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Local News

Five HU students must do community service

The university insists the discipline concerned violations of procedural rules, not political beliefs.

BY BEVERLY N. WILLIAMS
247-4755

December 3, 2005

HAMPTON -- Seven Hampton University students who took part in a walkout last month will find out next week they'll be disciplined for not getting the university's approval for the event.

But one student said he and four others received letters late Friday saying they would be required to complete 20 hours of community service.

"The community service is reasonable," said student Aaron Ray. "But what we had to go through to get to this point was not reasonable." The 19-year-old is from Columbia, Md.

Disciplinary hearings were held Friday for the students accused of violating several policies in the 2004 student handbook, including distributing unauthorized fliers and "cajoling or proselytizing students." The fliers, which students said were handed out to raise awareness about social issues, criticized the Bush administration, the war on Iraq and genocide in Sudan.

The seven feared being expelled, but university officials said Thursday that none faced expulsion because they were only charged with minor procedural violations.

Officials also said no students were disciplined for their beliefs.

The students, however, contend that their kind of activism is not welcome on the campus.

"We've been trying to get recognized as an Amnesty International group on campus, but we've been refused for four years," said Brandon King, one of the seven. "They tell us there are other organizations on campus that do what we do."

Bennie McMorris, the university's vice president for student affairs, refused to comment about the students' efforts to get the organization which campaigns for internationally recognized human rights on campus.

"Today's hearings, which lasted five hours, were about policies and procedures," McMorris said, "not about chartering an organization on campus."

During the hearings, each student was read his or her charges, Ray say. The seven also got a chance to dispute the charges and present character witnesses, Ray said. They did not receive copies of the police report, but McMorris said they were told they could get them later.

HU's actions against the students are considered by many in the academic community and by groups like the ACLU and the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education as an effort to stifle the students rights to free speech.

But McMorris denied the students' freedom of speech was violated. "The university recognizes 'the role of peaceful, nonviolent, unobtrusive demonstrations on campus to support student petitions to redress of grievance,'" officials said.

The Associated Press contributed to this report. n

"Hampton University has always and continues to be a champion of free speech and free expression. Hampton University believes in the free flow and sharing of ideas among our faculty, staff and students."

About 20 students participated in the Nov. 2 nationwide walkout organized by World Can't Wait, a group that opposes the Bush administration, and King said Friday that he and the other students plan to continue their efforts to raise student awareness.

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"Slowly but surely, after all of this stuff dies down, students may be blacklisted," King said. "It will be tough, but we're going to get an activist group recognized on campus."

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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