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CHIEGO

Expulsion for protest unfair

By:

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What happens when a college student peacefully criticizes the actions of his university's administration? At Valdosta State University, new details are emerging in an incident that appears to offer a disturbing answer to that question.

After reading about this incident in numerous media sources, I examined publicly available documents to try to uncover an answer. However, what I found only exacerbated my concerns.

In what should be of interest to all University System of Georgia students who value their First Amendment rights, this case reveals major issues with how far freedom of speech extends on university campuses.

The incident began with the most American of traditions: a peaceful, spirited protest by a determined individual.

In a scenario reminiscent of Tate II, a new parking garage costing \$30 million was announced for the VSU campus, to be funded with student fees.

T. Hayden Barnes, a VSU student, was angered by the garage and fought back peacefully and legally, sending e-mails to senior administrators and putting up fliers around campus protesting the garage.

Unfortunately for Barnes, his repeated letters roused the ire of VSU President Ronald Zaccari, who at the end of last spring semester personally ordered Barnes to be "administratively withdrawn" - expelled - specifically citing a collage Barnes posted on Facebook, which Zaccari claimed amounted to a "clear and present danger."

This collage includes images of a parking garage, Zaccari, a bulldozer and a sign that says "no blood for oil," among other environmental images. The title of the collage, "S.A.V.E.-Zaccari Memorial Parking Garage," apparently was a reference to Zaccari's desire to leave a legacy when he retired (he did so late last year), but I could not see any of the "clear and present danger" claimed by Zaccari. See for yourself online. (<http://thefire.org/index.php/article/8530.html>)

When Barnes appealed the decision to expel him to the University System of Georgia's Board of Regents, the same governing body that oversees our University, the regents defended Zaccari, claiming Barnes posed a danger to the safety of campus. To prove this charge, the regents cited two examples from Barnes' Facebook profile in a document submitted to the state Office of Administrative Hearings last fall.

According to this document, while Barnes' Facebook status stated he was "cleaning out and rearranging his room and, thus, his mind," Barnes posted a link to a Web site that included the tagline, "Shoot it. Upload it. Get famous." A reference to school shootings?

No, actually an ad for a photography contest, but apparently considered grounds for action against Barnes, as the regents document links that with the Virginia Tech shootings.

Last week, with the aid of the nonpartisan Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, Barnes filed a lawsuit alleging that his rights to free speech and due process were denied.

FIRE's president, Greg Lukianoff, had harsh words for VSU, decrying VSU's "concerted effort to silence and punish Hayden Barnes" as an "unconscionable attempt to violate his First Amendment rights."

Hopefully new details will emerge soon to clarify what happened at VSU, as taking out-of-context material from students' Facebook profiles to justify expelling them seems absurd.

The regents, which is meeting today, should give Barnes a fair hearing and transparently determine in a timely manner the merits of Barnes' case. Georgia's public university students should not have to worry whether speaking out against their administrators could lead to an untimely departure from college.

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