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Colorado College Satire Causes A Stir

By: Joe Murray , The Bulletin

A Colorado college has found two students guilty of violating the conduct code against violence after the students distributed a satirical flyer poking fun at the college's Feminist and Gender Studies program. Chris Robinson and a second student who wished to remain nameless now must hold a campus forum to discuss the very issues that landed them in hot water.

The controversy began when Colorado College's "Feminist and Gender Studies Interns" distributed their newsletter entitled The Monthly Rag. The newsletter contained information pertaining to the women's studies program and also highlighted information on a lecture to be delivered by a "world-famous prostitute and porn star," information about gender identity issues and a comment concerning "male castration."

In response to the newsletter, the two students, under the pseudonym of "The Coalition of Some Dudes," created and distributed "The Monthly Bag," a satirical response to The Monthly Rag. In the parody, the two students included a comment about "female violence and abuse" from a battered men's Web site, as well as a statement of "chainsaw etiquette" and a "Tough Guy Wisdom" quote by Theodore Roosevelt.

Officials at Colorado College wasted no time responding to complaints about the flyer, as Richard F. Celeste, the school's president, issued a strongly worded e-mail stating, "The flyers include threatening and demeaning content, which is categorically unacceptable in this community."

Mr. Celeste also urged those behind the satirical newsletter to come forward. Both Mr. Robinson and the other student did so an hour after the request and were rewarded with a charge, and later a conviction, of violating the college's values of respect and integrity. Now the two have to hold a forum to discuss the issues they raised.

In informing the two of the college's decision, Mike Edmonds, vice president for Student Life, acknowledged the intent was to parody and not to threaten, but concluded, "in the climate in which we find ourselves today, violence - or implied violence - of any kind cannot be tolerated on a college campus." Mr. Edmonds also explained "the juxtaposition of weaponry and sexuality" by anonymous male students made students feel threatened by such weaponry.

The decision has raised a number of red flags at the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), a Philadelphia civil rights organization dedicated to preserving free speech on college campuses.

"Not only has Colorado College wrongly punished students for expression that any reasonable person would easily recognize as parody that threatens no one, but according to Edmonds's standard, countless movies, songs, and other artistic endeavors that 'juxtapose weaponry and sexuality' are inappropriate for the adult students of Colorado College," Adam Kissel, director of FIRE's Individual Rights Defense Program, said. Mr. Kissel also argued the decision is a betrayal of the college's promise of free expression it made with the students.

Colorado College's Diversity & Anti-Discrimination Policy reads, "On a campus that is free and open, no idea can be banned or forbidden. No viewpoint or message may be deemed so hateful that it may not be expressed." Instead of upholding such a standard, FIRE contends the school enacted a double standard.

"One flyer that mentions 'male castration' is not violence, but a flyer that makes fun of it by mentioning 'chainsaws' is prohibited? Both should be protected, but the double standard and lack of respect for freedom of speech in this case is simply staggering," FIRE President Greg Lukianoff said. "Colorado College is brazenly violating its own promise of freedom of expression, as well as both fairness and common sense."

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