with those articulated by a national social workers’ association. After protesting, she agreed to write a response paper in which she promised to “lessen the gap” between her personal beliefs and the professional obligations to the national ethics codes, according to the complaint.

By doing this, the complaint says the college “deprived [Brooker] of her ability to freely express her ideas on issues of religious and political concerns at MSU and in the social work profession.”

Last month, in a separate case, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education [asked](#) the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to drop ties with the Council on Social Work Education unless the council changes its evaluation standards that FIRE calls “politically loaded.”

— [Elia Powers](#)

*The original story and user comments can be viewed online at
<http://insidehighered.com/news/2006/11/01/complaint>.*

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