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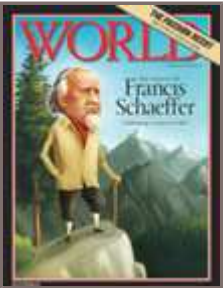
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Providence speech patrol

Against the ethos of Roger Williams, Rhode Island College tries to silence a student | *by Joel Belz*

It was hardly unusual for conservative Christians a generation ago to worry themselves silly that they'd lost the battle over free speech. Especially on America's campuses in the 1960s and '70s, outrageous public expressions that struck many as unpatriotic, blasphemous, or obscene regularly gained the protection of the courts. People shook their heads in wonderment.



The irony of all that history is that the free-speech issue is being contested all over again these days on America's campuses, although in a very different way. Now conservative Christians are the ones whose right to speak is being challenged—and way too often, they seem to be getting the short end of the stick.

I say "seem to be" because when these cases actually get tested in the nation's courts, the good guys typically win. But up until that point, too many of them have been roughed up by college and university know-it-alls who seem never to have heard of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

A current example of the hostility toward a diversity of beliefs involves Bill Felkner, a master's degree student in the School of Social Work at

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Rhode Island College in Providence. Last fall, Mr. Felkner took exception to an assignment in one of his classes. In the assignment, students were asked to participate in lobbying the Rhode Island legislature for any of several welfare programs—and, if they couldn't find a program they wanted to lobby for, to lobby instead for a gay marriage measure in that state.

When Mr. Felkner realized he couldn't in conscience lobby for any of the suggested programs, he asked his professor if he might be permitted to gain the same kind of experience by lobbying against one of the programs. But the professor refused, arguing that part of the assignment was for the students to work in small groups, and that Mr. Felkner would obviously be working alone. Faced with that response, Mr. Felkner joined one of the small groups, but wrote an individual paper arguing against his group's position on the issue. The professor, James Ryczek, gave Mr. Felkner a failing grade.

To be sure, Mr. Felkner had perhaps set himself up for such failure. Earlier in the semester, he had written his professor an e-mail to challenge what he saw as a liberal bias at the college. The professor had answered bluntly, in writing: "I revel in my biases. I think anyone who consistently holds antithetical views to those that are espoused by the profession might ask themselves whether social work is the profession for them."

By last week, the standoff continued. Mr. Felkner had turned for help to the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), a Philadelphia-based nonprofit group dedicated to defending students and professors whose free-speech rights are being challenged in academic settings.

And precisely because the scenario at Rhode Island College has become so typical across the country, FIRE is a very busy group. At any given time, FIRE is arguing the cases of at least a dozen beleaguered people. FIRE does not operate from a Christian perspective, and sometimes ends up defending the rights of folks whose expressions are decidedly offensive to Christians. In such cases, FIRE stresses the application of the Golden Rule: "Under this concept," FIRE argues, "we should fight for the rights of others if we wish to exercise those rights ourselves."

Especially on America's campuses, where free speech seemed a generation ago to enjoy a totally secure position, evangelical Christians, political conservatives, and others who are willing to challenge politically correct orthodoxies are the new minorities. And even though, with the help

of smart and able staffers at FIRE, they are ultimately winning most of their court cases, such defenses are costly and demeaning.

We'll try to keep you posted on the case of Bill Felkner. The fact that his case is being argued in the city of Providence is, of course, a special irony. That, you will remember, is where Roger Williams went almost four centuries ago—to defend the freedoms even of those with whom he disagreed. Roger Williams had started out as a Puritan in England, joining those who seemed at first to be his soul mates as they sought their freedom in Massachusetts. But when his disagreements even with them proved too much, he moved on to start over again in Providence, where his views on freedom of speech and freedom of religion set new standards for all who would follow.

Except, maybe, for academia. —•

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