

January 28, 2005

President John Nazarian
Rhode Island College
600 Mt. Pleasant Avenue
Providence, Rhode Island 02908

Sent By U.S. Mail and Facsimile (401-456-8287)

Dear President Nazarian,

It is with disappointment that the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) writes you for the third time in a year concerning issues of free expression at Rhode Island College. After our last letter to you, RIC abandoned its plans to punish Professor Lisa Church for refusing to censor protected speech and eventually appointed a commission to investigate free speech issues at the college. FIRE awaits the final findings of the commission, and hopes that RIC will bring its policies in line with the U.S. Constitution and the principles of academic freedom. However, in the meantime, a recent incident at RIC once again raises profound doubts about its respect for academic freedom and freedom of speech.

According to a variety of credible sources, RIC's School of Social Work has engaged in a campaign of repression against one of its outspoken students, Bill Felkner. An RIC faculty member has 1) suggested that Mr. Felkner's personal political beliefs may make him unsuitable for the social work profession; 2) required him to lobby the state legislature for positions that he does not believe; and 3) retaliated against his protests of these unconscionable and unconstitutional actions by giving him failing grades.

The following is our understanding of the facts. Please inform us if you believe we are in error. On October 14, 2004, Masters of Social Work student Bill Felkner e-mailed Professor James Ryczek, who taught Felkner's "Policy and Organizing" class. Felkner objected to the decision of some School of Social Work professors to show the Michael Moore film *Fahrenheit 9/11* in their classes, and expressed concern that the school was not providing a balanced political view of the upcoming elections.

RIC's School of Social Work Enforces an Unconstitutional Ideological Orthodoxy

This pattern of facts demonstrates an obvious and disturbi

grievances means little if state employees are allowed to compel those under their authority to advocate whatever position that employee deems “correct.”

Professor Ryczek refers to NASW actions and guidelines to justify his opinion that only the politically liberal can be social workers. Yet he has confused the NASW’s political efforts to defeat President Bush with a mandate from that body for professors to ensure the ideological conformity of their students. Even if the NASW had such an agenda, Professor Ryczek would be forbidden from enforcing it because of his status as an employee of a state government agency.

RIC Appears to Have Engaged in Unconstitutional Retaliation

Professor Ryczek’s actions strongly suggest that he has discriminated against Bill Felkner on the basis of his political beliefs. The fact that Mr. Felkner has received a failing grade for refusing to parrot Ryczek’s political philosophy and after he publicly exposed Ryczek’s biases creates a presumption of retaliation. For a professor to retaliate against a student in this manner is unacceptable and potentially exposes RIC to significant liability.

This apparent retaliation against a student who does not agree with those in power at RIC has

FIRE requests that RIC's School of Social Work immediately cease its unconstitutional viewpoint discrimination and make it clear to professors that retaliation against students for exercising their rights is unacceptable and unethical behavior. We also request that RIC never again attempt to compel students to petition the government and advocate positions that are contrary to their consciences on any topic. FIRE is, again, committed to using all of its legal and media resources to come to a satisfactory outcome in this case. Because of the ongoing and severe nature of the injury to Bill Felkner's rights, we request a response by **February 10, 2005**.

Sincerely,



David French
President

cc:

Dan King, Vice President for Academic Affairs, Rhode Island College
Gary Penfield, Vice President for Student Affairs, Rhode Island College
George D. Metrey, Dean, School of Social Work, Rhode Island College
Jim Ryczek, Professor, School of Social Work, Rhode Island College
Nicholas T. Long, General Counsel, Rhode Island College
Bill Felkner