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FREDONIA STATE COLLEGE

Professor claims criticizing policies cost him a promotion

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A Fredonia State College instructor said he is being denied a promotion for speaking out against campus policies in the media.

Stephen Kershner, an associate professor of philosophy, was nominated in January for promotion to the rank of professor. While he received support from his department's chairman, dean and vice president, the request was turned down by Fredonia President Dennis L. Hefner.

Kershner said he is being punished because he wrote a column in the Dunkirk-Fredonia Observer charging that the college's affirmative-action policies lower academic standards.

And Kershner was critical of the college last year in a Buffalo News story about Fredonia students being required to report violations of campus rules. The policy seemed a "little heavy-handed" and would turn students "into a group of snitches," he said.

"Your deliberate and repeated public misrepresentation of campus policies and procedures . . . to the media has impugned the reputation of SUNY Fredonia," Hefner wrote to Kershner. "You have clearly failed to make the distinction between presenting opinions and making false representations, which reflect poorly on the quality of your service to this university."

Kershner stands by his comments.

"I have yet to get an example of one misrepresentation," Kershner said.

"There's a freedom of expression that's just being ignored," Kershner said. Hefner was unavailable to comment Wednesday.

"The argument is really over accuracy of Dr. Kershner's statements and not his opinions," said Christine Davis Mantai, a spokeswoman for the university.

The president agrees Kershner's teaching is excellent, she said.

Kershner, who has been at Fredonia for nine years and has tenure, has published a book and at least 11 articles. He has been recognized by the college for his work and was awarded the SUNY Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Teaching in 2002.

Ultimately, though, Kershner's service to the campus and community is inadequate for promotion, Davis Mantai said.

Kershner came back with a compromise. For one year, he would submit any writings to a two-member committee for approval before being published. Hefner countered with stronger terms for an indefinite period.

Kershner rejected the proposal and sought help from the Foundation for Individuals Rights in Education, which wrote Hefner seeking an explanation.

"Fredonia's bungling attempt to suppress a professor's criticism of university policies is both reprehensible and embarrassing," said Greg Lukianoff, president of the nonprofit organization.

Kershner said he still wants the promotion.

And he can try again next year, when he builds upon his community service, Davis Mantai said.

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