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College staff find chilling free speech climate

NEW YORK (AP) -- Around the country, college faculty and staff who express opinions on the terrorist attacks and U.S. bombardment of Afghanistan are facing rebuke in public and private, suspension and investigation. At least two professors were asked to leave their schools as a security measure.

Colleges campuses take pride in nurturing debate, but that tradition is being tested in the wake of the Sept. 11 attacks on New York and Washington. People across the political spectrum are feeling the chill.

Some examples:

* University of California at Los Angeles library assistant Jonnie Hargis was suspended without pay for five days after he criticized U.S. support for Israel in an e-mail sent on the school's computers. He was responding to a co-worker's mass e-mailing that praised America. Hargis gave The Associated Press copies of both e-mail messages.

The day the 53-year-old Hargis was penalized, the staff was also told library policy forbids using its e-mail to send unsolicited political or patriotic messages.

Hargis has worked at the library 22 years. He said the policy was news to him, and that he was the only one punished. Library officials declined to talk about the case, but furnished a copy of the policy.

* University of South Florida professor Sami Al-Arian was placed on indefinite,

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paid leave for his safety and that of the Tampa campus, a school spokesman said. The university acted after receiving a death threat and angry calls following Al-Arian's appearance on a TV news program in which he was asked about his ties to two suspected terrorists.

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Al-Arian said he only knew the men as academics, and that their later links to terrorism shocked him. The computer engineer was also founder of a now-defunct think tank on Middle East issues that the FBI has investigated. Al-Arian was never arrested or charged.

* The day of the attacks, University of New Mexico history professor Richard Berthold said in a course on Western civilization: "Anyone who can blow up the Pentagon has my vote."

— Soon after his comment became public, violent threats followed and the 55-year-old Berthold agreed to leave the campus for a week for his safety, a spokeswoman said. He has apologized, saying, "I was a jerk," adding that the U.S. Constitution's guarantee of free speech "protects my right to be a jerk." An internal investigation is under way.

Such incidents highlight an erosion of free academic expression that existed before Sept. 11, said Thor Halvorssen, head of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education.

The Philadelphia-based organization finds free legal help for faculty who feel their rights were trampled.

The very vulnerability of free speech in these highly charged times, however, prompted extra restraint at Pennsylvania State University, an administrator said.

Math professor Stephen Simpson's personal Web page, on the school's computers, links to an essay by another writer asserting that the U.S. military must destroy the governments of Afghanistan and Iran, "regardless of the suffering and death this will bring to the many innocents caught in the line of fire."

When some students complained, vice provost Robert Secor passed on their comments to the 56-year-old professor, but refrained from asking that the controversial statement be removed.

"There's no action, there's no reprimand," Secor said. "We have to be very careful about protecting the rights of free speech, and we do."

Simpson's only response, he said in an interview, was that he wants the school to clarify where he has a right to air his views.

Many campuses now face quandaries, Secor said.

"These are real conflicts," he said, between "what universities feel is civilized behavior -- and free speech that they feel we must protect. I think we still haven't sorted it out yet."

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