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Friday, November 14, 2008

Social-Work Student Lands in Hot Water Over Posters at Binghamton

By [ROBIN WILSON](#)

The social-work department at the State University of New York at Binghamton wants a graduate student to withdraw for a year after he put up posters on the campus criticizing the Binghamton Housing Authority and an adjunct professor in the department who heads the authority.

The student, Andre Massena, is enrolled in the master's program in social work. The posters he put up last August included pictures of a single mother and her children whom Mr. Massena said had been unfairly evicted by the housing authority. The posters also noted that the authority's executive director—David K. Tanenhaus—is an adjunct professor in the social-work department at Binghamton, and urged people to call the department to voice their displeasure.

In September the social-work department sent Mr. Massena a "written plan" in which it asked him to withdraw for a year to "reflect upon his readiness to enter the field of social work." It also asked him to write a 10- to 12-page "critical reflection paper" and to retract the statements he had made on the posters. It also said he should apologize "to all parties concerned."

Mr. Massena appealed the decision to a college committee, which upheld both the one-year suspension and the requirement that Mr. Massena write a paper, but it dismissed the other punishments. The committee determined that Mr. Massena had violated standards of the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics by failing to get permission to display the posters and by lying to the university police when they asked whether he had been involved in creating them or hanging them up.

Now, Mr. Massena has appealed to a committee within the College of Community and Public Affairs, which plans to hold a hearing on his case today.

The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, a watchdog group that has complained to university officials on Mr. Massena's behalf, said the university was violating his right to free expression. The foundation said it was clear the university was trying to punish the student for what he had said on the posters, not because he had failed to get permission to display them or had lied about his role to the police.

"Given the department of social work's extreme and shocking overreaction to Massena's protected speech and its aggressive attempts to find any available rationale to punish the student, it is clearly trying to send the message that students dissent at their peril," Adam Kissel, a foundation official, said in a written statement on the organization's Web site. Schools of social work—including one at Missouri State University—have been criticized for requiring students to lobby for causes they do not support and then penalizing them if they refuse (*The Chronicle*, April 20, 2007).

Gail Glover, a spokeswoman at Binghamton, noted that some of the recommendations of the social-work panel had been overturned by the first appeals panel, and she said Mr. Massena was still attending classes as his case worked its way through the university.

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