

United States District Court
For the Northern District of California

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E-FILED on 11/25/09

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE NORTHERN DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA
SAN JOSE DIVISION

JUNE SHELDON,

Plaintiff,

v.

BILBIR DHILLON, MARIA FUENTES,
AUTUMN GUTIERREZ, RICHARD HOBBS,
RONALD J. LIND, RANDY OKAMURA,
AND RICHARD TANAKA, in their individual
and official capacities; ROSA G. PEREZ, in
her individual and official capacities; ANITA
L. MORRIS, in her individual and official
capacities; MICHAEL L. BURKE, in his
individual and official capacities; LEANDRA
MARTIN, in her individual and official
capacities;

Defendants.

No. C-08-03438 RMW

**ORDER ON DEFENDANTS' MOTION TO
DISMISS**

[Docket No. 26]

Plaintiff June Sheldon ("Sheldon") brings this action under 28 U.S.C. § 1983 against the trustees of San Jose/Evergreen Community College District ("the District") and other District administrators (collectively "defendants") alleging violations of her rights under the First and Fourteenth Amendments to the Constitution. Defendants move to dismiss her claims, arguing that: (1) Sheldon's in-class speech was not protected by the First Amendment; (2) an equal protection claim cannot lie on the basis of a class of one in public employment; (3) as an at-will employee,

ORDER ON DEFENDANTS' MOTION TO DISMISS
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1 Sheldon had no constitutional property interest in her employment; and (4) the District, nonetheless,
2 afforded Sheldon due process. Sheldon opposes the motion to dismiss. For the reasons stated
3 below, the court denies defendants' motion to dismiss as to plaintiff's first and second claims based
4 upon alleged violations of the First Amendment and grants it as to plaintiff's third and fourth claims
5 predicated upon alleged violations of the Fourteenth Amendment.

6 I. BACKGROUND

7 Sheldon received her bachelor's degree in molecular biology in 1975 and a master's degree in
8 biology in 1978, both from San Jose State University. Between 1986 and 1993, she taught
9 chemistry and biology in the Division of Math, Science, and Engineering at Evergreen Valley
10 College, one of the two community colleges operated by the District. In 2004, she began teaching
11 biology and microbiology at the other District-operated location, San Jose Community College
12 ("SJCC"). During the Summer 2007 semester, Sheldon taught a course entitled Human Heredity.
13 Around August 2, 2007, she received notice of a student complaint arising out of the class
14 discussion on June 12, 2007 of Mendelian inheritance and the biological basis for homosexuality.
15 After an internal investigation, on December 18, 2007 defendant Anita Morris, the District's Vice-
16 Chancellor of Human Resources, sent Sheldon a letter informing her that the offer she had received
17 to teach in the Spring semester was withdrawn, that she was removed from the adjunct seniority
18 rehire preference list and that her employment was terminated as of that date, subject to final
19 approval by the District Board of Trustees. Thereafter, the District approved the adverse action.

20 The facts of what actually occurred during the June 21, 2007 class are in significant dispute.
21 However, at the motion to dismiss stage, the court assumes that the facts alleged in the complaint are
22 true. *Marceau v. Blackfeet Housing Authority*, 540 F.3d 916, 930 (9th Cir. 2008). What follows is
23 Sheldon's version of what happened during the class and the investigation that followed as alleged in
24 her complaint.

25 Sheldon's lecture on June 21, 2007 covered Mendelian inheritance, based on material in
26 Chapter 4 of the course textbook, HUMAN GENETICS: CONCEPTS AND APPLICATIONS, by Ricki
27 Lewis. Complaint ¶¶ 26-27. The class began with a short quiz concerning the previous day's
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1 material. *Id.* at ¶ 27. After the quiz a student asked Sheldon how heredity affects homosexual
2 behavior in males and females. *Id.* at ¶ 28. That question was based on a quiz question, the material
3 in the textbook, and Sheldon's previous discussion of the topic. *Id.* According to the complaint,
4 Sheldon "answered the student's question by noting the complexity of the issue, providing a genetic
5 example mentioned in the textbook, and referring students to the perspective of a German scientist."
6 *Id.* at ¶ 29. Sheldon also noted that the German scientist (whose name, she later recalled, is Dr.
7 Gunter Dörner) had "found a correlation between maternal stress, maternal androgens, and male
8 sexual orientation at birth." *Id.* at ¶ 30. Sheldon also stated that she was unaware of Dr. Dörner's
9 finding a similar correlation for female sexual orientation. *Id.* She also mentioned that Dr. Dörner's
10 views were only one set of theories in the "nature versus nurture" debate. *Id.* Finally, Sheldon
11 briefly described what the students would learn later in the course, that "homosexual behavior may
12 be influenced by both genes and the environment." *Id.* at ¶ 32.

