



Group faults colleges over speech issues

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CLAREMONT - An organization dedicated to defending individual rights at colleges has sent a letter to the Claremont Colleges objecting to administrative responses to student speech deemed offensive.

In its March 18 letter, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education said it was concerned about the "chilling effect on free speech caused by several announcements ... in response to student expression."

The letter outlined three messages sent by college administrators in response to recent incidents.

In February, a dean at Scripps College called for a boycott of a student party at Claremont McKenna College after objecting to fliers for the event she believed were racist and sexist.

Also that month, a student at Harvey Mudd College wrote "Hillary is a foxy lesbian" on a white message board. The message, an apparent reference to presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, was erased after it was discovered by administrators.

"It seems that the student residents wrote this message as part of a joke, without thinking of the impact it might have on others," wrote Dean of Students Jeanne Noda, adding, "Campus Safety has been notified."

In March, another dean at Scripps College called for students to provide information about the "perpetrator" after what were termed a "cultural epithet and offensive drawing" were discovered on another white message board.

In its letter, the foundation says "these incidents show a concerted effort on the part of the Claremont College administrators to pressure students to censor their expression."

The letter, addressed to Robert A. Walton, CEO of the Claremont University Consortium, was also sent to presidents of the five undergraduate colleges and other administrators.

The organization publicly released the letter after the colleges failed to respond by the the letter's April 8 deadline, said Adam Kissel, director of the foundation's Individual Rights Defense Program.

"FIRE has threatened with litigation," said Claremont University Consortium spokeswoman Barbara Jefferson. "We have no comment."

Several messages left for college administrators were not immediately returned Thursday.

Kissel said he was unsure what the foundation would do in response to the colleges' failure

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to respond to its letter.

He said the foundation does not litigate, but "we do have a legal network. ... We have a good list of attorneys who are ready and waiting to help with cases like this one."

Kissel said the foundation would like to see the colleges send "a mass e-mail that reminds students that free expression is a hallmark of a liberal education and that the Claremont Colleges respect that entirely."

Free-speech protection is guaranteed at California colleges - both public and private - by the state's Leonard Law, Kissel said.

The Philadelphia-based Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, founded in 1998, monitors speech and other individual-rights issues on U.S. college campuses.

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