

March 25, 2008

Book-reading IUPUI worker deserved better

It has become all too common for our nation's colleges and universities to trample upon the free speech rights of students and faculty. Yet, to even the most seasoned observer of university foibles the case of Keith Sampson at Indiana University--Purdue University Indianapolis is extreme.

Sampson, an IUPUI student-employee, was found guilty of racial harassment last fall for reading a book, "Notre Dame vs. the Klan," during his work breaks. The book is an account of a street fight in 1924 between University of Notre Dame students and members of the Ku Klux Klan in South Bend. Its author, Todd Tucker, characterizes it as "enthusiastically anti-Klan." He points to the book's focus on the decline of KKK influence in Indiana after the events chronicled.

Even though Sampson read the book only in the break room, a co-worker complained to IUPUI's Affirmative Action Office.

Apparently, the complaint was based solely on the book's topic and the picture of burning crosses on the cover. It didn't matter how the book actually dealt with its topic. Indeed, the book's subtitle ("How the Fighting Irish Defeated the Ku Klux Klan"), visible on the front cover, should have disposed of any notions of bigotry.

To make matters worse, Lillian Charleston, IUPUI's affirmative action officer, never gave Sampson an opportunity to defend himself or face his accusers, when a brief clarification about the book could have ended the matter.

Instead, Sampson received a letter of reprimand stating he had been found guilty of racial harassment. Sampson had received no hearing and in the letter the Affirmative Action Office showed no understanding of the legal standard for workplace harassment.

It is tempting to label this as just another example of political correctness run amok in academia, but there is more to be learned here.

Sampson's reprehensible treatment demonstrates the danger of giving university bureaucrats like the Affirmative Action Office too much authority without sufficient oversight. Charleston and her office demonstrated an appalling lack of diligence and competence. Rather than taking the time necessary to listen to Sampson's explanation, or taking into account the huge gulf between actionable harassment and Sampson's behavior, the Affirmative Action Office steamrolled over Sampson's most basic rights and found him guilty of a career-ruining offense.

Universities need diligent and capable individuals in these powerful positions. Uninformed knee-jerk reactions are simply unacceptable when a person's future is at stake.

Additionally, universities need to establish clear lines of oversight to prevent abuses of authority. As author Tucker has asked, why was the Affirmative Action Office's handling of the matter not seen as problematic and resolved internally within IUPUI?

Months after the initial investigation, the Affirmative Action Office sent a second letter to Sampson acknowledging that he was free to read the book during work breaks. Instead of apologizing and admitting its wrongdoing, however, the Affirmative Action Office stated that it

was simply "unable to draw any final conclusion concerning what was intended" by reading the book.

This is an insufficient, hardly corrective response. It does nothing to address the grave wrong perpetrated against Sampson -- the harassment finding still stands -- and does nothing to prevent such abuses in the future.

IUPUI must immediately expunge the harassment finding from Sampson's record. Additionally, the university needs to take a close look at the AAO's policies, procedures and personnel to ensure that something like this never happens again. The Affirmative Action Office must be held accountable for its egregious actions. Significant changes and increased oversight are in order. If not, anyone at IUPUI could be the next Keith Sampson.
