



Foundation for Individual Rights in Education

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October 27, 2006

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CHAIRMAN EMERITUS

Sent via U.S. Mail and Facsimile (401-863-7737)

Dear President Simmons:

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As you can see from our Directors and Board of Advisors, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) unites civil rights and civil liberties leaders, scholars, journalists, and public intellectuals across the political and ideological spectrum on behalf of liberty, due process, legal equality, voluntary association, freedom of speech, and religious liberty on America's college campuses. Our website, www.thefire.org, will give you a greater sense of our identity and activities.

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FIRE is concerned about the threat to freedom of association posed by Brown University's recent suspension of the Reformed University Fellowship (RUF), a Christian student organization. While such a suspension is a serious matter demanding careful explanation, the university has so far proffered only a vague and poorly documented account of RUF's alleged transgressions. Unless Brown sufficiently explains its reasons for suspending the RUF, the university's actions are an affront to religious liberty and freedom of association on campus.

This is our understanding of the facts. Please inform us if you believe we are in error. This fall, Brown's Office of the Chaplains and Religious Life (OCRL) suspended the RUF for the 2006-2007 academic year. On September 13, 2006, OCRL Director Reverend Janet Cooper Nelson explained in an e-mail to RUF President Ethan Wingfield that the suspension was the result of "non-compliance with University policy and procedure as outlined in The Standards and Conditions Governing the Appointment of Religious Life Affiliates and their Sponsoring Religious Agencies at Brown University."

Based upon communications from the OCRL to the RUF, the reasons for RUF's non-compliance with those standards are threefold. First, Cooper Nelson claimed in the September 13 e-mail that Trinity Presbyterian Church, the local sponsoring body for RUF, "ha[d] withdrawn its sponsorship of RUF, effective immediately, for the 2006-07 academic year." Second, Associate Protestant Srhhwiversity Chaplain Reverend Allen Molicki, filed 9/11/06, explained to Cooper Nelson on time to refe Affiliate. Third, Callaan wrote in that same e-mail that:

...the irresponsibility of RUF's leadership last year and the failure to renew RUF Religious Life Status again this year. ...[U]nlike Molicki and last year's and now this year's student president (sic) become possessed of a leadership culture of contempt for the law rendered all collegial relations with my office impossible.

While Brown is a private institution and therefore not directly bound by the university does promise its students "the rights of peaceful assembly and orderly protest, and the right to attend, mrhh8(a)-1.2(ke usy) the same day that Cooper Nelson sent an e-mail to Cooper Nelson withdrawing its sponsorship of RUF activities of applicants with respect therefor

Sponsored
not group to fight in the 2005-2006 academic year, retaining its right to reserve rooms for meetings. Moreover, RUF's Religious Life Affiliate by Edward Park, who submitted this year well before the deadline. Neither the failure to

cultivated a “culture of contempt and dishonesty” and requested to know the terms of the group’s reinstatement. As of the date of this letter, RUF has not received a reply.

In an office that “works to ensure that all beliefs can find a home on campus” and attempts to “promote communication and understanding among all religious groups,” freedom of association should not be at the mercy of administrative caprice. While the “Standards and Conditions Governing the Appointment of Religious Life Affiliates and Sponsoring Religious Agencies at Brown University” grants the OCRL the power to suspend a group’s right to exist, the office should never abuse that power. The OCRL’s reasons for suspending a student group should at all times be objective, clear, and legitimate. Those very basic standards have not been met in this case, making RUF’s suspension unjust.

FIRE is committed to seeing this situation through to a just and moral conclusion. To this end, we request that Brown University either offer a reasonable explanation for the RUF’s suspension or revoke the suspension, allowing the RUF to recommence meeting. We further request that you reexamine the manner in which the Office of the Chaplains and Religious Life treats the student groups under its purview to ensure that all students and all organizations are treated equitably.

We request a response on this matter by November 10, 2006.

Sincerely,

Tara E. Sweeney
Senior Program Officer

cc:

Rev. Janet Cooper Nelson, University Chaplain and Director of the Office of the Chaplains and