

Rhode Island Supreme Court rules professors can't force students to agree with them

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In a recent decision handed down by the Rhode Island Supreme Court, a conservative student at Rhode Island College successfully defended his right to disagree with his professors.

Ilya Shapiro and Patrick Moran, two members of the Cato Institute, break down the case and how the court decided in favor of free speech.

The student, William Felkner, studied social work at the school, so it was no surprise that his conservative views caused him to clash with his professors due to the devotion of the course “to the value of social and economic justice,” and an assignment to lobby the state legislature on behalf of a progressive bill.

Shapiro and Moran explain how Felkner ran into trouble when he promulgated his conservative views:

Felkner refused to speak against his beliefs by lobbying in favor of progressive legislation. His term paper instead reflected his honest opinion of the bill. As a result, his professor gave him a failing grade and Felkner ultimately never completed the program.

That incident, in addition to a long string of events in which professors disparaged Felkner's politics and tried to stifle his opinions, led him to sue the college. He argued, among several claims, that the school infringed on his right to free speech, compelled him to speak against his conscience, and placed unconstitutional conditions on his earning his degree.

As a public school, Rhode Island College has the responsibility to respect its students rights to free speech.

“The U.S. Supreme Court has long understood that the First Amendment prohibits the government from compelling an individual to express an opinion that violates his or her conscience,” the pair point out.

However, a lower state court did not agree with this sentiment, and found that the school's actions did not violate the First Amendment, halting the case from going to trial. Felkner appealed to the state supreme court, and won.

The court found that “a teacher can't limit student speech as a punishment for a student's political views,” and allowed the case to go to trial.

This is a win for students' First Amendment rights, Shapiro and Moran write.

“In sum, no person in a public university, whether a student or a teacher, should be forced to say something that they find objectionable, and the case of Felkner v. Rhode Island College stands in recognition of that important principle,” they conclude.