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The Faculty

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Student Endangers Master's Degree With Vitriolic Addition to Thesis

Christopher T. Brown didn't pull any punches when he attached a special "disacknowledgments" section to his master's thesis that used the "F" word to criticize everyone at the University of California at Santa Barbara from the graduate dean on down. The stunt just may cost him his degree.

Mr. Brown, a master's student in materials science, tacked the disacknowledgment section onto his thesis last spring, after his paper had already been approved. But officials at Santa Barbara's library, which keeps student theses on file, noticed the addition and alerted administrators, who told Mr. Brown that his degree would be withheld unless he removed it. Now Mr. Brown is claiming that the university violated his free-speech rights and is threatening to sue.

In its first incarnation, the disacknowledgment section included a few profanity-laced insults to "the following degenerates for being an ever-present hindrance during my graduate career." It offered choice words for the librarians at Santa Barbara and called the graduate dean, Charles N. Li, a "fascist." The section also called one professor a "prick."

Mr. Brown agreed to tone down the language, hoping that his departmental committee would approve it if the profanity was removed. But his professors are worried that they might be held liable for the criticism the section still contains. Without their signatures, Mr. Brown can't receive a degree.

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David M. Birnbaum, a lawyer for the university, says Mr. Brown is free to publicize his views, but his master's thesis is not the place. "Personal attacks on individuals with no opportunity to respond," he wrote in a letter to Mr. Brown, "did not belong in a scientific paper."

Mr. Brown's thesis, which explores the crystal-building properties of the abalone shell, "doesn't offer thoughtful observations about why he had a bad experience," Mr. Birnbaum added in an interview. "It's name-calling. It's like graffiti. It's not something anyone could learn something from."

Mr. Brown says he knew he was treading on dangerous territory when he wrote the disacknowledgment section. But he says the university and some professors were so cavalier with graduate students, and so unfeeling in their application of what Mr. Brown considers unnecessary rules, that he felt he had to say something. "People who've contacted me have said, 'I wanted to say this, too, but I had better discretion than you.'"

Mr. Brown says a student should be allowed to write what he wants in the acknowledgment section of his thesis. "They've asked me for my opinion, but they want to hold me to expressions of praise," he says. "That's a First Amendment problem."

Unless a settlement is reached, it looks as if a judge will have the final say.

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