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'Free speech' cries ring hollow on college campuses and beyond

Posted 4/18/2006 10:31 PM ET

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By Nat Hentoff

Karen Murdock is an adjunct professor of geography and earth science at Century College, a two-year community college in White Bear Lake, Minn.

She often posts news articles and blank comment sheets on a faculty bulletin board that she says she hopes students read and argue about — and thereby think beyond White Bear Lake into the world.

In February, she posted an array of the inflammatory cartoons of the prophet Mohammed that offended not only Muslim students but also college administrators. Murdock's exercise of free speech was eventually silenced, yet her cause echoes well beyond White Bear Lake.

While the most embattled cartoons in the history of that genre have receded from the front pages, the fallout lives on. Just last week, the animated and often-controversial *South Park* television show took on the issue and was rebuffed when its creators tried to depict the prophet in a scene.

Instead, a black screen appeared with the words, "Comedy Central has refused to broadcast an image of Mohammed on their network."

It's more of the same in academia. New York University, for example, states that it is "committed to maintaining an environment where open, vigorous debate and speech can occur." But late last month, the Objectivist Club, a student group that supports the philosophy of Ayn Rand, discovered that the NYU policy is more situational than firm.

The club wanted to have a panel discussion, "Free Speech and the Danish Cartoons," but after protests from Muslim groups, the



By Joe Raymond, AP

Kaitlyn Redfield, a senior at the University of Notre Dame, gets a petition signed by a fellow student on campus. Redfield is an organizer for a group called United for Free Speech, which started its petition drive to encourage the university to allow the play, "The Vagina Monologues," and a gay and lesbian film festival to remain on campus unrestricted.

NYU administration insisted that the controversy could be discussed without showing the cartoons. When the club disagreed, NYU then imposed such limiting conditions on the club — including who could attend the discussion — that the club finally "chose" not to show them. ("Chose" is the administration's interpretation of the decision.)

Speech codes

The cartoons aside, on many campuses, the right to free speech, however contentious, is under siege. The

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politically correct "speech codes" — forbidding speech that might offend one's race, sexual orientation, religion, et al. — have been folded into codes of conduct under the continuing assumption by some students and administrators that there is a constitutional right not to be offended.

Back at Century College, Murdock has not flinched from her conviction that showing the cartoons provided "a teaching moment ... on the worldwide controversy." This view was not universally held at the college because the cartoons were torn down four times.

The first three purgings were done anonymously, and each time the indomitable non-tenured professor put them up again. Then the administration firmly told Murdock that they were "hurtful" and "disrespectful." Being just an adjunct professor, she got the message to cease and desist.

The story eventually made its way into the *Star-Tribune* (Minneapolis-St. Paul) newspaper, at which point FIRE (the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education) intervened. FIRE, which defends academic freedom for professors and students, wrote to Century College President Larry Litecky that "the college's responsibility to free speech and open inquiry far outweighs any responsibility the college has to avoid offense."

The administration's tone changed. It said Murdock was simply asked to remove the cartoons to make space for another posting. Litecky asserted that the "college administration at Century has neither censored anyone's free speech nor removed any of the posted cartoons."

A fifth time

Even so, though Murdock placed a curtain over the cartoons with a notice that the material underneath might be offensive to some, they were torn down a fifth time, and there was no further word on free speech from the administration.

Murdock, sensing a "direct order" to not try a sixth time, has not replaced the cartoons.

Reflecting on the undertow her posting caused, Murdock told me, "I just want to teach about the causes of earthquakes. But now I feel like a ticket-taker at The Met who has suddenly been pushed on stage to sing the lead in *Tosca*."

Century College's administration — and indeed, all who wither amid such free speech controversies — should welcome a challenge from Oliver Wendell Holmes: "If there is any principle of the Constitution that more imperatively calls for attachment than any other, it is the principle of free thought — not free thought for those who agree with us, but freedom for the thought that we hate."

Nat Hentoff is an expert on First Amendment issues, student rights and education. He is on the advisory board of FIRE.

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