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**HEADLINE:** Professor accused of not punishing students for racist remarks

**DATELINE:** PROVIDENCE, R.I.

**BODY:**

A Rhode Island College professor has been called in for a hearing for failing to punish two students who allegedly made racist remarks, and her case is drawing the attention of civil liberties advocates.

The professor, Lisa B. Church, could face disciplinary action for her alleged failure to appropriately respond to a student's complaint, but the college says the initial hearing is merely a fact-finding proceeding.

The complaint against Church, a professor of accounting and computer information services, was brought to the college administration by a student and mother at the college who claims that Church responded inappropriately when told about racist comments allegedly made by two other student-mothers who had children in RIC's preschool.

The professor was not present during the incident.

According to the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), a Philadelphia-based nonprofit educational foundation that seeks to bring attention to violations of civil liberties on college campuses, the planned hearing stems from an incident on Feb. 19 in which the three mothers discussed welfare and race.

"The argument ended abruptly when one mother took offense to statements made by the two other mothers that allegedly expressed negative opinions of interracial relationships and the belief that certain minority groups' rights were valued over the rights of white," the foundation said.

FIRE told The Providence Journal that the woman who was upset by the comments left the preschool and ignored attempts at apologies. Nine days later, the woman complained to Church - who during the last academic year was the coordinator for the cooperative preschool, in addition to her teaching duties - and asked that the matter be discussed at a school meeting.

Church, who had not witnessed the conversation, told the woman that since the issue involved a disagreement between private individuals, she thought the matter should be mediated and that a sensitivity training session should be held.

But according to the foundation, the offended student "insisted that Professor Church take disciplinary action against the other mothers involved, action that if taken by an employee of a public college such as Professor Church, would likely have violated the First Amendment's guarantee of free speech."

The foundation said when Church declined to take disciplinary action, the offended student accused Church of discriminatory conduct and filed a complaint against her, a teacher at the preschool and the two other mothers alleging that they had violated college policies banning "hostile environment racism" and "intimidation."

The foundation said Church was informed by Scott Kane, an associate dean for student life at RIC, that she was being accused of violating RIC's policy on Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action, which states that the college "recognizes a higher order responsibility to create, promote and ensure a positive climate where individuals may learn, teach and work free from discrimination."

Foundation officials said while RIC can prohibit discrimination, it cannot enforce a policy that violates the First Amendment.

Jane Fusco, a spokeswoman for RIC, said the college hoped to set a hearing date by Sept. 3.

"We're not trying a professor for anything," she said. "This is a matter that is just going through the college's complaint resolution process. We don't know if there's any disciplinary action that needs to be taken at this point."

Fusco said that discipline "could become a possibility," depending on the evidence presented but that the student had not asked for Church to face disciplinary action.

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