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Sunday, February 23, 2003

## Free speech - as long as it's politically correct

map

[Ratemyprofessors.com](http://Ratemyprofessors.com) is a place where students can say what they think about boring, incompetent or obnoxious college professors, without fear of retaliation. Here's a sample:

"Not only is the book a better teacher, it also has a better personality."

"BORING! But I learned there are 137 tiles on the ceiling."

"Bring a pillow."

"Your pillow will need a pillow."

"She hates you already."

Funny. But what if it's no joke? What if a student columnist writes something that ticks off the faculty - and he gets fired?

That's what happened to Aaron Sanders at Miami University. He wrote a column accusing the French department chairman and a faculty member of pushing obscenity in classes. He said some students in a French class were offended by the movie *Ridicule*, which showed a close-up of one man urinating on another. He asked why professors are not held accountable.

Instead, he was the one fired when the French department chairman complained to the *Miami Student* faculty adviser, and the adviser urged the student editor to dump Sanders.

Something similar happened at the Harvard Business School recently, when faculty members cited a student editor for violating their "community standards" speech code with an editorial cartoon.

The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education defended the student, and the dean of the Harvard Business School publicly apologized.

Now FIRE, a nonprofit, nonpartisan group based in Philadelphia, is "absolutely" eager to defend Sanders, according to CEO Thor Halvorssen. "This is an astonishing case," he said. "It shows utter

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contempt for freedom of speech."

The Miami Student Senate introduced a resolution this week supporting Sanders and condemning censorship.

The campus paper now has no conservative columnists, Sanders said, although it has liberals who regularly bash President Bush.

Faculty adviser Cheryl Heckler and Jill Inkrott, the student editor who fired Sanders, insist he was not fired for his views, but the way he expresses them.

And that's good enough for the Miami administration. When I asked for a comment from President James Garland, I was referred to spokesman Richard Little, who defended the firing by repeating what Heckler said.

Little said the administration would not get involved because the student newspaper is independent.

I can't see how that keeps the administration from expressing concern about free expression on campus, or faculty members who intimidate students. But Little said the editor has a right to fire Sanders, "even if she had a disagreement with the columnist" over his views.

I'm in favor of independent student papers. But that sounds like free speech for liberals only. Imagine the faculty outrage if Sanders had been fired for opposing the war against Iraq.

Michael P. McNamara, MU Class of '98, and Brad Beckett, Class of '94, said it sounds familiar. Beckett said he started the *Miami Review* in 1992 because of "school censorship and control, and the fact that we were tired of the overboard liberal bias of the school-controlled paper."

McNamara said the *Miami Student* would not publish his conservative columns, so he wrote for the *Review*.

"The faculty claims to promote tolerance and diversity, but they are quick to shut down those who have divergent viewpoints from the politically correct and liberally acceptable rhetoric and propaganda being taught," he said.

Halvorssen says FIRE defends all ideologies, but most free-speech abuses are predictable. "You don't get punished for annoying Christians, Republicans or white males," he said. "It's a double standard."

"There is a ferocious assault on freedom of speech on college campuses," he said. "It should be a national scandal."

It's already simmering on the Miami campus. And it sounds like FIRE is about to turn up the heat.

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