



FIRE is a nonprofit educational foundation devoted to free speech, individual liberty, religious freedom, the rights of conscience, legal equality, due process, and academic freedom on our nation's campuses.

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Foundation for Individual Rights in Education

THE FOUNDATION

- ▶ Home
- ▶ About FIRE
- ▶ Mission Statement
- ▶ Programs
- ▶ Issues
- ▶ Board of Directors
- ▶ Program Staff
- ▶ Board of Advisors

DEFENDING LIBERTY

- ▶ Cases
- ▶ Submit a Case
- ▶ In the News
- ▶ In the Mailbox
- ▶ Events
- ▶ Newsletter

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- ▶ Contact Us
- ▶ Support FIRE
- ▶ Legal Network
- ▶ Internships
- ▶ Subscribe
- ▶ Jobs at FIRE

FIRE on MSNBC REPORTS with Joe Scarborough

Transcript, originally aired March 11, 2003

JOE SCARBOROUGH: Coming up, liberal professors on college campuses strike again. A writing assignment turned into a forced anti-war protest. That's next.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

SCARBOROUGH: Imagine your professor offer you extra credit in class for writing a letter in support of a political position. Sounds good, right? After all, we can all use a little extra credit now and then.

Now, you'd imagine that if you only got credit if you agreed with the professor's point of view you must be upset, because that's sounds unfair. Well, that's exactly what happened at Citrus College in California.

A part-time speech professor gave students an extra credit assignment to write President Bush a letter protesting the possible war with Iraq. Students were told that they would only receive credit if it was a protest letter. No supporters of the war need apply.

Now several students refused to turn in the assignment, and they were penalized for their political views.

With me tonight from Philadelphia to discuss what happened, and the fallout from this, is Thor Halvorssen, the CEO for the Foundation of Individual Rights in Education. And from Burbank, Dr. Louis Zellers, superintendent and president of Citrus College. Thank you, gentlemen, for both -- both of you for being with us

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tonight.

Thor, I've got to say, this sounds like sheer lunacy. How did your group first hear about it?

THOR HALVORSSSEN, FOUNDATION FOR INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS IN EDUCATION: Well, we get a number of cases that come to us through our Web site. And in this case a student from Citrus College notified us about what was going on and we immediately began investigating and verifying the facts in this case.

SCARBOROUGH: And what did you find out?

HALVORSSSEN: Well, we found out it was actually worse than what you described. Because not only did this professor compel students, under the penalty of getting a bad grade, of holding positions that they did not agree with, but in fact in order to get the grade, you needed to send these protest letters to the president.

SCARBOROUGH: And what happened if you did?

HALVORSSSEN: If you did, you in fact did get credit for the assignment. If you did not, you did not get credit. And of course, students want to always get as much credit as they can.

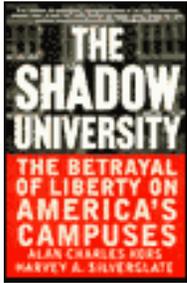
And in this case it was a flagrant violation of the First Amendment and of the freedom of conscience of these students.

SCARBOROUGH: Dr. Zellers, do you agree with that assessment, that this was an infringement of their First Amendment rights?

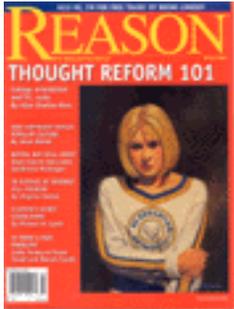
LOUIS E. ZELLERS, PRESIDENT, CITRUS COLLEGE: That was essentially the way it was reported to me.

SCARBOROUGH: Well, the Chronicle of Higher Education reported that students who tried to report this behavior initially were rebuffed. When did your administration realize that there was a real problem here with this anti-war professor?

ZELLERS: Well, the -- the schedule of events occurred a little over a week ago. It was brought to the attention of our dean of language



Read excerpts from *The Shadow University* by Alan Charles Kors & Harvey A. Silverglate.