13 In early August, defendant Leandra Martin ("Martin"), Dean of SJCC's Division of Math and
14 Science e-mailed Sheldon regarding a student complaint. *Id.* at ¶ 36. On September 6, 2007,
15 Sheldon met with Martin and others to discuss the complaint. *Id.* at ¶ 63. At that meeting, she was
16 given a copy of the student complaint, which was neither signed nor dated. *Id.* at ¶ 65. The
17 student's complaint states that during the June 21, 2007 class, Sheldon made "offensive and
18 unscientific" statements, including that there "aren't any real lesbians" and that "there are hardly any
19 gay men in the Middle East because the women are treated very nicely." Complaint Ex. 8. Around
20 September 10, 2007, Sheldon received an e-mail recounting some of the events of the meeting, and
21 noting that Sheldon would meet with full-time biology faculty to discuss some of the issues raised in
22 the complaint. *Id.* at ¶ 74. Sheldon did agree at the meeting to confer with the biology faculty and
23 discuss the topic of mainstream scientific thought. *Id.* at ¶ 75.

24 On October 19, 2007, Martin sent Sheldon an e-mail offering her a teaching assignment for
25 the Spring 2008 semester, without mentioning the student complaint. *Id.* at ¶ 81. Sheldon responded
26 to the e-mail and accepted the class assignment. *Id.* at ¶ 82. As a result of that teaching assignment,
27 Sheldon determined that she would not need to seek alternate employment. *Id.* at ¶ 82.

1 On December 6, 2007, Martin issued a letter stating that she had investigated the allegations
2 in the student complaint. *Id.* at ¶ 83. The letter also stated that Martin had spoken with Sheldon, as
3 well as some members of SJCC's biology faculty regarding the statements attributed to Sheldon in
4 the complaint. *Id.* at ¶ 86. Martin also wrote that she had concluded that Sheldon was teaching
5 misinformation as science, and that the statements were grievous enough to warrant withdrawing her
6 course assignments for the spring semester. *Id.* at ¶ 89.

7 On December 18, 2007, defendant Anita Morris, Vice Chancellor of Human Resources for
8 SJCC, sent Sheldon a letter stating that because of the student complaint, Sheldon had been removed
9 from teaching status. The letter also stated that District had the right to terminate any adjunct
10 employee without cause, and that Sheldon was "hereby terminated, subject to final approval of the
11 Board of Trustees." *Id.* at ¶ 100. After some additional correspondence, the Board of Trustees
12 approved the termination of Sheldon's employment on February 12, 2008. *Id.* at ¶¶ 101-12.

13 On July 16, 2008, Sheldon filed a complaint alleging violations of her First and Fourteenth
14 Amendment rights under the Constitution. Her first cause of action is for retaliation in violation of
15 the First Amendment and claims that defendants terminated her employment based on her First
16 Amendment protected answer to a student's in-class question. Complaint ¶¶ 137-41. Her second
17 cause of action claims that defendants deprived her of First Amendment rights by discriminating
18 against her protected speech based on its content and viewpoint. Sheldon's third and fourth causes
19 of action allege violations of the Fourteenth Amendment's guarantees of equal protection and due
20 process, respectively. Defendants move to dismiss all of Sheldon's claims. The court will consider
21 each in turn.

22 II. ANALYSIS

23 A. First Amendment Retaliation

24 Sheldon's First Amendment claim presents the question of what constitutional protection, if
25 any, is afforded to classroom instruction.

26 Defendants rely heavily on *Garcetti v. Ceballos*, 547 U.S. 410 (2006), which they contend
27 compels a determination that a public school teacher's classroom instruction does not constitute
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1 protected speech within the meaning of the First Amendment because when engaging in classroom
2 instruction, the teacher is performing her duties as a public employee and is not speaking as a private
3 citizen.

