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NEWS

Jesuit university faces fresh heat

by Tom Schalmo

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The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education is petitioning Marquette University to reconsider allowing a graduate student to post a quote by humorist Dave Barry on the student's office door.

The quote, which was removed two months ago by MU Philosophy Department Chair James South, is "pretty tame," according to FIRE President Greg Lukianoff.

"Marquette has very strong and clear promises of free speech," Lukianoff said. "But they wouldn't even tolerate a quote by light-hearted humorist Dave Barry."

The quote that appeared on the door, according to FIRE, read: "As Americans, we must always remember that we all have a common enemy, an enemy that is dangerous, powerful, and relentless. I refer, of course, to the federal government."

MU, located in Milwaukee, is contradicting its commitment to free speech with this action, Lukianoff said.

"They cannot make false representations of free speech," he added. "They cannot say this and turn around and censor a Dave Barry cartoon."

The university said the quote was "patently offensive," which, according to Lukianoff, is the same term used to describe "hard-core pornography."

South, though, said in an e-mail to Stuart Distler, the graduate student involved, that the office doors and hallways in campus buildings are not "free-speech zones."

Brigid O'Brien Miller, spokesperson for MU, said that South was prompted to remove the quote following negative response to it.

"Dr. South ... had received several complaints, so he made the decision to take it down," O'Brien Miller said.

Despite FIRE's claims, O'Brien Miller said MU attests this is not an issue of academic freedom on the campus.

"[South] was responding to complaints to what some felt was offensive material," said O'Brien Miller. "Certainly Marquette values academic freedom."

According to O'Brien Miller, MU President Robert Wild sent a responding letter to FIRE Oct. 16, saying that allowing the quote back up with Barry's name on it is not out of the question.

"There's no policy that would prevent something that would go back up if it were attributed," O'Brien Miller said. "That's up to the department."

O'Brien Miller said Wild's letter was sent before FIRE issued a press release. However, Lukainoff said Thursday that the organization had not received the letter, three days after O'Brien Miller said it was sent.

"They have our fax number; we should have received it by now," Lukainoff said. "I haven't seen this response they supposedly sent to us. I'd love to see how they call Dave Barry offensive."

Barry has written 25 books, and his humor columns have appeared in more than 500 newspapers around the nation. His humor was the basis for the CBS sitcom "Dave's World."

FIRE, a nonpartisan organization, became known in Wisconsin last year for backing UW-Eau Claire resident assistant Lance Steiger, who was banned from holding Bible studies in his dorm room. The Board of Regents later revised a policy, allowing the resident assistants to hold the studies.

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