



September 20, 2023

Mr. Graham Piro  
Program Officer, Campus Rights Advocacy  
Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression  
510 Walnut St., Suite 1250  
Philadelphia, PA 19106

Dear Mr. Piro,

Thank you for reaching out regarding clarification about the lecture from Professor Robert George held at Washington College on September 7, 2023, at 4:30 p.m., and the unfortunate disruption and cancellation of the event. Your request recognizes the important issues regarding free expression and protest, and we wanted to provide you with important details that were absent from the reporting of the event.

Prior to the event, Washington College took proactive measures to both reassert its core values in support of free expression and to provide students with alternate events to express themselves regarding the presence of Professor George on campus. In an email to campus dated September 6, 2023, I stated the following:

“This Thursday, the Institute for Religion, Politics, and Culture is presenting the inaugural Lawrence Swanstrom Memorial Lecture. The speaker, Constitutional Law and Political Philosophy Professor Robert George of Princeton University, espouses views that some members of our community find abhorrent. There have been calls from some to cancel his appearance. While I understand this desire, doing so would not be consistent with the core values of liberal learning to which this institution is dedicated.

Challenges concerning free expression are not new to college campuses and they raise complicated questions, especially for a campus that values diversity, equity, and inclusion like ours. However, inviting a speaker to campus is not an endorsement of their viewpoint. The very foundation of a Washington College liberal arts education is committed to informed, critical inquiry and the exploration of a wide diversity of perspectives—indeed, we could not be true to our mission to challenge and inspire emerging citizen leaders if we did not uphold this commitment. It is incumbent upon us as a community to create and maintain an environment in which everyone feels safe to share their ideas, even those that may be controversial or offensive. And as a community, we must examine and, when necessary, challenge those ideas, but we cannot insulate ourselves from differing viewpoints.”

This was followed by an email on September 7, 2023, sent at 12:52 p.m. that set forth explicit expectations for civil engagement with the speaker, and also provided details for counterprogrammed events:

“In support of the College’s values around free expression, we have arranged multiple opportunities from **4:00 - 6:00 this afternoon in and around Hodson Hall** for you to express your opinions and values in ways that you can be heard but do not interfere with the same right of self-expression of other members of our community.

These include:

- Attendance at the planned event in Hynson Lounge to hear and question the speaker. This option requires a level of civility and conduct that is not disruptive to the event and the ability of others to participate in the event. When we disagree with opinions and ideas, our commitment to intellectual development for the good of all requires we engage in good faith, and thoughtful, respectful challenging of others is an essential element of that.
- An identified area adjacent to Hodson to support peaceful protest. This area, the grassy area adjacent to the Hodson terrace on the Cater Walk side of Hodson will be clearly marked. A reminder that this protest, consistent with College policy, should not infringe on the rights of others or disrupt the operations of or other events on campus.
- Alternate activities in the Egg and Goose Nest to process and discuss feelings and reactions to the event. These activities will be staffed by professional staff, including College counselors, to support attendees, provide multiple outlets of self-expression, and the opportunity to gather and have some food.
- The Washington Advocacy Coaches (students) will be available in Toll from 6:30-8:30 p.m. following the event to provide support to students as needed. The WACs will be in Toll in the wellness office (once you enter the Decker entrance of Toll, it's the very first door on the left.)

As a diverse community of learners, we strive to provide a space where all of our students are welcomed and can have their voices heard while learning from others in the community with whom they disagree. We know this isn't always a smooth process but believe that it is possible on our campus and that we all should do so in a respectful and civil manner. The Honor Code and the Student Handbook outline specific related policies.”

About 20 minutes into George’s lecture, a small group of protestors entered the room making noise with music and whistles for about one minute. Thereafter, two protestors were responsible for the remainder of the disruption. Shortly after the protestors began shouting, two faculty and two student affairs administrators of the College intervened with the students. Attempts were made to de-escalate the emotions involved, and the students were informed that they stood in violation of the Student Honor Code. The intervention with the students continued for some 10-15 minutes before the decision was made to halt the event.

We fully agree that things did not go as we had hoped despite our efforts to provide outlets to channel the energies of some of our students. Let me add that there were dozens of Washington College students who attended the event in the spirit of engaged dialogue. As an institution we value our role in shaping engaged citizen leaders and we strive to instill the ability for reasoned disagreement. I am proud that so many of our students attended the lecture prepared to listen to Professor George’s perspective and ask questions of him and his positions.

Regardless, any time you have an aberrant occurrence, it is an opportunity to step back and assess. We always strive to learn from our experience, improve processes and make adjustments to better prepare for future events. It is worth noting that the College has clear policies and procedures around civil disturbances and demonstrations. Part of our after-action analysis will include ensuring that our Public

Safety officers are prepared to engage in ways that will not permit events to be disrupted or abruptly canceled. In this instance, the few disruptive students who aimed to shut down the lecture were warned that their actions would result in disciplinary action should they continue. That disciplinary process is currently underway, and I can assure you that students who violated our policies will be held accountable.

Washington College remains committed to free expression and to providing a learning environment that allows students the opportunity to grow into engaged citizens. We recognize that as students transform into adulthood, the choices they make become a part of the learning process, whether those be successful choices or mistakes, it is part of our responsibility to help those students understand the context of their actions and help them continue on a path to success.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michael J. Sosulski". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "M" and a long, sweeping underline.

Michael J. Sosulski

*President*