4 The speech at issue in *Garcetti* was a memorandum in which Ceballos, a deputy district
5 attorney for the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office, described his concerns about
6 possible "serious misrepresentations" in an affidavit used to obtain a search warrant. 547 U.S. at
7 413-415. After submitting the memorandum to his superiors, Ceballos asserted that he was subject
8 to adverse employment actions in retaliation for engaging in speech protected by the First
9 Amendment. The district court granted a motion for summary judgment in favor of Ceballos's
10 supervisors in the District Attorney's office and the County on the basis of qualified and sovereign
11 immunity, respectively. The Ninth Circuit reversed and remanded, holding that neither the
12 individual nor the county defendants were immune and that, under existing Ninth Circuit law as set
13 forth in *Roth v. Veteran's Administration of the United States*, 856 F.2d 1401 (9th Cir. 1988),
14 Ceballos' speech was protected, for summary judgment purposes, by the First Amendment. *Ceballos*
15 *v. Garcetti*, 361 F.3d 1168, 1180 (9th Cir. 2004). The Supreme Court reversed and clarified prior
16 case law that the only speech that is protected is speech offered in the speaker's citizen capacity, as
17 opposed to in his or her capacity as an employee. The Court held that "when public employees
18 make statements pursuant to their official duties, the employees are not speaking as citizens for First
19 Amendment purposes, and the Constitution does not insulate their communications from employee
20 discipline." *Garcetti*, 547 U.S. at 421.

21 The Court, however, expressly reserved the question of whether its holding extends to
22 scholarship or teaching-related speech. The majority opinion notes:

23 There is some argument that expression related to academic scholarship or classroom
24 instruction implicates additional constitutional interests that are not fully accounted
25 for by this Court's customary employee-speech jurisprudence. We need not, and for
that reason do not, decide whether the analysis we conduct today would apply in the
same manner to a case involving speech related to scholarship or teaching.

26 *Id.* at 425. Thus, *Garcetti* by its express terms does not address the context squarely presented here:
27 the First Amendment's application to teaching-related speech. For that reason, defendants' heavy
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1 reliance on *Garcetti* is misplaced. *See Lee v. York County Sch. Div.*, 484 F.3d 687, 695 n.11 (4th
2 Cir. 2007) (recognizing that *Garcetti* explicitly did not decide whether its public employee speech
3 analysis would apply in the same manner to speech related to teaching, thus applying existing circuit
4 law).

5 Acknowledging that the Ninth Circuit has not determined the scope of the First Amendment's
6 application to classroom teaching, plaintiff urges the court to follow the case law of other circuits,
7 specifically the Sixth Circuit and the Second Circuit have recognized that the First Amendment
8 protects a teacher's classroom speech. *Evans-Marshall v. Board of Educ. of the Tipp City Exempted*
9 *Vill. Sch. Dist.*, 428 F.3d 223 (6th Cir. 2005) (applying *Pickering-Connick*¹ balancing test to
10 determine whether teacher's classroom speech was protected, and affirming denial of motion to
11 dismiss First Amendment retaliation claim); *Cockrel v. Shelby County Sch. Dist.*, 270 F.3d 1036 (6th
12 Cir. 2002) (recognizing that classroom speech touching on a matter of public concern is
13 constitutionally protected); *Hardy v. Jefferson Comty. Coll. and KY Comty. and Technical Coll. Sys.*,
14 260 F.3d 671 (6th Cir. 2001) (college instructor's in-class speech relating to matters of public
15 concern is constitutionally protected); *Dube v. State Univ. of N.Y.*, 900 F.2d 587, 598 (2d Cir. 1990)
16 (finding college officials not entitled to qualified immunity because punishment of professor based
17 on classroom discourse would violate the First Amendment).

18 In light of the *Garcetti* Court's reluctance to apply its public-employee speech rule in the
19 context of academic instruction, the court must apply the existing legal framework for analyzing
20 teacher's instructional speech. The Ninth Circuit has previously recognized that teachers have First
21 Amendment rights regarding their classroom speech, albeit without defining the precise contours of
22 those rights. *Cohen v. San Bernardino Valley College*, 92 F.3d 968, 972 (9th Cir. 1996); *see also*
23 *Cal. Teachers Assn. v. State Bd. of Educ.*, 271 F.3d 1141, 1148 (9th Cir. 2001) (recognizing that
24 neither the Ninth Circuit nor the Supreme Court had "definitively resolved whether and to what
25 extent a teacher's instructional speech is protected by the First Amendment"). In *Cal. Teachers*
26 *Assn.*, the Ninth Circuit assumed both that instructional speech deserves some First Amendment

27 ¹ *Pickering v. Board of Educ.*, 391 U.S. 563 (1968); *Connick v. Myers*, 461 U.S. 138 (1983).
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1 protection and that regulation of such speech is subject to the test set forth by the Supreme Court in
2 *Hazelwood Sch. Dist. v. Kuhlmeier*, 484 U.S. 260 (1988), a case involving regulations on student
3 speech. 271 F.3d at 1148-49. The court noted that several tests have been applied by the various
4 circuits, but cited with approval case law applying *Hazelwood* in the context of a teacher's
5 instructional speech. *Id.* at 1149 n.6. Under this standard, a teacher's instructional speech is
6 protected by the First Amendment, and if the defendants acted in retaliation for her instructional
7 speech, those rights will have been violated unless the defendants' conduct was reasonably related to
8 legitimate pedagogical concerns. *Id.* at 1149, citing *Hazelwood*, 484 US. at 273.

