



5-Day Forecast
 Currently: 39° F
 Scattered Clouds
 Humidity: 75%
 Chance of precip: 8%



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Wil LaVeist

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HU parents breathe sigh of relief

Published December 4 2005

As a parent who sent a kid away to college, I felt the collected exhale of the parents who learned that their Hampton University students wouldn't be expelled.

The students had their hearings Friday. But on Thursday, Bennie McMorris, the university's vice president for student affairs, confirmed they wouldn't be sent home. Instead of getting paddled out the door, they would get a "slap on the wrist" for a "minor offense."

That's the outcome I predicted to Arthur and Tanya Ray last week. They are the parents of Aaron Ray, one of the students who received a letter about an unauthorized Nov. 2 demonstration that ignited a firestorm over free speech.

The letters said the students involved "could" be expelled for their actions.

The Rays called from Columbia, Md., alarmed about what they heard and read in the letter. Arthur, who is a lawyer, said the word expulsion had a "chilling effect" on them. I covered the tuition bill for my son to attend Morgan State University in 2003, so I know the Rays lost some breath.

Tanya, who is retired from a career in criminal justice, was particularly concerned that this came down as finals week nears. "We want Aaron to focus on priority one, which is his grades," she said.

She also told Aaron that "ignorance is not a defense" when he said that members of his loosely formed group were not aware of HU's demonstration policy. It's in the student handbook. They should have complied, even though the policies have been enforced selectively and might be on shaky legal ground. Still, the Rays thought threatening possible expulsion was heavy-handed and muzzling.

HU sent letters to seven students for "posting unauthorized materials" and participating in "actions to cajole or proselytize students" about issues such as the AIDS crisis and the performance of the Bush administration.

After my column last Sunday, I received several e-mails and phone calls from HU alumni and others supporting the students.



Organizations like the ACLU and the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education spoke out and fired off letters. I doubt that's the response McMorris and university officials expected when campus police shut down the small demonstration and recorded students' names and ID cards.

A few alumni e-mails defended the administration, saying the students should have followed the rules. But to those critics offering the same tired refrain, blaming the media for putting down poor little defenseless HU, I'd like you to consider parents like the Rays. They are people who send their students to HU because they believe it's bigger than just a little home in a bubble by the sea. Whether the parents are HU alumni or not, they, as I do, believe it is one of the best and most valuable universities in the country, that it's a shining jewel where their kids can sparkle.

HU produces great leaders who have made their mark in fields such as architecture, business and journalism. Its Scripps Howard School of Journalism and Communications, headed by radio and TV commentator Tony Brown, has a faculty of highly accomplished journalists and media pros. Some of them are HU alumni. Their resumes list some of the best media organizations around.

So no, HU is not a defenseless little school that can't handle the heat and doesn't understand free speech is essential to a vibrant, stimulating college campus. HU is a high-profile institution with broad 137-year-old shoulders that bear the responsibility of inspiring and molding men and women who go out and advance the culture. We criticize because we care.

It was an English professor at Lincoln University of Pennsylvania, Joanne V. Gabbin, who in 1984 saw my flame and guided it toward journalism. At a time when my mind was more on partying and women, Gabbin encouraged me.

She made me editor of the student newspaper and introduced me to the writings of Langston Hughes, a Lincoln alumnus.

I'll let that marinate some.

The Rays came down to attend the hearings, and I sat with them afterwards. Other parents came from as far as Ohio, they said. Letters were sent to the students Friday. Most of them got warnings and community service sentences. However, the Rays remain concerned about the message.

"They could've just given the kids a warning (in the first place)," Tanya Ray said. "We're living in a time of fear. Make people fearful, and they'll be compliant."

"How can you have a school of political science and a school of journalism that deal with the social issues of the day and not encourage free speech?" Arthur Ray said. "The school is supposed to be about nurturing, not tearing down."

That's why we send our kids to historically black colleges and universities, right?

Still, "It's going to turn out to be such a great learning experience," Tanya Ray said, adding that the students had to deal with administrators, with lawyers and organize their thoughts on the fly.

"Imagine what they could do if they had the full backing of the administration?" Arthur Ray

suggested.

Imagine HU. Imagine.

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