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Group says U of C 'censored' student's Facebook album

BY PETER SACHS

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A national advocacy group is raising free speech issues with the University of Chicago for demanding that a student remove derogatory information about his girlfriend from a Facebook page.

The Philadelphia-based Foundation for Individual Rights in Education complained about the incident in February, says Adam Kissel, a director at the group.

"The University of Chicago is claiming the power to censor off-campus, disrespectful, allegedly disrespectful speech," Kissel says.

The incident began in January, when a U of C student posted a photo album on Facebook naming his ex-girlfriend in the title and exclaiming "(she) cheated on me, and you're next," says Kissel.

The album included pictures of his ex-girlfriend, along with photos of the male student with several other people.

The male student's friends started commenting on the album. Two of them called the woman, whose name has not been released, a "whore."

The university got involved when the woman complained to the dean of students and said she felt libeled, Kissel says.

The U of C asked the male student to remove his girlfriend's name and picture from the Facebook page or face possible disciplinary action, Kissel says.

In a written statement, university spokesman Bill Harms defended the actions the university took.

"In order to make the free exchange of ideas possible, students, faculty, and other members of our community must help create a safe, respectful climate in which inquiry and debate can flourish," the statement says. "The University's policies and practices are designed to safeguard that culture of

robust and respectful discussion, and the legitimate rights of all involved.”

Harms declined to answer other questions on the matter.

The school announced this week it is hosting an open forum on free speech issues on Friday, partially in response to the Facebook incident.

The male student could not be reached for comment.

“The demand to censor went too far,” Kissel says. “A request to consider the feelings of the ex-girlfriend would have been appropriate.”

Because the university is private, it does not have to allow for free speech under the First Amendment.

But in 1967 the university proclaimed the importance of maintaining intellectual independence in a document known as the Kalven Report. The three-page report also strongly implies that the university must uphold the principles of free speech, stating, “The instrument of dissent and criticism is the individual faculty member or the individual student. The university is the home and sponsor of critics.”

Kissel says he can understand how the content on the student’s page would be seen as offensive. But that doesn’t justify the university’s actions in all but demanding censorship.

“There’s an important distinction to be made between the university punishing protected speech and criticizing protected speech,” Kissel says.

Daily News Staff Writer Peter Sachs covers higher education. He can be reached at 773.362.5002, ext. 18, or [peter \[at\] chitowndailynews \[dot\] org](mailto:peter[at]chitowndailynews[dot]org).