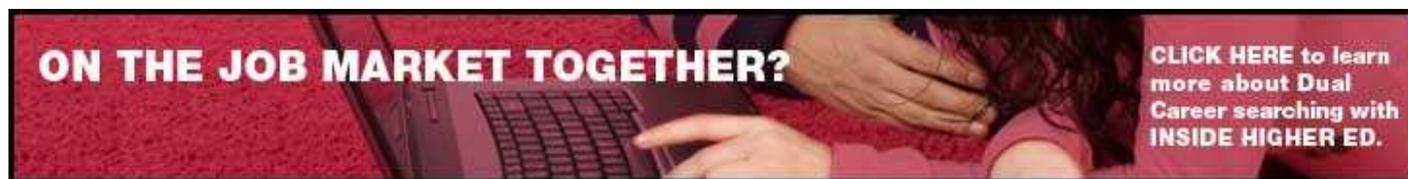


Advertisement



April 10

Pardon Me, but Your Door Is Terribly Offensive

Getting one's own office can be a rite of passage right up there with defending a dissertation or receiving tenure — and many professors' lairs are reflections of their own attitudes and beliefs. Usually, it takes just a quick glance at the door, as anyone who's taken a stroll down the hall of an academic building can attest: What a professor finds amusing, outrageous or just plain interesting is there for all to see.

At a public university, such common displays of individual preference would presumably fall under the protections of the First Amendment. But not when such displays are offensive to others, according to officials at Lake Superior State University, which threatened to reprimand a tenured professor whose door boasted cartoons and other images of a conservative political bent. In a [March 26 letter](#) to the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, which had been monitoring the case and [publicized it on Wednesday](#), an outside lawyer representing the university reiterated its argument that because the professor “acted in an unprofessional and insubordinate manner, his actions cannot be considered protected speech.”

The first complaints date back to 2005, and the professor, Richard Crandall, was ordered to remove the materials from his door in 2007 (he eventually complied). [Items included](#) a photo of Ronald Reagan, pictures mocking Hillary Clinton, a sign posting a “Notice of the Weekly Meeting of the White, Male, Heterosexual Faculty and Staff Association (WMHFSA),” and various cartoons about abortion, Islamic terrorism and other topics. One depicts two hooded women looking over a photo album. One says, “And that’s my youngest son, Hakim. He’ll be martyring in the fall.” The other replies, “They blow up so fast.”

The university argues that the postings contribute to a hostile environment and therefore do not fall under First Amendment protections, although such arguments have not fared well historically in the courts. No lawsuit has been filed, but in the past some professors whose cases have been publicized by FIRE have pursued legal action. The university did not respond to requests for comment.

FIRE and Crandall, who could not be reached for comment, point out that [other professors at the university](#) are able to post politically charged pictures and phrases on their doors without consequence, presumably because their perspective is liberal or leftist rather than conservative or right-wing. (The university appeared to argue that it wasn't the political perspective but the denigration of religious minorities that was the problem.) In photographs provided to FIRE, one Lake Superior State professor's door features an “Exxpose Exxon” slogan and an “Honor Veterans: No More War” bumper sticker, while another door bears a sign asking if the Bush administration works for “Big Oil and Gas.”

“We really think this is a case that’s amenable to public pressure because the double standard here is so

transparent,” said Robert L. Shibley, FIRE’s vice president. “The fact is that clearly other professors are allowed to express their political views on their door, which is very common ... it seems only Professor Crandall is the one who’s the problem.”

— [Andy Guess](#)

The original story and user comments can be viewed online at <http://insidehighered.com/news/2008/04/10/Issu>.

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