

FIRE Protests Students' Punishment for Handing Out Anti-Bush Flyers

By Jim Brown
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(AgapePress) - A [Foundation for Individual Rights in Education](#) (FIRE) spokesman says the group is concerned about Hampton University's commitment to free expression. In November, police officers at the Virginia school confronted seven students who were passing out flyers protesting President Bush's response to Hurricane Katrina. Later, the students were charged with "posting unauthorized materials" and threatened with expulsion.

However, after FIRE sent a letter to Hampton University protesting its actions, the school decided not to expel the students, instead sentencing at least five and possibly all of them to 20 hours of community service each. But FIRE program manager Robert Shibley feels strongly that the students' actions did not warrant any punishment at all.

FIRE objects to the sentence, Shibley says, "because we believe that, at a university that promises to give a liberal education and that upholds the general standards of academic freedom, students shouldn't be forced to run their political tracts by administrators before passing them out." He feels the students' punishment should be rescinded and that Hampton's administration should renew its commitment to the principle of free speech.

"At a university, it should be a marketplace of ideas," the FIRE spokesman asserts, "where students are free to communicate any variety of political ideas and understandings. When you restrict those and when you make people review things with administrators beforehand, you're putting a chilling effect on speech that's really dangerous for free expression."

Shibley notes that Hampton University's record on free expression has not been exemplary. In 2003, the administration seized all copies of an edition of the student newspaper because editors refused to print a letter written by the university's then-president on the front page of the publication.

The school has released a statement saying in part that it "has always and continues to be a champion of free speech and free expression." However, FIRE has issued a press release in response. Recapping the issues, the group asks, how can Hampton University "publicly promise to be a friend of speech but privately deliver repression?"

FIRE is calling upon the university to demonstrate the seriousness of its touted commitment to academic freedom and free expression by revoking the punishment meted out to the students and changing its practices accordingly.

Jim Brown, a regular contributor to *AgapePress*, is a reporter for [American Family Radio News](#), which can be heard online.

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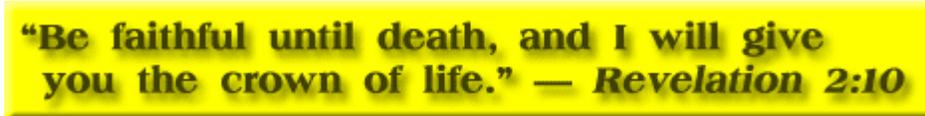
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