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Assignments get teacher in trouble

College speech instructor allegedly told students to write antiwar letters

By Terry Webster, Staff Writer

GLENDORA -- A teacher who allegedly asked students to write antiwar letters to President George W. Bush for extra credit has prompted hundreds of angry e-mails and telephone calls from free-speech activists throughout the country, Citrus College President Louis Zellers said Monday.

Most of the e-mails appear to be in support of the college's decision to place part-time speech instructor Rosalyn Kahn on administrative leave, said Samuel Lee, an associate dean for language arts and foreign languages at the 10,000-student community college.

In addition to the antiwar letters, students in Kahn's Speech 106 class said they were asked to complete a separate extra credit assignment by writing letters to state Sen. Jack Scott, D-Pasadena, about the state budget crisis.

Specifically, students were told to write about how part-time instructors are vital to the college and that they shouldn't lose their jobs, said Christopher Stevens, 20, a first-year student at Citrus College.

For both assignments, students were told they would only receive credit if they expressed certain political viewpoints, Stevens said.

"It seemed more like a political science class," Stevens said. "There was no room for dissenting remarks. You just had to follow her beliefs and that's what you worked with. I told her this isn't fair, we can't compromise our beliefs, but that I did the assignment according to her instructions. When she said the letter had to be mailed if I wanted credit, I said, 'No, that's not OK,' and I took the letter back."

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The college's adjunct union and Kahn did not respond to requests for comment.

The first-year instructor "abused her power," Zellers said, adding that he has drafted letters of apology to Bush and Scott, asking that all of the students' letters be retracted.

"This was a speech class, and I don't think writing any kind of letter is really an appropriate assignment," he said.

The class is a requirement for students wishing to transfer to California State University or University of California institutions.

Zellers also ordered that the extra credit for both assignments be removed and replaced with new assignments. The new ones will allow students to write letters about the potential war and the state budget, without sanctions for their beliefs. Additionally, students will not be required to mail their letters to receive credit.

College officials said they completed their investigation by interviewing Kahn's entire class.

"I gave them a very specific questionnaire to answer, if they wanted to, and then we spent an hour discussing what happened," Lee said.

The ordeal unfolded when Stevens approached administrators to complain about the assignments. Lee said he first heard the complaint Feb. 27.

Stevens stepped up the effort by contacting the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), a nonprofit group in Philadelphia concerned with free speech, individual liberty, religious freedom, legal equality, due process and academic freedom.

Upon receiving the complaint, Lee said he contacted Kahn and told her the assignments were inappropriate.

"I told her we have to give students the opportunity to get credit regardless of their political views," Lee said. "She agreed to do that, and on March 3, I e-mailed the students of the outcome of the discussion with the instructor. I also said she wants to change what she's done and make this right. On March 4, I got the fax from FIRE."

"The college basically brushed us off," Stevens said. "I didn't think it was being taken seriously."

FIRE sent a letter to Zellers on March 4 regarding the student's allegations and demanded an investigation.

Thor Halvorssen, executive director of FIRE, said Monday the college responded appropriately.

"As far as we're concerned, they took the right action and the case is closed," he said.

Zellers said he was unsure if further action will be taken against Kahn.

"I've not received a recommendation for further action, but I'm not saying that door is closed," he said.

College Board of Trustees member Susan Keith supported the administration's position.

"From a policy standpoint, what the teacher did was inappropriate," she said.

The story has drawn widespread media attention.



"We've never had anything that has drawn this much attention,' Zellers said.

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