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DePaul Dispute Has Blogs Buzzing

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By NICOLE ZIEGLER DIZON, Associated Press Writer

Sat May 14, 3:45 PM ET

CHICAGO - A longtime DePaul University instructor who argued with pro-Palestinian students at a campus activities fair last fall no longer works for the school. That much is not in dispute.

But why Thomas Klocek lost his job while other professors under fire for their statements kept theirs has created a buzz among conservative-leaning Internet blogs about free speech rights at campuses across the country.

John Ruberry, who writes the Marathon Pundit blog, started following the case after Klocek staged a news conference and appeared with his mouth taped shut.

"There seems to be kind of a double standard as far as free speech," Ruberry said, noting the case of University of Colorado's Ward Churchill, who came under fire for comparing some Sept. 11 victims to Adolf Eichmann, a Nazi architect of the Holocaust.

Ruberry contends Churchill and left-leaning professors elsewhere have kept their jobs while the conservative Klocek was fired. Other blogs picked up on Klocek's story, including one that referred to a "jihad-friendly atmosphere" at DePaul.

DePaul officials maintain that it was Klocek's "belligerent and menacing" behavior toward the pro-Palestinian students — not his views — that got him in trouble.

Klocek, who does not have tenure, could still have his job if he agreed to apologize to the students for behavior that included throwing papers and shouting, said DePaul spokeswoman Denise Mattson.

"We emphatically reject that this is at all a matter of academic freedom," Mattson said. "For DePaul, it was about his conduct, not his content."

Klocek attended a campus activity fair on Sept. 15 where Students for Justice in Palestine and United Muslims Moving Ahead were among about two dozen student groups with tables in the cafeteria of DePaul's downtown Chicago campus.

Klocek, a part-time instructor who taught critical thinking, writing and research for 14 years, says he picked up a controversial flier and argued with students, saying among other things that there is no Palestine and Palestinians do not truly exist.

After about a half-hour, other groups called faculty advisers to intervene, and Klocek left — flipping his thumb under his chin.

The pro-Palestinian students, aided by a Chicago Islamic advocacy group, complained to the

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university, and Klocek ended up giving up his teaching assignment for that quarter with pay. He has not worked at the university since.

"This case fits within a disturbing pattern we see nationally ... of punishing and disciplining professors who offend other individuals," said David French, president of the Philadelphia-based Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, a group that takes on campus free speech cases.

Klocek insists he is being punished for his opinions and is considering suing DePaul.

"This had nothing to do with religion. It had nothing to do with ethnicity. My side is that it has everything to do with free speech," Klocek said.

Klocek maintains that he was let go without a hearing and that the university's comments about his behavior have made it difficult to get other teaching work. He said does not regret his actions.

"A university is not bricks and mortar. It is great because of the intellectual reputation that they have," Klocek said. "You cannot have a university that acts like a preschool."

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On the Web:

DePaul University: <http://www.depaul.edu/>

Marathon Pundit: <http://marathonpundit.blogspot.com/>

Students for Justice in Palestine: <http://www.sjdepaul.org/>

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