NYC 9/11 Public Portal Document

NEWSDAY, FRIDAY, OCTOBER 19, 2001

CUNY Trustees: Let Free Speech Flourish

By John P. Nidiry

COLLEGE CAMPUSES have always been a hotbed for ideas that might be deemed unpopular by those in power. One of the founding principles of America is that people have a right to express their views, especially if they're powerless.

Earlier this month City College held an anti-war teach-in, "Threats of War, Challenges to Peace," where some students and faculty reportedly blamed "American colonialism" for the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers. After coverage of the forum ran in the New York Post, a City University of New York trustee labeled the speakers' behavior "seditious." Another trustee said that there were enough votes on the board to "unanimously" censure the faculty association that had sponsored the event. In fact, they actually drafted a resolution but then withdrew it after the CUNY chancellor issued a statement denouncing the forum.

The trustees may return to this line of criticism at Monday's meeting of the CUNY board. If they do, it will not only represent an hysterical overreaction to the free speech of students and faculty, but will also repudiate the very principles of open inquiry that distinguish the academy in a free society.

Indeed, just days after the attacks on the World Trade Center, CUNY's own vice chairman, Benno Schmidt, told fellow trustees, "The freedom of thought to challenge and to speak one's mind (is) the matrix, the indispensable condition of any university worthy of the name." But two trustees, Jeffrey S. Wiesenfeld and John J. Calandra, apparently think they know better. Wiesenfeld is the trustee who branded as "seditious" the speakers at the teach-in. Calandra anticipated a "unanimous" vote. Both feel that they have an obligation to counter the "offensive" speech heard at the forum.

The trustees should realize that those who offered "offensive" thoughts were not the only speakers at the teach-in. Other voices, with "pro-American" views, were clearly heard, and they too were representative of the range of student and faculty opinion.

Maybe in other countries authorities can routinely chastise "seditious" speakers on college campuses, but here in America we supposedly value differences in viewpoints. Indeed, what is a forum but an arena for free thinkers and unfettered speech? Faculty members should not be censured, condemned or ostracized simply for allowing the expression of contentious, contrarian opinions. Are these not the tenets of academic freedom that are supposed to be fostered and nurtured in the first place?

The cost of living in a free society is that different viewpoints must be tolerated. We must respect and preserve dissent to foster intellectual growth through inquiry and analysis. Yes, this means protecting the expression of politically unpopular ideas. Speakers are not seditious merely because they don't buy into the conventional thinking of the society at large. Authority figures are not correct simply because they are in authority. Besides, sedition is a serious charge that should not be used idly. The trustees should know better.

Naturally, trustees too have free speech rights. But they ought to be aware of the chilling effects and the perils such condemnation can have on students and particularly untenured faculty members, who want to contribute to the public weal. Dissent is a sign that our democracy is healthy.

Trustees who support the "seditious" label are, in effect, saying that others should not dare, as Wiesenfeld and Calandra contend, to bring "shame" to the university. They fear that such ignominy may undermine donation efforts and otherwise erode public support for CUNY.

I say that that's a risk university trustees must assume and overcome without abridging the free speech rights of the members of the academic community. The university must allow its students and faculty to dissent from the nation's policies unapologetically and to withstand the winds of war. In this regard, there can be no official truth. There can only be, to paraphrase Vice Chairman Schmidt, the unbridled pursuit of truth through free inquiry and speech. It's what sets us Americans apart from the nation states of the undemocratic world.

John P. Nidiry, a recent graduate of Bowdoin College, is on the staff of the New York Civil Rights Coalition.

CITY_21MC100_011831316

NYC-WTC_000413636