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## Kent: UI free speech policy disappoints

Certainly our freedom of speech is one of the most cherished and fundamental rights in this country. Unfortunately, the United States falls far short of the ideal put forth in the old saying, "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it." Far too many people are now more than willing to suppress the speech of others simply because they find it offensive.

Perhaps the most frightening aspect of this move towards oppression is that our nation's universities are leading the way. At the Uni-versity of Oklahoma, a disgraceful group of inept ad-ministrators has spent the last few years relentlessly persecuting geology Professor David Deming for expressing unpopular opinions. For the unimaginable offense of publishing a letter to the editor in the campus newspaper, he was charged with sexual harassment by 25 people he had never even met. The university only dismissed the charges when Deming's lawyers threatened a First Amendment lawsuit. Nonetheless, he still received a formal letter of reprimand from Dean John Snow.

More recently, an internal memo Snow wrote raising legitimate questions of a conflict of interest in the hiring of a part-time professor resulted in Deming having his office relocated to former lab space in the basement that was crudely converted to an "office," getting kicked out of the geology department and being strip-ped of three out of his four classes.

All of that seems to be an odd way for a university that boasts a commitment to free speech to treat a tenured professor with a history of positive student reviews and an impressive portfolio of scholarly works that have been published.

### Invitations to abuse

Luckily for Professor Deming he is being defended by one of the most important organizations in the country today: the Foundation for Individual Right in Education. FIRE is constantly on the lookout for any university that is restricting the First Amendment rights of its students and is extraordinarily successful in defending those whose rights are violated. As an organization dedicated solely to restoring liberty to college campuses, FIRE has defended the rights of College Republicans to hold "affirmative action" bake sales as well as those of anti-war activists to demonstrate on campus.

As shameful as the be-havior of the University of Oklahoma administration was in this case, it wouldn't be nearly as alarming if it was a unique situation. Un-fortunately, a short visit to the FIRE Web site proves convincingly that, from a Forsyth Community College professor who lost her job because she spoke out against the war in Iraq to a Lakeland Community Col-lege professor who was disciplined for telling students he is Catholic, American universities have made a habit of restricting the rights of their



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All of this made me wonder how well the universities here in Iowa rated when it comes to freedom of ex-pression. My study of the policies at the University of Iowa and Iowa State University proved disappointing. Both schools have speech codes that are obscenely general and an invitation to abuse. Officials at the two universities surely would defend these policies by pointing out language declaring a commitment to freedom of speech. Regrettably, similar declarations did little to stop the University of Oklahoma from destroying the career of a professor who expressed an unpopular opinion.

### **An antidote**

Despite Iowa State Uni-versity's claim to be dedicated to free speech, students at that school can be charged with sexual harassment for "derogatory or de-meaning comments about women or men in general, whether sexual or not." There can be no doubt that this exceedingly vague limitation placed on speech in Ames has a profound and destructive effect on campus expression. The definition of "demeaning comments about women or men" is entirely dependent on who is enforcing this policy. As a result, many students will choose to censor themselves rather than endure the legal battle necessary to recover the right to simply speak their mind

To be clear, there have yet to be any publicly reported incidents of the University of Iowa or of Iowa State University violating the First Amendment on campus.

However, the policies of both schools contain speech codes that significantly restrict a student's right to free speech. In light of the trend that has developed on college campuses, we must be vigilant as a community in ensuring that all students at Iowa's public universities are able to ex-press their opinions freely without fear of retribution.

More and more, freedom of speech in the United States takes a back seat to ensuring that no one is "offended." But diminishing our First Amendment rights is not the answer to expression that many people may find upsetting or of little value.

An editorial in The Philadelphia Inquirer put it best: "The only antidote for offensive speech is -- more and better speech."

Chad Kent is a North Liberty resident and a member of the Writers' Group, a corps of local residents who write regular columns for the Press-Citizen.

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