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City & Region

Tempers stirred by Harvard cartoon

By Patrick Healy, Globe Staff, 11/12/2002

These are tense days at Harvard Business School: Six-figure job offers have been hard to come by for some students. Harvard ranked a middling number 9 on a recent employer survey of US business schools. And just before this month's "Hell Week" - when the aspiring business leaders met as many visiting corporate recruiters as possible - computer snafus scrambled some of the students' interview schedules.

But when the school's student newspaper took a swipe at Harvard - publishing a cartoon of a career services Web site exploding with error messages, including one referring to "incompetent morons" - the tension turned to anger for some school officials.



Last week, the director of Harvard's MBA program reprimanded two student editors of the paper, the Harbus, over the term "incompetent morons" and warned them to avoid "disrespectful" language in the future.

Days later, Harbus editor-in-chief Nick Will resigned, citing "personal intimidation and threats" by Harvard officials. The incident has sparked complaints from some students and professors about free speech on campus and leaders of the Business School, particularly dean Kim B. Clark.

"The message the school sent to Nick Will was pretty threatening," said Jennifer Taylor, a second-year student who is on a campus "community standards" board that is now reviewing the case. "This is denying the community a voice to express its frustrations."

Carl Kester, chairman of the MBA program, said yesterday the school never intended to punish or censor the paper's editors, but rather inform them the cartoon violated the campus "community standards" code because it appeared to insult the school's career-services workers.

"If it weren't for those two words, nothing would have been said or done to the students," Kester said. "There was just a very palpable sense that this had damaged the feelings of people working very hard on behalf of students."

Clark struck a similar note in a memo that he sent to Harvard students Friday evening,

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saying that, while the school is "committed to principles of free expression and inquiry ... each of us first and foremost is a member of the Harvard Business School community, and as such, we are expected to treat each other respectfully."

Harbus editors say the "incompetent morons" remark was not directed at specific individuals or groups at Harvard, but was meant to be a satirical comment on a computer system that Harvard was using to help schedule the recruiters' visits.

Yet Clark's memo - in which he also said he was "saddened" by Will's resignation - set off some fiery discussions among students, including some who suggested that the dean was cracking down on the Harbus for publishing material that he opposed for personal reasons.

"[Clark] has a strong sense of what is and is not appropriate and professional," Taylor said. "Students may have a more liberal view."

Louis Wells, a Business School professor who has been notifying colleagues about the incident, said it interested him because it had, "on the surface, eerie similarities" to the way the Suharto government managed the press in Indonesia, where Wells worked for several years.

"The issue is, can the Harbus publish what it wants within some reasonable standards?" Wells said. "This seems like an infringement of that."

Several students suggested yesterday, in interviews and on Web discussion lists, that school officials were overly sensitive about its own public image. Some noted that recent rankings by Business Week and the Wall Street Journal have placed Harvard number three and number nine, respectively, among business schools nationwide, and that the school's "brand" has been tainted by alumni who led scandal-plagued companies like Enron.

"Dean Clark doesn't need his own student newspaper taking shots at the school," said one second-year student, speaking on the condition of anonymity.

Neither Clark nor his spokesmen returned phone messages and e-mail seeking comment yesterday.

But Kester said, "Our students are going to be leading organizations and people someday, and they need to learn from time to time about how their words and actions might influence others."

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