



CARROLL: CC's free-speech fears

By Vincent Carroll

Tuesday, April 8, 2008

Chris Robinson is a one-man free-speech movement. Colorado College, where Robinson is a senior majoring in political science, believes free speech on certain topics is worrisome and must be corralled. So its thought police subjected Robinson and a fellow student (who has chosen to remain anonymous) to an inquisition last month after they published a parody of a campus feminist flier known as *The Monthly Rag*.

For good measure, dean of students Mike Edmonds reached into his bag of tricks two weeks later and found Robinson and his colleague guilty of the farcical charge of "violating the student code of conduct policy on violence under the college value of Respect." Their flier, which claimed to be "brought to you by the coalition of some dudes," included a dumb discussion of "chainsaw etiquette" and a brief item noting the range of a "sniper rifle," but neither advocated violence or was remotely threatening.

To see for yourself, go to the Web site of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (thefire.org) and check out the file on Colorado College. While there, you might compare *The Monthly Rag* with *The Monthly Bag* (the parody) to determine which is actually more offensive.

The Monthly Rag features a promo for the "world-famous prostitute & porn star turned sexologist & artist" Annie Sprinkle, as well as a helpful list of definitions for various forms of "packing," which is what women outside "the gender binary" do when they want to create "the appearance of a phallus under clothing."

The Monthly Bag - a "caricature of hyper-masculinity," in Robinson's words - will offend some people, too. But the problem is *who* it offends. It commits the mortal sin of poking fun at the work of activists associated with the Feminist and Gender Studies program.

College spokeswoman Jane Turnis emphasizes that *The Monthly Bag* was plastered around campus just weeks after the shootings at Northern Illinois University. Fine, but from the outset officials were intent on condemning speech as much as in discovering whether they had a weirdo on their hands. That much is obvious from a campuswide e-mail President Richard Celeste sent out the same day. He denounced the flier's content as both "threatening and demeaning" before pompously urging an "appropriate" discussion of "how gender impacts our experience of the world and one another."

The e-mail could have been written by the folks in Feminist and Gender Studies.

Celeste - who may be unfamiliar with the rich tradition of anonymous political satire in this country dating to the Revolution - invited the "coalition of some dudes" to identify themselves, which the two-man coalition promptly did. Case closed, right? Two normal students and a harmless parody. No, not quite.

Robinson tells me that his appearance before a "student conduct committee" was an hours-long ordeal in which he was quizzed about his views on gender, class, sexism and privilege, among other things. It was "political correctness on steroids," he says, engineered by a "persecuting special-interest group" that has the college administration in its thrall.

Does Celeste appreciate the losing hand he holds? Perhaps, since he told a Colorado Springs TV station that the two students "were not sanctioned or punished." No? Perhaps not officially, but being taken to task by your college president and dean of students, as well as interrogated by a tribunal, might reasonably be considered punishment by some. Or at least an exercise in intimidation.

Colorado College's policy on academic freedom insists that "On a campus that is free and open, no idea can be banned or forbidden." Robinson is challenging the college to reclaim that ideal.

As he declared recently in the campus newspaper, "Colorado College is a private institution, which means that from a legal standpoint it can do whatever it wants regarding speech. It can enforce political positions it regards as sacrosanct with legal impunity. But should it? Do you as a student think CC should be a campus with less protection for free speech than Pikes Peak Community College?"

Apparently many students don't. Robinson said Monday that those he talks to are "overwhelmingly in my favor, even if they hated *The Monthly Bag*. That's because there's a principle at stake."

Robinson has appealed his case, which another campus committee will hear. Maybe it will notice the "principle at stake" in time to save the college from further embarrassment.

Vincent Carroll is editor of the editorial pages. Reach him at carrollv@RockyMountainNews.com.

© Rocky Mountain News