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University Bans Humor Quotation From Student's Door

By Nathan Burchfiel
 CNSNews.com Staff Writer
 October 19, 2006

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(CNSNews.com) - Officials at Marquette University have ordered a Ph.D. student to remove a quotation critical of the federal government from his office door, because the hallway the door faces is not a "free speech zone."

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In August, Stuart Distler, a doctoral student teacher, posted a quotation from humor columnist Dave Barry on his office door. "As Americans, we must always remember that we all have a common enemy, an enemy that is dangerous, powerful and relentless," the sign stated. "I refer, of course, to the federal government."

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On Sept. 5, Philosophy Department Chairman James South informed Distler via email that the sign had been taken down because it was "patently offensive."

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"While I'm a strong supporter of academic freedom," South wrote, "I'm afraid that hallways and office doors are not 'free-speech zones.' If material is patently offensive and has no obvious academic import or university sanction, I have little choice but to take note."

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When asked to comment on academic freedom at the university, South told **Cybercast News Service** he had "no interest in pursuing that conversation, but I do appreciate your interest."

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South directed further questions to university spokeswoman Mary Pat Pfeil, who did not respond to requests for comment via telephone and email Wednesday.

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According to the university policy South quoted in his email to Distler, student teachers are allowed to participate in free speech "when he/she speaks or writes as a citizen," but when speaking or writing as a teacher, the university "imposes special obligations."

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While student teachers are "entitled to freedom in the classroom in discussing his/her subject," they are required to "exercise appropriate restraint, should show respect for the opinions of others and should make every effort to indicate that he/she is not an institutional spokesperson."

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"This incident at Marquette is part of a truly disturbing trend," Greg

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Lukianoff, president of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), said in a release.

"Administrators seem willing to ban speech across the board and to designate increasingly tiny 'free speech zones' rather than risk any student or faculty member being offended," Lukianoff said.

Referring to the quotation as a "harmless joke," Lukianoff said the controversy at Marquette illustrates "how even innocuous expression is under ongoing assault at our colleges and universities."

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