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George Mason's Student Newspaper BROADSIDE Online

- Main Menu**
- Front Page
 - News
 - Opinion
 - Style
 - Sports
 - Video Clips
 - Archives
 - Classifieds
 - Place an Ad
 - Staff List
 - Email Us
 - GMU Home Page
 - Masonhoops.com
 - Mason Gazette
 - Today @ Mason
 - Check GMU Email
 - Grades and Schedule

Opinion

Letter from the Editor: Policies Come Under FIRE

An article in Sunday's The Washington Post Magazine caught my eye, which typically does not happen, since I do not normally read the magazine. Education reporter Jay Mathews, as part of his regular "Class Struggle" column, wrote in Sunday's edition a piece entitled "The Perils of Campus Candor," that concerned students' free speech rights on campuses nationwide. In the column, Mathews cited material from a Philadelphia-based organization known as the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE). FIRE uses a grading system to determine how expansive - or limited - students are in exercising their First Amendment rights. Based on a traffic light principle, FIRE gives green lights to campuses that let their students speak their mind, yellow lights to campuses that may restrict free speech and red lights to campuses that suppress free speech.

George Mason University was one of four local colleges to receive a red light. FIRE's criticism stemmed from reviewing Mason's Sexual Harassment Policy and Grievance Procedures, which state that sexual harassment "may include... sexual comments and innuendo and visual displays of degrading sexual images." However, according to FIRE executive director Thor Halvorssen, the organization thoroughly reviews each policy that universities have concerning free speech. In a telephone interview conducted Wednesday, Halvorssen said that Mason was due for a green light "until [we read] the Sexual Harassment Policy." Halvorssen added that the "very existence of the code is a violation of free speech." He believes that it is because the principle of government by self-censorship that restricts student speech. A close examination of the policy shows that the two items scrutinized by FIRE are just part of a lengthy list of what Mason considers as sexual harassment.

Before this list is a definition of sexual harassment by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) and the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights (OCR). Halvorssen said that there is a definite distinction between speech and behavior and I believe his assessment is correct. Sexual harassment, by its very nature, is a subjective matter. Numerous student art projects are on display in the Fine Arts Building, as well as performances put on by the Mason theater department, that may be construed as "visual displays of degrading sexual images." It just depends on the viewer and how degrading he or she thinks the images really are. Of "sexual comments and innuendo," most of us have, from time to time, let these slip or deliberately placed them into conversation, yet even the most light-hearted of dirty jokes can result in a sexual harassment lawsuit.

There is no question that sexual harassment is a serious matter, and I am glad to see that Mason has a definitive policy on cases that occur. However, when this policy compromises the very rights that our namesake, George Mason, helped establish in our country to begin with, then I seriously question why Mason needs to go to such lengths to infringe on everyone's First Amendment rights.

Erick Soricelli Opinion Editor



Local Weather



32 F

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