

FIRE Laura Bronstein

If someone told you that recounting an inappropriate story in class could get you expelled from the University, you would laugh them off. You can drink or smoke pot in your dorm room and face no more than several months probation. Even violent crimes might lead to no more than a suspension. Unfortunately, no one is laughing in the Masters of Social Work Department. For the second time in twelve months, a student has been targeted by the department simply for expressing his thoughts. Last year, Andre Massena was nearly expelled—before the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) intervened—for political speech. This year, another student, Michael Gutsell, has been expelled for simple, innocent words that elicited an over-dramatic response from some hypersensitive administrators.

The MSW department held Gutsell accountable to a contract he signed as a condition for remaining in the program at the start of the semester. The contract required he "maintain rapport with peers, instructors, colleagues and clients." The department was to receive "no reports from instructors or students that they are uncomfortable with you [Michael]," for him to remain in the program. This, as FIRE points out, put Gutsell's fate in the hands of the most sensitive student in the program, as one report from an "uncomfortable" student would be enough to justify expulsion. (See full story on page 8.)

This is the second time in one year that FIRE has penned a letter to university President Lois DeFleur on behalf of a student whose rights were violated. So far, no one from the upper levels of the University administration has intervened on either's behalf.

That's too bad, because, compared to other colleges, Binghamton University is one of the most free, at least in terms

of commitment to free expression. According to a report by FIRE, over 70% of colleges and universities restrict the speech of their students or faculty. Though Binghamton University is not one of the eleven schools to earn FIRE's "green-light" rating—signifying no policies which restrict free speech—BU has earned a moderate "yellow-light" rating, meaning we are in a better position than most. (See page 11 for full story.)

In 2005, FIRE wrote in their online blog that BU was close to achieving a "green-light" rating. What stood in its way was an unconstitutionally overbroad harassment policy, which opened any speech that "annoyed or alarmed" someone to investigation. That policy remains, but other controversial ones have been removed.

Just last year, the administration removed the controversial "failure-to-cooperate" policy from the Student Code of Conduct, after a year-long uproar from student civil-libertarians after the policy's implementation in 2008. No longer is it a punishable offense to refuse to exit your dorm room at the request of a University employee.

"The tradition at Binghamton, a public university, is that the full exercise of First Amendment rights is encouraged and protected," reads the student handbook. We are glad that the University acknowledges its duty to the U.S. Constitution. If it wants to maintain its credibility in that department, they can start by revising their harassment policy.

With six months left in President DeFleur's tenure, she should make one final stand in defense of the academic values she has spent a career preserving. Fire Laura Bronstein, the chair of the MSW department, and open the program to an external review. ◀

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Our Mission

Binghamton Review is a non-partisan, student-run periodical of conservative thought at Binghamton University. A true liberal arts education expands a student's horizons and opens one's mind to a vast array of divergent perspectives. In that spirit, we seek to promote the free exchange of ideas and offer an alternative viewpoint not normally found on our predominately liberal campus. It is our duty to expose the warped ideology of political correctness that dominates this university. We stand against tyranny in all its forms, both on campus and beyond. We believe in the principles set forth in this country's Declaration of Independence and seek to preserve the fundamental tenets of Western civilization. Finally, we understand that a moral order is a necessary component of any civilized society. We strive to inform, engage, and perhaps even amuse our readers in carrying out this mission.