Read *Thought Reform 101* by Alan Charles Kors.



Read *Memo to Free Speech Advocates University of Wisconsin-Madison* by Harvey A. Silverglate.

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arts that this had occurred. And he looked into it.

And there's a great deal of skepticism when students come forth like this, so I -- perhaps a half a dozen or so come per year and we look into the situation and find out that there was disgruntlement but no real basis for any action on the part of the administration.

A week ago tonight, a student came to me, it was after a board of trustees meeting...

SCARBOROUGH: Right.

ZELLERS: ... and reported -- and reported to me that this had occurred. I promised him that I would look into it and we did in a punctual fashion. And we took appropriate action.

SCARBOROUGH: Well, Dr. Zellers, your administration's taken a number of steps now, I understand, to rectify the situation. You placed the professor on paid administrative leave. You wrote an apology letter directly to President Bush, in addition to apologizing to the students and giving them a chance to complete another assignment.

A lot of Americans may be asking why should this lady even receive paid leave? Shouldn't she be fired at once?

ZELLERS: That -- that would be the essence of the e-mails that I've received urging that. However, in the fairness to due process, we wish to continue the investigation. We think there may be other issues that will come forth and at that time, we will take the appropriate action.

HALVORSSSEN: Joe, I'd like to add and I'd like to second what the president has said. And I would like to say that the college, regardless of who did what when, the college has acted decisively, and they've done exactly what they should do and they respected Professor Kahn's due process rights.

But more important of all, they realized that some harm was being done, they stopped that, they restored liberty at this college campus and they sent a message to so many college presidents that are not able to act with this much -- with this much clarity and this much honesty and simply say what's happened is wrong and we're going

to solve this problem and we're going to redress the grievance.

And I think this is probably a first time that a college president has apologized so publicly. And for that, President Zellers should be commended and given an award.

SCARBOROUGH: Well, I don't know if he's going to get an award, but I do want to read some of the text of the note that the president sent to President Bush apologizing on behalf of the college and for the professor's assignment and retracting the letters.

He wrote, "It was brought to my attention that a part-time instructor at Citrus College, gave an extra credit assignment to the students in her... class, requiring them to send you protest letters... Letters of support, or otherwise, were excluded... I respectfully ask that these letters be retracted. As president of the college, I want to apologize for this unconscionable affront to freedom of speech and freedom of conscience. I regret that such a thing could happen on my watch."

Dr. Zellers, how can a speech professor not understand that this bad behavior was a violation of free speech? It's clearly and unequivocally, as you understood in that letter to President Bush.

ZELLERS: You would have to ask the teacher.

HALVORSSSEN: Well, I think it's a little worse than this, Joe. This is going on at college campuses across the country. This is not an isolated incident.

There are situations, in campus after campus, where students that are told in order to get a grade, in order to receive full credit, they need to hold certain perspectives.

It is one thing to expect students to understand and master a certain argument, say, for example, the pro-choice or the pro-life argument...

SCARBOROUGH: Right.

HALVORSSSEN: ... but it's a completely different thing to expect students and compel them to hold a certain view in order to receive

a grade.

We had a situation like this at the University of South Carolina not too long ago.

SCARBOROUGH: And you know, Thor, and I -- we're going to break soon, but I've just got to tell you, you and I both know and other people who have gone to the college in the past 20, 30 years understand that from college professors, understand their left wing bent for the most part and even traditionally conservative colleges know they have to kiss up to a liberal professor's left wing views or they're going to be punished and I think that's a disgrace.

I'm glad you took notice of it. And I'm glad the good president understood the importance of it, too.

HALVORSEN: And students who fight for it don't have to take it. These students stood up for their rights. It takes no courage to be free in a free society.

SCARBOROUGH: You're right. Thank you very much both of you for being here tonight to talk about this important issue.

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