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Race to Vilify Math Professor Wrong Response Says FIRE

2006-09-19 -- WDC Media News --

(AgapePress) - A veteran professor at a community college in Seattle is protesting the school's decision to suspend him over what it calls a "racist" math exam question.

The math test question written by Bellevue Community College (BCC) professor Peter Ratener in 2004 involved a person named "Condoleezza" tossing a watermelon from the top of a building. Last spring a student complained that the question was racially offensive. In response, the college's Board of Trustees called Ratener's conduct a "gross violation of BCC's mission and core values of respect for diversity."

Ratener than apologized for the question and explained his intent was not to use a negative racial stereotype, yet the school decided to suspend him one week without pay. The math instructor has now enlisted the help of the [Foundation for Individual Rights in Education](#) (FIRE). That group's president, Greg Lukianoff, says suspending the professor is not only unwise, but it violates the law.

"When someone in a position of power, particularly at a public college that's bound by the First Amendment, decides that even though [the instructor has] apologized, even though every party in the case agrees that it was an unintentional error, there is no need to suspend a professor," Lukianoff explains. Yet suspend him they did -- "and in doing so," says Lukianoff, "frankly, they're violating their commitment to the First Amendment."

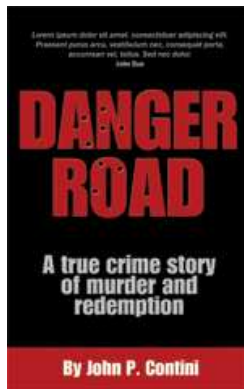
The FIRE spokesman explains that Ratener's question originally featured the comedian "Gallagher," who is renowned for smashing watermelons as part of his comedy routine.

"[Professor Ratener] decided just at the last minute that he would use the name 'Condoleezza' instead, because he didn't think anybody would actually remember the comedian Gallagher," Lukianoff notes, commenting that he finds that explanation "relatively reasonable, considering most people who weren't around in the 80s don't know who he was."

And now, after discussing the matter with their client, FIRE representatives feel the issue is a non-issue. "[W]e've asked him and we've looked into it, and we do believe sincerely that he was not trying to play into a racial stereotype," says the FIRE president. "It was one question on an exam, and he used the first name that occurred to him."

Lukianoff says "while Bellevue Community College and others are free to criticize Ratener for his choice of words, the answer to speech one dislikes is more speech -- not official punishment." Following the math question controversy, BCC brought in a sensitivity trainer for the school's entire faculty and staff.

Ratener has filed a formal grievance through his union and is awaiting arbitration, which is scheduled for January 2007.



Jim Brown, a regular contributor to *AgapePress*, is a reporter for [American Family Radio News](#), which can be heard online.

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60 Sec Audio Teaser

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