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HIGHER EDUCATION

Harris '99 fights against campus censorship

By **Kelly Lack**
 Princetonian Staff Writer

"I say we throw a tomohawk [sic] into her face," the [facebook.com](#) post read.

Written on the wall of the group "If They Get Rid of the Chief I'm Becoming a Racist," the comment referred to a student leader at the University of Illinois-Urbana Champagne who opposed the school's Native American mascot. When news of the Facebook post reached university administrators, they threatened disciplinary action against the student who had written it.

That's where Samantha Harris '99 came in.

Harris is the Director of Legal and Public Advocacy at the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), which seeks to "defend and sustain individual rights at America's increasingly repressive and partisan colleges and universities," according to the organization's website.

FIRE focuses on free speech issues by monitoring campus speech codes across the country. When the University of Illinois issue arose last November, FIRE stepped in, sending the school a sternly worded letter and promising to take further action if the student were punished.

"The heart of our work is really the public advocacy," Harris said. "The university is supposed to be a marketplace of ideas where students and faculty can talk openly, often about controversial issues. Any policies that restrict free speech thwart that goal."

A native of Philadelphia, Harris — formerly Samantha Kors — graduated magna cum laude from the University with a degree in politics. She went on to law school at Penn before clerking for a U.S. District Court judge and working at a law firm. She then moved on to FIRE, an organization that her father, Penn history professor Alan Kors, helped establish.

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Harris was "one of the finest students I've encountered in more than 20 years of teaching at Princeton," politics professor Robert George, who taught Harris in classes on constitutional interpretation and civil liberties, said. He praised Harris' "sense of the importance of freedom of speech and freedom of inquiry to the project of pursuing truth."

Harris cited George's civil liberties class as "the class that sparked my interest" in her current line of work. George also advised Harris' senior thesis, which concerned the implementation of "broken windows" social and crime policy in New York City under then-mayor Rudolph Giuliani.

Recently, Harris said, FIRE has received more case submissions regarding freedom of speech online — such as the one at the University of Illinois — which she connected to the increasing popularity of Facebook and MySpace on college campuses. The cases often arise in response to disciplinary measures taken against students for comments left on these web sites.

"Students speak very freely on those web sites. They joke with each other in ways that are often offensive," Harrison said. "Facebook is basically giving administrators a closer look at the way students actually talk to each other, and a lot of administrators don't like [the way they are talking.]"

Though Harris has dedicated her career to opposing censorship, she said she did not personally experience restrictions on free speech during her time at the University.

"I loved Princeton. I had a great experience there," said Harris, who sang in the Roaring 20 and Koleinu a cappella groups while at the University. "My work does not extend from any experience I personally had with censorship."

Nevertheless, Harris added that Princeton, like other private universities across the nation, has some policies that restrict free speech. She noted that, though the University is "not legally bound" by the First Amendment, it



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does "promise free expression."

Upholding students' freedoms, she added, is "more of a moral obligation."

Wilson School professor Stanley Katz said he also considers Princeton to be "a very open campus," adding, "In the 28 or 29 years I've been here, I can't think of a single example of censorship at this university."

"This university is really very good at protecting rights of students and faculty," Katz said.

Harris said that she urges students nationwide to assert their First Amendment rights. "If you do find yourself facing censorship, stand up for your right for freedom of speech," she said. Many students do not fight for these rights for fear that disciplinary measures might be taken against them, she added.

Harris, who plans to come to Princeton in March for a career fair, and who expressed an interesting in speaking at the University on behalf of FIRE, added that she hopes Princeton students will object to any attempts at censorship.

"I would very much encourage any students concerned about free speech at Princeton to come speak to us," Harris said.

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