



Foundation for Individual Rights in Education

601 Walnut Street, Suite 510 • Philadelphia, PA 19106
T 215-717-3473 • F 215-717-3440 • fire@thefire.org • www.thefire.org

Greg Lukianoff
INTERIM PRESIDENT

Rob Pfaltzgraff
VICE PRESIDENT OF
DEVELOPMENT,
MANAGEMENT, AND
MARKETING

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Alan Charles Kors
CHAIRMAN

Harvey A. Silverglate
VICE CHAIRMAN

William J. Hume
Joseph M. Maline
Michael Meyers
Marlene Mieske
Daphne Patai
Virginia Postrel
Ed Snider
James E. Wiggins

BOARD OF ADVISORS

Lloyd Buchanan
T. Kenneth Cribb, Jr.
Candace de Russy
William A. Dunn
Benjamin F. Hammond
Nat Hentoff
Roy Innis
Wendy Kaminer
Woody Kaplan
Leonard Liggio
Herbert London
Peter L. Malkin
Milton Rosenberg
John R. Searle
Ricky Silberman
Christina Hoff Sommers

February 16, 2006

President Lawrence Litecky
President's Office
E 2503
Century College
3300 Century Avenue North
White Bear Lake, MN 55110

Sent via U.S. Mail and Facsimile (651-779-3470)

URGENT

Dear President Litecky:

As you can see from our Directors and Board of Advisors, FIRE unites leaders in the fields of civil rights and civil liberties, scholars, journalists, and public intellectuals across the political and ideological spectrum on behalf of liberty, legal equality, freedom of religion, due process and freedom of speech on America's college campuses. Our web page, thefire.org, will give you a greater sense of our identity and activities.

FIRE is profoundly concerned by the threat to free speech posed by Century College's recent censorship of Professor Karen Murdock's display of political cartoons on a public bulletin board. While the situation surrounding the now-infamous Danish cartoons depicting the prophet Mohammed has indeed become an international controversy, FIRE would like to remind you that as a public institution of higher learning, Century College is obliged by the United States Constitution to uphold Professor Murdock's right to display newsworthy and even controversial materials.

This is our understanding of the facts. Please inform us if you believe we are in error. On Tuesday, February 7, 2006, adjunct professor of geography and earth science Karen Murdock displayed twelve cartoons depicting the prophet Mohammed on a bulletin board in the hallway of the social sciences department. Murdock and other professors regularly post educational materials, notices about current affairs, and various other items of general interest on that board. Under a disclaimer that warned viewers that the board contained potentially offensive materials, Murdock posted the twelve cartoons, alongside newspaper articles detailing the international fracas that has resulted from their publication. As she

had done in prior cases when posting controversial items, Murdock also posted blank sheets of paper so that passers-by could leave comments about the display.

By late afternoon, the cartoons had been removed, and Murdock responded by printing new copies and posting them again. The following day, students reportedly met with Vice President of Student Services Mike Bruner to express that they were offended by the cartoons. On the morning of Thursday, February 9, the cartoons were twice anonymously removed from the bulletin board, and both times Murdock responded by re-posting them. Late on Thursday, the cartoons were removed by the chair of the geography department, David Lyons, who brought them to Murdock's office and suggested that she talk to an administrator before posting them again. Murdock was then visited in her office by Vice President Bruner, who reportedly claimed that the cartoons were "hurtful" and "disrespectful," and suggested that the school would find another means to address these issues. Professor Murdock was informed that she would have to meet with Vice President Bruner on Monday, February 20, presumably to discuss the controversy surrounding her posting of the cartoons.

As you know, Century College is a public institution and therefore has an overarching legal obligation, in addition to its moral obligation, to ensure the First Amendment rights of its students, faculty, and staff. It has come to FIRE's attention that Murdock, as well as other Century professors, have repeatedly posted articles about politics, current events, and world affairs on the bulletin board in question without administrative interference. The cartoons at the center of an international controversy certainly should be no different.

Century administrators have justified the decision to censor the display of cartoons by saying that the cartoons were perceived as offensive. In a comment to the Minneapolis *Star-Tribune*, Vice President Bruner said that "[w]hen students come to me who are hurt, it signals to me we're off course somewhere." But Century administrators should be reminded that a cry of "offense" should not suffice to suppress professors' speech, as any speech can be perceived as offensive by some person. The college's responsibility to free speech and open inquiry far outweighs any responsibility the college has to avoid offense.

In this current climate of conflict between free speech and "offensive" materials, it is crucially important—now more than ever—that we affirm the rights guaranteed in the Constitution and not abandon them in order to suppress views that some may find objectionable. The time is ripe for Century College to claim its position as a marketplace of ideas, where thoughts are shared, opinions are tested, and the truth is sought.

FIRE has been made aware that a meeting between Professor Murdock and Vice President Bruner is scheduled for Monday, February 20. If this meeting is intended to focus primarily upon the display of cartoons, then FIRE hopes that the result is a robust affirmation of students' and professors' rights to speak freely. This meeting cannot and must not result in disciplinary action against Karen Murdock. FIRE hopes that this situation can be resolved thoroughly and swiftly; however, we are categorically committed to using all of our resources to support Karen Murdock's expressive rights and to seeing this process through to a just and moral conclusion.

Because of the pressing nature of this matter, FIRE requests a response by the close of business on February 20, 2006.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Robert L. Shibley". The signature is written in a cursive style with a blue background behind the text.

Robert L. Shibley
Program Manager

cc:

John O'Brien, Vice President of Academic Affairs, Century College
Mike Bruner, Vice President of Student Services, Century College
David Lyons, Chair, Geography Department, Century College
Karen Murdock