9 As noted, the precise contours of the First Amendments' application in the context of a
10 college professor's instructional speech are ill-defined and are not easily determined at the motion to
11 dismiss stage. Too many facts remain to be discovered and developed before the parties and the
12 court may dispositively address whether plaintiff's rights under the First Amendment were violated
13 by the defendants' actions. The court cannot determine, at the pleadings stage, whether the
14 defendants' actions were reasonably related to legitimate pedagogical concerns. To the extent that
15 the defendants took action against plaintiff because of her instructional speech to her class, and
16 assuming without deciding at this stage of the proceedings that the instructional speech was within
17 the parameters of the approved curriculum and within academic norms – i.e., that the defendants
18 actions were not reasonably related to legitimate pedagogical concerns – then the complaint has
19 stated a claim for relief under 42 U.S.C. §1983. Therefore, the motion to dismiss the first claim is
20 denied.

21 **B. First Amendment Viewpoint Discrimination**

22 Defendants argue that Sheldon's First Amendment claim for viewpoint discrimination does
23 not state a claim for the same reason as her retaliation claim. The court's analysis of the first claim
24 essentially addresses the second claim also. Therefore, the motion to dismiss the second claim is
25 denied.

1 **C. Fourteenth Amendment Equal Protection**

2 Sheldon's equal protection claim is apparently based on the alleged individual mistreatment
3 of her. *See* Complaint ¶¶ 147-51. Defendants argue that this is an equal protection claim in the
4 public employment context based on a class of one, which is foreclosed by *Engquist v. Oregon Dept.*
5 *of Agriculture*, 128 S. Ct. 2146 (2008). Plaintiff raises no written opposition to this argument, and
6 the court finds that her claim is indeed barred by *Engquist*. The motion to dismiss the third claim for
7 relief is granted.

8 **D. Fourteenth Amendment Due Process**

9 Sheldon's fourth claim alleges that SJCC denied her due process of law in terminating her
10 employment. Defendants move to dismiss, arguing that: (1) as an at-will employee Sheldon had no
11 constitutionally cognizable property right in her employment; and (2) she was afforded due process
12 before being terminated.

13 In order to have a constitutional property interest in a particular benefit, a person "must have
14 more than an abstract need or desire for it. . . [a person] must have a legitimate claim of entitlement
15 to it." *Board of Regents of State Colleges v. Roth*, 408 U.S. 564 (1972). A constitutionally
16 sufficient claim of entitlement, furthermore, must stem from "an independent source such as state-
17 law rules or understandings that secure certain benefits and that support claims of entitlement to
18 those benefits." *Id.* In California, public employment is held by statute, not contract. *Miller v. State*
19 *of California*, 18 Cal.3d 808, 813 (Cal. 1977). Sheldon qualifies as a temporary employee under
20 Cal. Educ. Code § 87482.5, and therefore could be terminated at SJCC's discretion under Cal. Educ.
21 Code § 87665. Under California law, Sheldon therefore had no constitutional property interest in
22 her employment, and no due process claim lies for her termination. *See Mt. Healthy City Sch. Dist.*
23 *Bd. of Educ. v. Doyle*, 429 U.S. 274, 283 (1977); *Portman v. County of Santa Clara*, 995 F.2d 808,
24 905 (9th Cir. 1993).² Therefore, Sheldon's fourth claim for relief fails.

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26 ² Even though Sheldon could have been discharged for no reason whatever, and had no
27 constitutional right to a hearing prior to the decision not to rehire her, she may nonetheless establish
28 a claim to reinstatement if the decision not to rehire her was made by reason of her exercise of
constitutionally protected First Amendment freedoms. *Mt. Healthy*, 429 U.S. at 283-84.

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III. ORDER

For the reasons stated above, the court:

- (1) denies defendants' motion to dismiss as to plaintiffs' first and second claims based upon the alleged violation of her First Amendment rights; and
- (2) grants defendants' motion to dismiss as to plaintiffs' third claim based upon the alleged violation of her equal protection rights under the Fourteenth Amendment and her fourth claim asserting deprivation of due process under the Fourteenth Amendment. The dismissals are with prejudice as any attempt to amend would be futile.

DATED: 11/25/09



RONALD M. WHYTE
United States District Judge

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17 **Dated:** 11/25/09

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Chambers of Judge Whyte

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