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Specifics on Max P. cartoon incident still cloudy

By **Hassan S. Ali**

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Details remain unclear as to whether disciplinary action will be taken against a Hoover House resident who posted a homemade sketch of the Muslim prophet Muhammad on the door of his suite two weeks ago.

Accompanied by the caption “Mo’ Mohammed, Mo’ Problems,” the drawing prompted strong reactions from Muslim students on campus and, more recently, attracted the attention of free speech advocates.

Katie Callow-Wright, director of undergraduate student housing, said that although details on the status of the case could not be discussed, the process of addressing such complaints involves a series of discussions and careful review.

“When a resident reports an incident or concern to their resident staff or the Housing Office, the resident staff gather information by talking with students and, if necessary, other staff to understand all of the facts of the situation,” she said. “This is an informal process, and cases sometimes entail several individual meetings or conversations.”

Callow-Wright added that the appropriate Resident Heads (RHs) would hold individual meetings with the student who allegedly violated community standards.

“Depending upon the situation, a meeting with a student or students might then take place in the Office of Undergraduate Student Housing,” she said.

Callow-Wright said that the Hoover House complaint, while seemingly comparable to last month’s incident involving racist remarks written on a Hitchcock dorm room whiteboard, did not necessarily involve the same set of circumstances.

“I am aware of a great many details about each situation which lead me to consider them different,” she said.

A first-year student who wished to remain anonymous reportedly put up the drawing that also included the caption “Mo’ Mohammed, Mo’ Problems,” with regard to recent worldwide protests concerning Muhammad cartoons printed in a Danish newspaper.

CBS2 News reported on Wednesday that the offended Muslim student accepted a written apology from the cartoonist, and that the administration decided not to punish or evict the cartoonist. According to the CBS report, "The University of Chicago considers the incident closed."

A close friend of the cartoonist and Hoover House resident, who preferred to remain anonymous, said that while he was unaware of the details in the CBS report, steps were taken to better address the issue within the residential community.

"There was a mandatory Hoover House meeting on civility during which the RH [Andrea Gates] addressed 'civility' in the dorm," the student said. "They basically just said that since the dorm is so diverse, it is not acceptable to post propaganda or certain opinions [and] statements on the message boards or doors."

The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), a Philadelphia-based nonprofit organization of professors and lawyers who work to protect freedom of expression on college campuses, issued a statement Wednesday detailing incidents at colleges that have involved the controversial Muhammad cartoons. While most of the report focused on student newspapers reprinting of cartoons first published in the Danish newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten*, FIRE also included the Hoover House incident as one that it would continue to monitor.

"We're trying to find out what we can," said Charles Mitchell, Program Officer of FIRE, adding that the organization has not yet contacted the University for more details on the case. Mitchell said that the organization would need to get a complaint submitted by a student to respond, and that this has not occurred in the Hoover House case.

With numerous cases involving campus newspapers, Mitchell said that the Hoover House incident is not the first of its kind to make waves.

"We've gotten reports from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute about students who put up the 11 original cartoons and were told to take it down," he said.

In another incident not related to the Muhammad cartoons, a University of New Hampshire student frustrated with people using the dorm's elevator to travel one or two floors reportedly put up a poster in the elevator about the "freshman 15," encouraging girls to use stairs instead. The student was evicted from housing, according to Mitchell.

"Universities are not safe places for humor," he added.

Fourth-year in the College Hasan Ali, president of the U of C Muslim Students Association, said that while he feels the cartoon was "an act of stupidity," the gravity of the incident should not be diffused just because of the cartoonist's apology. "We're working with the administration to combat

the perception that such actions can be resolved by an apology,” Ali said. “People need to know that there’s more going on than just an apology.”

Ali added that despite the offensive nature of the incident, he and fellow Muslims on campus reacted respectfully and with a constructive attitude to the situation.

“We are spelled by our respect for Prophet Muhammad, who acted with kindness and compassion,” Ali said. “We’re not fine with any of this kind of stuff, but the point isn’t about punishment or reparation.”

In drawing the line between free speech and hate speech, Mitchell echoed Ali’s sentiment based on his own experiences with FIRE. “Nobody’s ever said free speech is neat,” Mitchell said. “The best way to fight hateful speech is by more speech.”

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