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TOP ALASKA STORIES

UA chief strikes hard for free speech

'A CERTAIN TRUMPET': Hamilton's shot is heard around the country.

By Doug O'harra
Anchorage Daily News

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In a memorandum that ricocheted through the Alaska academic community and brought attention from national media this week, the president of the University of Alaska bluntly declared that school officials shall not be wimps in their defense of freedom of speech by faculty members, staffers or students.

"Opinions expressed . . . don't have to be politic or polite," President Mark Hamilton wrote. "However personally offended we might be, however unfair the association of the University to the opinion might be, I insist that we remain a certain trumpet on this most precious of Constitutional rights."

Hamilton cited three examples in the March 13 memo to the university's three chancellors: the reaction to complaints over the poem "Indian Girls" published in December by Anchorage creative writing professor Linda McCarriston, complaints over the selection of an advocate for physician-assisted suicide to speak in the Bartlett Lecture Series last month, and objections after a dozen professors signed a letter asking President Clinton to make the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge off-limits to oil development.

After he'd been contacted repeatedly about the three incidents, Hamilton said Thursday that he needed to make "absolutely clear" his position.

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"This is a university. We allow ideas to be expressed. That's what happens," said Hamilton, a former Army general and a published poet. "As I told one caller, I defended the constitution for 31 years, and I'm not going to abandon her just yet."

The memo, which wasn't widely publicized until this week, prompted coverage in the Chronicle of Higher Education and the Wall Street Journal. The Philadelphia-based Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, or FIRE, a group that had been defending McCarriston, had published a report on the Internet.

By Thursday, chancellors at Alaska's three universities had forwarded copies of the memo to employees and students. UAF Chancellor Marshall Lind and UAA Chancellor Lee Gorsuch included letters endorsing Hamilton's position and First Amendment principles.

Gorsuch also announced that philosophy professor James Liszka would hold a forum on freedom of speech this fall for faculty and staff members. A similar forum will be scheduled for students.

The uproar over McCarriston's poem and the subsequent response are merely an Alaska version of how free speech on college campuses has been "chilled" by people protesting opinions they find offensive, according to FIRE executive director Thor Halverssen.

"There are cases like this at colleges and universities across the country," he said. "Either you have academic freedom or you don't. You don't qualify things."

The poem described child sexual abuse and exploitation of Native women, triggering protests and demonstrations by a group of students. Among several other local Native students, graduate student and poet Diane Benson had criticized the poem in e-mails and public statements, arguing that it perpetuated stereotypes.

In the aftermath, several university officials issued statements suggesting that they were investigating the situation. Hamilton said in his memo that officials cannot be ambiguous in their response to complaints about what employees or students have said or published.

"Attempts to assuage anger or to demonstrate concern by qualifying our support for free speech serve to cloud what must be a clear message," he added. "Noting that, for example, 'The University supports the right of free speech, but we intend to check into this matter' or 'The University supports the right of free speech, but I have asked Dean X or Provost Y to investigate the circumstances' is unacceptable.

"There is nothing to 'check into,' nothing to 'investigate.' "

Hamilton's response brought praise from activists for academic freedom.

"It's a phenomenal letter," Halverssen said. "For us, that sort of unequivocal statement is something that we do not see very often. It's

very heartening, and Alaska should be very proud to have Mark Hamilton as president."

"He had enormous courage," said UAF professor Judith Kleinfeld, president of the Alaska Association of Scholars. "He is not cowed by the political forces that usually cow a university president."

McCarriston and Benson each said Thursday they had a harrowing winter, saying they felt intimidated on campus by supporters of the other.

"My reaction is one of relief and celebration," McCarriston said. "I am deeply grateful to FIRE and President Hamilton for taking a clear and powerful stand for the necessity of the free flow of ideas."

Benson also said she is in "absolute" agreement with Hamilton's stand.

"There's nothing more important to this country," she said. "I would never suggest anyone's civil rights be thwarted or violated or taken away."

Benson said she thought it ironic that she wasn't mentioned in Hamilton's letter. "Because I spoke up, I have faced ridicule and harassment," she said. "I want to express my opinion, and in the process of doing so, I've taken a lot of heat."

McCarriston said harassment of her remains ongoing and has been getting worse. "Until FIRE intervened on my behalf, I was very tentatively supported by the university," she said. "I felt very alone and afraid."

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