

The Progressive Faculty Network of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill has passed the following resolution in support of Elizabeth Ito of Forsyth Technical Community College in Winston-Salem:

"Academic freedom in inquiry and expression in the classroom is the central tenet of higher education, including in the University of North Carolina System and the Community College System of North Carolina. In classes such as the humanities (e.g. literature, poetry, drama), academic freedom in particular encompasses the right of the teacher and students alike to express their personal feelings about political events when it bears on the development of relevant expressive capacity and rational argument in such classes.

"Elizabeth Ito, who came highly recommended for her achievements as a writer and teacher from other institutions, was therefore exercising her academic freedom in expressing her anti-war views to students in the business writing class she taught at Forsyth Technical Community College in the Spring 2003 semester. The possibility that such personal expression might have made some students, faculty, or officials in the administration of FTCC uncomfortable, far from being proof of incompetence or unallowable bias, in fact provided Ms. Ito with a teachable moment to discuss the relation between personal political views, expressive capacity and rational debate. At times this can best be done by provoking students to think orally and in writing and respond through rational argument to dissent or unpopular opinions, as, in this case, opinions against the invasion of Iraq.

"We believe that Elizabeth Ito demonstrated her competence and professionalism as a teacher by seizing that teachable moment when she devised a class evaluation exercise which allowed any student who might have been uncomfortable or feared that they might be treated unfairly by the teacher to express their opinion anonymously and safely. The experienced teacher uses such exercises not only to communicate the general need for tolerance in discussing different opinions and engaging in rational debate, but also to make an unambiguous statement to students that this expectation of tolerance prevails specifically in her own class.

"Under these circumstances, teachers 'on the spot' must be given latitude to determine through their professional judgment what is, and what is not, relevant to the development of expressive capacity and rational debate in a writing class, and we therefore believe it inappropriate for her administrative superiors to second-guess her judgment in this situation. This is particularly the case where unpopular views are expressed, when academic freedom and the Constitutional guarantee of freedom of speech – for teacher and students alike – must be honored as a paramount value. Otherwise, unsubstantiated allegations of 'incompetence,' etc. would simply mask as grounds for the elimination of unpopular views from our classrooms.

"Whereas it is clear that Elizabeth Ito was improperly dismissed from her position at FTCC for expressing her views against the Iraq War which were covered by this State's commitment to academic freedom in its institutions of higher learning, the Progressive Faculty Network therefore:

"1. finds no grounds for her dismissal from employment from FTCC on the basis of spurious charges of "incompetence," "insubordination" and "creating dissension among members of the faculty, staff, and student body";

"2. urges that she be immediately reinstated in her position with all back pay paid which are due to her during the period between her firing and reinstatement;

"3. urges that the administration of FTCC provide her with a public apology and a promise that it will not be prejudiced against her future employment at FTCC;

"4. urges that the FTCC administration reaffirm its commitment to academic freedom for its faculty."

Date: September 30, 2003