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Professor Fired Over Sexual Orientation Debate

By: Joe Murray , The Bulletin

An adjunct professor at a California community college was delivered a pink slip after holding a discussion on the "nature versus nurture" debate concerning the root causes of homosexuality. San Jose/Evergreen Community College (SJCC) officials terminated June Sheldon after a single student complained the discussion held in Ms. Sheldon's Human Heredity class had been "offensive and unscientific."

"SJCC has violated its constitutional obligations and its own promises of academic freedom by summarily dismissing a professor for engaging in clearly protected classroom speech," stated Greg Lukianoff, president of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE). FIRE is a civil rights organization that fights to preserve civil liberties on college campuses.

"A professor has every right to discuss controversial material that is germane to the subject matter of the class, and firing Prof. Sheldon for doing so is an egregious violation of her rights," Mr. Lukianoff added.

Last summer, Ms. Sheldon led a brief discussion at SJCC concerning homosexuality among men and women, as well as the potential causes for such behavior. During the class, Ms. Sheldon noted the nature versus nurture debate was complex but argued, from the nurture standpoint, men seeking straight children should treat their wives in a courteous fashion. Ms. Sheldon also argued, from the nurture standpoint, lesbianism was the result of failed relationships with men.

In a complaint filed last July, a student asserted Ms. Sheldon specifically targeted the men in the classroom and told them "if they want a 'nice' and strong son, they should treat their wives very nicely (do things like 'open doors for them'). And she said, if they wanted a 'sensitive' son, they should abuse their wives." The student further added, "Even after a month of waiting to cool down, I am still horribly offended."

Soon thereafter Leandra Martin, SJCC's dean of mathematics and science, launched an investigation in which she sought the counsel of SJCC's full-time biology staff. Despite the fact that all the faculty interviewed agreed the nature versus nurture debate was complex, Ms. Martin concluded Ms. Sheldon "was teaching misinformation as science in a science course" and the statements "were grievous enough" to withdraw SJCC's offer for her to teach further courses.

Because Ms. Martin's report was not concluded until last fall, Ms. Sheldon had been offered an opportunity to teach at SJCC in the spring. That offer, however, was revoked by SJCC's vice chancellor of human relations, Anita Morris, due to the nature versus nurture incident. The board of trustees at a Feb. 12 hearing upheld the termination.

FIRE believes the termination is a direct affront to academic freedom and has called upon SJCC to reconsider its decision.

"SJCC has failed to safeguard the basic rights of a member of its faculty," stated Adam Kissel, director of FIRE's Individual Rights Defense Program. "Using the pretext that Sheldon was not teaching 'science,' SJCC has unconstitutionally declared which points of view must be taught regarding the nature versus nurture debate."

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