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The Providence Journal (Rhode Island)

September 30, 2004 Thursday
All Editions

SECTION: EDITORIAL; Pg. B-04

LENGTH: 457 words

HEADLINE: Freedom at RIC

BODY:

With its decision this month to drop action against a professor who failed to regulate students' conversation, Rhode Island College appears to have come down on the side of free speech.

The case centered on Lisa Church, a professor of accounting and computer-information services, who did not punish two RIC students for having made racially insensitive remarks to another RIC student, at the college's preschool. The professor was not on hand when the remarks were made, but was dragged into the affair because she is the preschool's coordinator.

RIC President John Nazarian insisted that the matter "was not an issue of free speech, the First Amendment, academic freedom, discrimination or censorship." But two civil-liberties groups -- the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) -- disagreed, as, presumably, did the professor, who had turned to FIRE for help.

Speech is often a thorny, politically charged matter. It is not surprising that some administrators seek to curtail spoken words that seem hateful or promote ill-will between students of different backgrounds.

But punishment of speech is not the way to do that. Tolerance cannot be enforced through intolerance. It can only be encouraged -- as by people who exemplify it, and who make rational arguments against erroneously founded views. Surely, the students and professors at RIC are smart and moral enough to do that.

Punishing speech, on the other hand, can have ugly side effects. People tend to consider the views of those with whom they disagree as motivated by ignorance, selfishness or hatred. In institutions where "zero-tolerance" speech codes prevail, even mainstream political views can become subject to punishment. Habits of intolerance grow, and cowardly attacks against those who disagree take hold.

That is why people who despise racial prejudice were nonetheless concerned when RIC held hearings against Professor Church for having failed to punish people for their speech.

The RIC community, and those who support the college, should be pleased that after the case was finally resolved, President Nazarian made a strong statement:

"Rhode Island College actively supports the right to free speech for all and does not discourage students, faculty, staff or any member of the college community from expressing

their thoughts or concerns on any matter."

Good. The role of an institution of higher learning is to promote the exploration of ideas. This cannot happen in a place where teachers are expected to police students' speech.

So we hope that President Nazarian will review passages in the RIC student handbook that seem to promise punishment for students who tell distasteful jokes or profess certain beliefs.

LOAD-DATE: October 1, 2004

Project ID: project

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