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Rhode Island College Lawsuit Highlights the Arrogance of ‘Liberal’ Faculties

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“So what if most college professors are leftist? They’re dedicated scholars who don’t let their politics get in the way of good teaching.” That’s the defense usually employed when the subject of the ideological slant of the faculty comes up.

One person who doesn’t buy that line is William Felkner, who is the plaintiff in a suit against Rhode Island College, where he enrolled some 13 years ago in the school’s master’s-degree program in social work. The problem was that Felkner objected to a course requirement that he engage in political advocacy. Whatever the study of social work entails, the faculty thought it encompassed activism, but not just any activism. It had to be for one of their approved “social justice” causes. Felkner wouldn’t sacrifice his principles, leading to conflicts with the school that kept him from getting his degree. So he sued. The case was filed back in 2007 and the legal skirmishing has been going on ever since.

Late in 2015, a trial judge in Rhode Island state court dismissed Felkner’s complaint, finding no First Amendment violation. That ruling has been appealed to the state supreme court. I write about it in [this piece](#) published by the James G. Martin Center.

Crucial at this point is an *amicus* brief submitted by FIRE, Cato Institute, and the National Association of Scholars. That brief shreds the trial court’s ruling on a number of points, but especially its First Amendment analysis. It sums the case up like this: “If the trial judge’s decision is allowed to stand, public college administrators will be presented with a road map for an end-run around decades of First Amendment jurisprudence governing student speech rights.”

I think the Felkner case exemplifies what NAS calls “the new civics” in its recent report entitled “[Making Citizens: How American Universities Teach Civics.](#)”

Increasingly, faculty leftists insist on turning college education into a training ground for young zealots. They use their power to dragoon students into “social justice” activism and are seldom challenged on it. At Rhode Island College, the faculty was not content just to teach whatever body of knowledge comprises social work, but felt the need to make every student get “involved” in leftist political activism.

Perhaps the Rhode Island Supreme Court will take the case and reverse the trial court’s dismissal. If not, then there remains the U.S. Supreme Court which has never had much tolerance for the sort of anti-First Amendment authoritarianism on display in the Felkner case.