

## **AAUP-UNH and UNH LU-AAUP statement on UNH censorship of SHARPP exhibit**

UNH's two faculty unions—the American Association of University Professors (AAUP-UNH) and UNH Lecturers United-AAUP (UNHLU)—condemn the University's recent removal of students' anti-sexual harassment exhibit from the Memorial Union Building (MUB).

A threat to anyone's academic freedom is a threat to everyone's academic freedom. Our students are exercising their academic freedom to call attention to a climate of sexual harassment. The University has not only denied them this right, they have denied the right of intellectual freedom to the university community and have assumed the role of public censors. The university's action is not just about the denial of the students' right to post but the public's right to know. Censorship is never honest.

On March 17, students working with the Sexual Harassment and Rape Prevention Program (SHARPP) created an exhibit quoting actual statements shouted at students on campus. These are hard, crude and violent statements to read; that was precisely the point of the exhibit. But the display was removed in a matter of hours.

In taking the exhibit down, the University invoked section 8.03 of the MUB's policy manual: "Any poster with 'hate speech' as defined in the Students Rights, Rules and Responsibilities will not be posted. Any poster/flyer containing profane/vulgar language is prohibited." The administration's interpretation, evidently, is that the exhibit itself, and not the behavior that prompted it, is "profane/vulgar." We might ask, invoking Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Isn't this like condemning a robbed man because his possession of money precipitated the evil act of robbery? Isn't this like condemning Socrates because his unswerving commitment to truth and his philosophical inquiries precipitated the act by the misguided populace in which they made him drink hemlock?" The students who made this exhibit are not engaging in hate speech. They are fighting hate speech. If these statements are so shocking that they cannot be on the walls of the MUB in the light of day, imagine the impact of these statements when they are screamed from a moving car or uttered by passersby under the cover of darkness.

Like many universities nationwide, UNH is attempting to address the problem of campus sexual violence through increased bureaucratization rather than open dialogue and education. In a report titled *The History, Uses, and Abuses of Title IX*, the national AAUP details the problems with this bureaucratization, including the blanket assigning of mandatory reporter status to all professors. AAUP is concerned that, among other problems, this mandate opens the door to future suppression of free speech around the issue of sexual violence (for instance, by requiring professors to report a delicate personal essay to the University police). And indeed, in this case, the university seems to have done just what the AAUP fears. They have shut down a desperately needed conversation and creative response to campus sexual violence.

The removal of this exhibit is an infringement of the academic freedom that is so vital to students' education. The AAUP-affiliated faculty unions stand in support of student academic freedom and inquiry, however uncomfortable it may be.