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THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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## Today's News

Friday, May 24, 2002

### George Washington U. Professors Blast Hot Line for Anonymous Complaints

By [THOMAS BARTLETT](#)

George Washington University will no longer use a security company to operate a telephone hot line allowing callers to lodge anonymous complaints against employees or students, university officials said Wednesday. The decision was made after the Faculty Senate twice condemned the service, set up at the beginning of the year, as an affront to academic freedom.

Some professors, however, said the decision had not allayed their fears. Calls are now routed to an answering machine on the campus, and they demanded that the hot line be shut down entirely. "It's a major threat to academic freedom, because people can file totally fabricated, anonymous complaints based upon what a student or faculty member said on or off the campus," said John F. Banzhaf III, a professor of public-interest law. Mr. Banzhaf also said the system bypasses complaint procedures that the university has used for many years.

The nonprofit Foundation for Individual Rights in Education also condemned the use of the anonymous hot line.

Before the hot line's installation, students and professors alike could file complaints with the appropriate person in their department. However, those filings were not anonymous.

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The telephone hot line was operated by the Chicago-based Pinkerton Service Corporation. Callers, who did not have to identify themselves, could report any wrongdoing -- from criminal offenses, like theft, to violations of university policy, like plagiarism. A written version of each report would be forwarded to the university's compliance office, which could investigate the allegations.

A company official said Pinkerton operators were now transferring calls to an office at George Washington.

University officials said that they would continue to discuss whether a hot line that allows anonymous complaints is appropriate in a university setting.

The university's president, Stephen Joel Trachtenberg, said he had learned of the service from a notification letter mailed to all university employees. "I thought, Oh, no, people aren't going to like this," he said. While he maintained that a hot line of some kind was necessary, he said using Pinkerton "was not how I would have done it."

Louis H. Katz, a vice president and treasurer who reportedly had approved the hot line, did not return phone calls. Colin T. Clasper, assistant vice president for university compliance, declined to comment.

The hot line was first debated at a Faculty Senate meeting in March. At that time, Mr. Katz apologized for not discussing the service with faculty members before it was installed. He argued, however, that it would help the university defend itself against potential lawsuits, according to minutes of the meeting.

Not likely, said Mr. Banzhaf: "Many college administrations are paranoid over the idea of possibly being sued, and people like Pinkerton are playing on that paranoia by offering them a canned solution that won't work."

The Pinkerton official said that the company operates

hot lines for 16 other universities, but that George Washington was the only one to use the service for general, universitywide complaints. All but one of the other hot lines are used only by employees of university hospitals. At the University of Kentucky, Pinkerton operates a hot line that allows callers to report National Collegiate Athletic Association violations.

There was confusion Wednesday about whether anonymous complaints could still be made. Mr. Trachtenberg said he believed that a recording now told callers to submit complaints to the appropriate person in their department. In fact, a recording tells callers that no one in the compliance office is available and that they should leave a message.

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