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U. New Mexico prof's edge dulled by controversy

By James Barron

[Daily Lobo](#) (U. New Mexico)

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(U-WIRE) ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. -- University of New Mexico Professor Richard Berthold has built a reputation during the past 30 years as an engaging and entertaining instructor and a brash, outspoken critic of just about everything.

It's that blunt personality that has attracted students in droves to his classes and driven his adversaries nuts.

But now, four months after his ill-timed remark that "anybody who can blow up the Pentagon has my vote" and a month after the University's decision to reprimand him, the edge on his jaded personality has dulled.

Now, when he speaks, he does so in a measured tone. Pauses and silence now fill the spaces that his unabashed opinion once occupied. If anything, Berthold says, the experience of the past four months taught him an invaluable lesson.

"Think before I speak," Berthold said. "That's certainly a lesson right there."

But it all came with a price. On Dec. 11, Provost Brian Foster announced in a statement that Berthold had "failed to meet his professional responsibilities as a faculty member because of his conduct on Sept. 11."

Foster said a letter of reprimand would be placed in Berthold's personnel file, he will not teach freshman classes for the immediate future and he will undergo an in-depth post-tenure review. Foster said he will follow a specific plan for complying with the standards of professional behavior for the classroom that are described in the Faculty Handbook.

The problems also go beyond the University's decision. Berthold says that he is constantly afraid of saying something that will get him into more trouble or that somebody is writing down everything he does. During the latter part of the fall semester, he said he watched what he said in classes, but it was so subtle, students may not have known it.

Monica Cyrino, an associate professor and chairwoman of the Foreign Languages and Literature Department, has worked with Berthold and is a close friend of his. She said the situation has affected him deeply, adding that if the University wanted Berthold to watch what he says, it was successful.

"I think Rick is not alone in being a person who is going to watch what he says, as our government is telling us to do," Cyrino said. "He will teach on Tuesday and be an utterly different person. That was what the University wanted. I'm not sure if it's a good thing."

Berthold said the whole experience has drained his enthusiasm -- so much so that he is looking at an

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earlier retirement. But, because of the way the University calculates retirement pay, Berthold said he might have to wait a year or two.

"If I could, I'd retire at the end of the spring semester," Berthold said.

But at the same time, he said he feels his comments in his two classes on Sept. 11 have been blown out of proportion.

"It was an offensive remark, but let's keep it in perspective," Berthold said. "It's not like I was applauding and dancing around because Americans were blown away or stood there and said, 'Let's kill more Americans' or 'I'm in favor of all terrorism.' No, it was a stupid, sarcastic remark, and I'm done apologizing. I'm done eating crow."

Berthold said he was happy with the University's decision because it meant he could put the ordeal behind him. He even proposed that he be censured for his comments, saying that the University should expect its faculty to have a certain minimal level of intelligence and sensitivity, something he admits he didn't display on that day.

One thing he would not back down from, though, was that he be suspended without pay or have his salary reduced. Berthold said that the University continued to press that he be punished financially, and that it bogged down the disciplinary process. He even received help from Cyrino, who has experience dealing with grievance situations.

Then, he received a phone call from UNM President Bill Gordon, who Berthold said proposed that he be reprimanded, which Berthold agreed to. Foster declined to comment on Gordon's involvement, but said the disciplinary process was applied perfectly. Foster added that it is a multi-layered process, starting with the department chairperson and possibly moving on to the school's dean and provost.

Cyrino said discussions between Berthold and University administrators were cordial and professional, but the University may not have realized the kinds of concessions Berthold was willing to make.

"At the end there, it basically was a moment of awareness that there was a lot on the table that could be used," Cyrino said. "It would have gotten much messier with litigation. It was the appropriate time for the administration to step up and it finally did the right thing."

Berthold said he didn't know what changed the University's position, but he thought the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, a watchdog group that deals with First Amendment issues, may have had something to do with it. The group acted on its own accord, he said, and suggested that Berthold take the issue to court. But, he said he didn't have the money or the stomach for the court battle.

"They can line up a pro bono attorney, this would still end up costing me money and I just don't have that kind of money, especially if they are giving me a way out," Berthold said.

Foster said the group's involvement was on a First Amendment basis, which the University supports. He said the question involved Berthold's conduct in the classroom.

Even in the whirlwind of controversy, Berthold said he found a lot of support from students and community members. Amid the thousands of hate letters and e-mails he received, Berthold said he received words of encouragement from people in the community and students -- including some he taught 15-20 years ago.

Of all the times he went out in public, he remembered only one person who gave him a hard time.

"Some guy came up to me in a bar, just leaned over and looked at me and said, 'You can kiss my ass,'" Berthold said. "I told him he'd have to get in line for that."