



Student forced to lobby for progressive policies is still fighting back

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In 2004, William Felkner was a graduate student in the social work program at Rhode Island College. While taking “[Social Work 531](#),” a class about “social work policy and organizing to achieve social justice,” Felkner was required to lobby the Rhode Island General Assembly on a topic chosen by the school.

The topic was welfare reform, and students were required to advocate an education-first policy, a type of reform that emphasizes training and education before participants search for a job. Felkner supported work-first reforms, such as the ones President Bill Clinton signed into law in 1996.

Felkner did not agree with the school’s position and was told his grade would be reduced and his continued participation in the program would be in jeopardy. Felkner’s professor, Robert Pearlmutter, told him he could advocate his own viewpoint only if he found other students who shared his view. He could not. Since the project was supposed to be a group effort, Felkner found students outside the class to help him lobby on behalf of his own viewpoint.

This, however, resulted in a grade reduction, meaning that while Felkner was ultimately able to practice his First Amendment right against compelled speech, he was punished for doing so.

James Ryczek, RIC’s director of field education for the social work program, told Felkner that his attempts to lobby for a position other than the one dictated by the school would keep him from meeting “the academic requirements necessary to obtain a degree,” according to a lawsuit Felkner launched almost a decade ago.

Originally, Felkner had the aide of a national advocacy group. But the group backed out of the case and is not presently involved. Felkner’s attorney, Tom Lyons, told Watchdog that much of the delay has been the result of a lengthy discovery process that included numerous depositions and extensive pretrial motions.

‘We do take sides’

But the controversy predates even the lawsuit.

In a 2004 [email to Felkner](#), Ryczek made clear that the school and the profession had a particular viewpoint to which students must adhere.

“As I have mentioned in class, and I assume you’ve heard in other classes, social work is a value-based profession that clearly articulates a socio-political ideology about how the world works and how the world should be,” Ryczek wrote.

Felkner had originally emailed Ryczek about the school’s showing of *Fahrenheit 9/11*, a documentary/propaganda film directed by Michael Moore critical of President George W. Bush and the War on Terror. The film has been [heavily criticized](#) as deceptive. Felkner wanted to know if the school had sponsored the film and if it would be showing *Fahrenhype 9/11*, made in response to Moore’s film.

Ryczek informed Felkner he didn’t believe there’d be an objection to showing the other film (and that it was a school-sponsored event), but that there was a “broader issue” at play. That’s when Ryczek began telling Felkner about the school’s bias.

“[The National Association of Social Workers] also have a PAC specifically organized to promote certain candidates with whom we share the same political agenda and outlook ... and as you may have guessed, is working actively to defeat Bush,” Ryczek wrote. “So, as a social worker, I don’t find it at all unusual that a film like *9/11* might officially be sponsored by the school, and that the alternate view film might not be sponsored.”

He added: “In short, by and large as a profession we do take sides ... and indeed in this school, we have a mission devoted to the value of social and economic justice.”

Ryczek said he didn’t think anyone wanted “to quash alternative views,” but went on to say that Felkner might not be a good fit for social work because his views so consistently opposed what the school was teaching. Ryczek insisted his “bias” is what made him a social worker.

So, it appears Ryczek was saying a social worker must have a particular – progressive – slant, because apparently right-leaning thinkers can’t be good social workers. It doesn’t appear to have occurred to him that conservatives have different views of what constitute “social and economic justice” that are just as valid as those held by progressives.

Felkner, who is now director of operations at the [Hummel Report](#), an independent non-profit news site, has been fighting with RIC for more than a decade. In October 2015 a Rhode Island Superior Court justice [ruled](#) that his First Amendment rights had *not* been violated.

The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education [began working with Felkner](#) in 2005, when it wrote a letter to the school and issued a press release. Last month FIRE, along with the [Cato Institute](#) and the National Association of Scholars, filed a [friend-of-the-court brief](#) as part of an appeal of the judge’s ruling.

“[A]s our brief to the state’s highest court argues, the trial court’s decision incorrectly relied in part on legal precedent governing students at public high schools, not students in master’s programs at public colleges,” wrote FIRE’s Will Creeley in a blog about the brief. “Moreover,

we note that by requiring Felkner to publicly voice the school's opinions as his own, the college's actions violate longstanding First Amendment protections against compelled speech.”