

College Forced Conservative To Advocate Liberal Causes. Now The Case Is Going To A Jury.

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William Felkner was once a graduate student at Rhode Island College (RIC), working toward a degree from the college's School of Social Work. As part of his "policy and organizing" class, his professor required him to lobby the state legislature for progressive "social and economic justice" policies, which Felkner, a conservative libertarian, did not support.

When Felkner refused to advocate for policies with which he disagreed, he was given a failing grade in the class. That was in 2004.

In 2007, Felkner filed a lawsuit against RIC.

Now, 15 years after he received his failing grade, Felkner's case is going to be heard by a jury, [according to the College Fix's Greg Piper](#).

Two years ago, First Amendment protection groups, such as the Cato Institute, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), and the National Association of Scholars, filed a friend-of-the-court brief [on behalf of Felkner](#), asking the Rhode Island Supreme Court to overturn a trial court ruling against the former student. The court has finally agreed to do so.

"The record in this case is voluminous and replete with disputed facts. Resolving all such facts in the light most favorable to Felkner, the issue is whether he has made tenable claims that defendants have violated his constitutional rights to free speech and expression. We believe that he has," [the court wrote](#).

Felkner's problems with his professors began before he refused to lobby for policies he didn't support. The school announced it would show the Michael Moore propaganda film "Fahrenheit 9/11." Felkner emailed his professor, James Ryczek, about concerns over bias and whether an opposing film would be shown. Ryczek responded at the time: "I revel in my biases," [according to an email obtained by FIRE](#).

"[A]nyone who consistently holds antithetical views to those that are espoused by the profession might ask themselves whether social work is the profession for them," Ryczek also wrote.

Ryczek would admit in court testimony that students had to lobby for the policy chosen by the school, even if they disagreed with that policy.

Another of Felkner's professors, Roberta Pearlmuter, eventually allowed Felkner to lobby for his own cause but told him his grade would suffer for it. Felkner refused to give up his First Amendment rights and took the grade reduction.

Felkner was then told that his choice to lobby for a policy he chose would keep him from being “able to meet the academic requirements necessary to obtain a degree.”

After eight years in the court system, Felkner’s case was dismissed. Thanks to help from the friend-of-the-court brief, the Rhode Island Supreme Court overturned the lower court’s ruling and will send the case to trial – unless RIC finds a way to settle with Felkner and avoid a trial, which could reveal some nasty things about the school they may not want public.

Felkner is now 55 years old, and told the Providence Journal that he was “pleased the court has recognized my claim of free speech infringement and I look forward to my day in court.” He added that he has a 17-year-old daughter who is getting ready to look at colleges and wants to make sure that “RIC does not continue this discrimination for her generation.”