



Foundation for Individual Rights in Education

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President Christoph M. Kimmich
Brooklyn College
2900 Bedford Avenue
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Professor Charles Tobey
Chairman, Faculty Council Steering Committee
107 Roosevelt Hall
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2900 Bedford Avenue
Brooklyn, New York 11210

Sent by U.S. Mail and Facsimile (718-951-4872, 718-951-4541)

Dear President Kimmich and Chairman Tobey:

It is with great disappointment that FIRE writes Brooklyn College for the second time in a year concerning a serious matter that appears to threaten free speech and academic freedom. Last fall, Brooklyn College effectively disbanded the student government, preventing it from voting for a resolution which included an academic bill of rights. After FIRE wrote in protest of this decision, the college restored the student government to its earlier status. Now, FIRE has learned that Brooklyn College's School of Education (SOE) and its Faculty Council appear to be attempting to silence Professor Robert David Johnson for his public criticisms of the school's policies.

The following is our understanding of the facts, based on reports and documents provided by Professor Johnson and on articles in the *Clarion* (an official faculty union publication) and the *New York Sun*. Robert David Johnson is a professor of history at Brooklyn College and the departmental advisor to students Evan Goldwyn and Christina Harned. On November 29, 2004, Johnson received an e-mail from SOE Professor Barbara Winslow inquiring about the behavior of Goldwyn and explaining that the SOE "is trying to be more systematic in looking at what educators call 'dispositions,' that is, behaviors necessary for being a successful teacher in the public schools." In that e-mail she further explained,

“[b]eing able to do excellent academic work does not always translate into being a thoughtful, self reflective and effective teacher for youngsters.”

On May 23, 2005, Johnson published an article in *Inside Higher Ed* in which he expressed his views on the national trend toward the use of “dispositions” theory by schools of education to assess students’ commitment to “social justice.” Without mentioning the names of the professor or students involved, the article discussed what Johnson believed to be Brooklyn College’s problematic use of dispositions theory and its possible retaliatory use by SOE Professor Priya Parmar against Goldwyn and Harned in her “Language Literacy in Secondary Education” class.

Then, on May 31, the *New York Sun* also published an article that quoted Johnson as being critical of the dispositions rubric used by Brooklyn’s SOE. This article went into greater detail about Goldwyn and Harned’s claim of retaliation after they had filed a complaint against Professor Parmar for what they believed to be viewpoint-discriminatory grading practices. The article also quoted several other figures who were skeptical of dispositions theory. According to the article, both Professors Parmar and Winslow were asked to comment about the SOE’s conception of “dispositions” theory and the allegations made by Goldwyn and Harned, but they declined to do so.

According to Professor Johnson, in an apparent response to the

official faculty publication, did not contact him for a response to this article despite the fact that he is a faculty member of Brooklyn College.

The SOE letter and the *Clarion* article demonstrate the consistent and pervasive misunderstanding by members of the faculty and the faculty union of the nature of free speech and academic freedom on campus. A press investigation into education policy at a state-supported institution such as Brooklyn College is hardly an “attack” on academic freedom. Indeed, reporting on this topic is in itself an exercise of free speech. On the other hand, academic freedom does require that Professor Jo

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