

The Faculty's Fight Against Freedom

In the continuing saga at Orange Coast College, Professor Ken Hearlson finds himself attacked by a group of teachers who think there is too much academic freedom.

by Jonathan V. Last

12/21/2001 12:01:00 AM

AT A TIME when college professors all across America are going hoarse complaining about diminished academic freedom and "chilling effects," a small group of teachers at Orange Coast College in southern California is applauding the crackdown on free speech.



Jonathan V. Last, online editor

[You may remember](#) that after a September 18 class, four Muslim students claimed that their professor, Kenneth W. Hearlson, called them "terrorists," "Nazis," and "murderers." School administrators suspended Hearlson without due--or any other kind of--process. [Last week](#), an independent investigation concluded that nothing the Muslim students alleged had actually taken place. The college reinstated Hearlson, but put a letter of reprimand in his personnel file and refused to either publicly acknowledge his innocence or punish the students who lied about him.

This week, a group of Hearlson's colleagues circulated a petition condemning the exonerated political science professor. Signed by 24 instructors from departments ranging from English to Interior Design, the petition portrays Orange Coast College as a bastion of academic freedom, saying, "We do not believe the decision for Ken Hearlson to leave the classroom for the semester created what our union president called a 'chilling effect' on instruction. . . . Academic freedom is alive and well under our current administration."

The petitioners go on to convict Hearlson where the school-sanctioned investigation could not, saying, "We believe there is a strong possibility that Ken Hearlson exercised poor judgement in class, going beyond 'shock teaching' to create a hostile environment in class." Finally, they impugn Hearlson's defense of himself: "We regard Ken Hearlson's recent disparaging remarks to be an attempt to smear Orange Coast College's reputation for his own personal benefit."

P. Kevin Parker, an assistant professor of English and one of the signers of the petition, concedes that Hearlson is technically innocent of the charges. "The four students who raised complaints were factually wrong in their accusations," he says. "However, they were inferentially correct."

Parker cites Hearlson's defense of Israel and suspicion of Arab nations as proof that he had a personal agenda during the September 18 class. "No, Professor Hearlson never directly called the students terrorists, Nazis, or murderers. But wasn't he doing it by inference?" Parker asks. He adds: "By the way--I just need to make this point: We don't read about Jewish suicide bombers blowing themselves up in malls because Israel has missiles, Cobras, and rifles. David has to use a sling and a stone while Goliath has the physical advantage."

Thor Halvorssen, executive director of the [Foundation for Individual Rights in Education](#), a group which has aided Hearlson's defense, finds the petition laughable. "The petition is welcome," he says. "Let faculty and students who oppose [Hearlson] air their views. Let them call for his dismissal. Let the signers reveal who are the enemies, beyond the manifest careerists in the administration, of academic freedom and freedom of speech." He adds, "What I'd like to know, is where is the American Association of University Professors in this?"

Where indeed. Ruth Flower, the director of public policy and communications at the American Association of University Professors, says while the group doesn't have a position on the Hearlson affair, they are troubled by it. "The petition you've seen," she says, ". . . is no substitute for a responsible, dispassionate inquiry into the facts." "[Hearlson] is told, on the one hand, that there is no evidence to substantiate the claims of the students, and on the other hand that he is (apparently) to be reprimanded. The process appears to be severely flawed."

For his part, Hearlson is sanguine about being attacked by his peers. "I just consider the source," he says jovially. "348 of my 370 students signed petitions of support, trying to get me back in the classroom," he adds. "The students that supported me have been fantastic."

It's interesting to note that Orange Coast College sent out a press alert calling notice to the faculty petition against Hearlson. The student petitions supporting him received no such attention from the school.

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