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## Taking a policy too far

E-mail Print

Friday, July 22, 2005

### EDITORIAL BY THE RECORD

WILLIAM Paterson University went too far when it formally reprimanded a Muslim employee for writing in an e-mail to a professor that homosexual relationships are "perversions."

The university acted on an overzealous interpretation of the state's anti-discrimination policy.

In so doing, it unfortunately provided grist to the national Christian right in its complaint that so-called liberal academe squashes free speech among students and employees.

The decision to discipline the employee also forestalled other more creative and constructive solutions that must be sought for the inevitable dust-ups in our culturally diverse society.

The problem began when a women's studies professor sent a campus-wide e-mail announcing an event that included the screening of a film about a lesbian relationship.

A 68-year-old Muslim man who repairs computers for the university and is a part-time graduate student e-mailed a response to the professor not to send him announcements about such films because "these are perversions." He also lamented "the absence of God in higher education."

The professor forwarded the e-mail to university officials, who investigated and officially reprimanded the man last month.

The professor claims she felt threatened by the employee's response and that his use of the word "perversions" was discriminatory.

The employee on the other hand says he was exercising his free speech rights, an argument pushed by the national conservative group that's representing him and that has represented many Christian students claiming discrimination at campuses around the country.

The fact is, though, that this case is not so much about speech on campus, as it is about speech in the workplace. And employers can set limits on what workers say on the job.

It's also clear that the man didn't threaten the professor, even if she did somehow interpret his words that way.

So, the core question is whether his comment was discriminatory toward gays.



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The state's anti-discrimination policy, which William Paterson follows, forbids using "derogatory or demeaning slurs to refer to a person's race, gender, age, religion, disability, affectional or sexual orientation, which have the effect of harassing an employee or creating a hostile work environment."

The intention of such workplace policies is noble - to protect employees of any particular group from feeling harassed.

But employers must be careful when enforcing such rules not to go overboard. One e-mail doesn't constitute harassment, particularly when, as in this case, the employee didn't directly call anyone a name.

University officials should have instead used the incident as an opportunity for dialogue and education.

They should have called in the employee to explain how his comments were offensive, and unnecessary. They should have informed the professor of what they were doing. They could have even held a forum on gay rights and invited Muslim employees and students to attend.

After all, William Paterson is not just a workplace. It's also a place for learning.

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