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Controversy prompts national attention

By *C.M. Gatson*

A speech instructor at Citrus College broke her silence yesterday when she issued a statement regarding the recent speech controversy at Citrus College.

Rosalyn Kahn, a part time speech instructor, was placed on administrative leave March 7 for allegedly offering extra credit to students who wrote letters to President George W. Bush in protest to a war with Iraq.

"A terrible wrong has been done to me and to the teaching profession," Kahn said in her statement. Kahn says that the actions taken against her thus far have been taken "without conducting a thorough investigation and without affording me the protections of due process"

Some Speech 106 students said part-time instructor Rosalyn Kahn offered extra credit if they wrote letters in protest of a possible war, and, according to students, made it clear that letters expressing other opinions would not receive extra credit.

Kahn denied these allegations.

"Students were allowed to communicate any view," Kahn said. "At no point were students directed to adopt any particular position."

Kahn offered a similar assignment in which students could write letters to California State Senator Jack Scott (D-Altadena) about the state budget crisis.

"I did the assignment according to what she wanted, which was to write against the war, so I wrote against the war. Then I turned it in to her and I said, 'this is not my personal beliefs but I'm simply following instructions,'" student Christopher Stevens said.

When Stevens turned in the assignment he said that Kahn said she was going to mail the letters to Bush. Stevens said he took his letter back and sacrificed the extra credit.

"I would not, and did not require students to send letters contrary to their beliefs to public officials," Kahn said.

Sam Lee, associate dean of language arts and foreign languages, said he sent Kahn a detailed email Feb. 28 clarifying the Citrus College District's position that no political activism or political favoritism be allowed in the classroom. Students and instructors should feel secure to express their views in an "atmosphere of mutual tolerance and respect," Lee said.

In Kahn's reply to the email Lee said she wrote, "There were circumstances that were not portrayed correctly by the students."

Lee said he spoke with Kahn on March 3.

"The more I spoke with her...the more it seemed that some of the complaints indeed were true. Although her story changed," Lee said.

Kahn said that each of the allegations are untrue.

Kahn said she was met at the door of her classroom March 6 by a college dean and informed that she would not be teaching on that day.

Lee met with Kahn's class March 6. He asked students to respond to a list of 12 detailed questions regarding allegations about the extra credit assignments and other issues. A discussion between Lee and

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the students followed.

"At the end of the class it became apparent that in these two specific occasions there was an abuse that took place based on what the students were telling me," Lee said. He apologized to the students on behalf of the college.

He also told students that any extra credit earned from the initial assignments would be expunged and they would be allowed to resubmit letters for which they would receive extra credit regardless of their political views.

Lee said a list of current grades would be given to the students, and if that students could come to him if they had a dispute. Finally, Lee informed students that Kahn would be sanctioned appropriately.

Lee will be primarily responsible for further inquiries regarding the alleged abuse of power.

As part of the actions Citrus is taking in response to the issue the Citrus College President/ Superintendent, Dr. Louis E. Zellers sent a letter of apology to Bush asking that the students' letters be retracted, as they were collected inappropriately.

"We don't want to suppress anyone's right to free speech and expression," Zellers said. "I regret that students were put through this."

Thor L. Halvorssen, Executive Director of Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) wrote a letter to Zellers March 4 about the allegations of instructor misconduct. FIRE is a non-profit organization devoted to academic freedom, freedom of speech, equality and conscience on college campuses.

Zellers responded to Halvorssen March 7 with a letter stating, "We believe the instructor did abuse her authority..." Zellers also outlined the actions being taken by the college and thanked FIRE for working to "safeguard our liberties."

Kahn said, "The president's letter adopted as fact the allegations made against me and summarily concluded that my alleged actions were violative of college policies and regulations.

"All of the college's actions were taken and the conclusions reached without obtaining or requesting comment from me."

When asked about allegations that school officials initially turned students away and prevented students from filing a grievance, Lee said, "I want to thank Chris for his courage, but there was also a mischaracterization that we have been dragging our feet somehow. I've never acted so quickly on anything here yet."

"We never tell people they can't file a grievance," said Dr. Jeanne Hamilton Vice President of Student Services. She said that the complainants in question could "still file a grievance."

Zellers agreed with Lee and said that the situation was handled in a timely manner.

"The college administration responded swiftly and boldly..." said Halvorssen.

Jean Culp, co-president of the part-time instructors' union, Adjunct Faculty United, said that there was "a rush to condemn."

Kahn's concluded her statement by saying, "It was disappointing that unfair accusations against me were made.

"It was also disappointing and disconcerting that third parties, such as FIRE, accepted the accusations lodged against me as truths without further investigation into the truth of the matter or inquiry into the context which the assignments were given.

"It was troubling that the accusations were subsequently validated with an official stamp of approval from the college administration without fair investigation and, adding insult to injury, publicly disseminated, which effectively and necessarily impacts my professional and personal reputation."

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