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## No Room for a Gay Group

Jessica Smith is tired of the phrase “unofficial status.” The Hampton University junior wants to post fliers, instead of relying on word of mouth, when planning events for Students Promoting Equality, Action & Knowledge, a group whose stated mission is to “serve as a bridge between the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and straight communities.”

But for now, Smith has to settle for the status quo. Hampton has denied official recognition to the group, called SPEAK. The news caused members to question the university’s motives.

“Everyone is disappointed, but we’ve all become accustomed to the system here and our hopes weren’t that high,” Smith said. “I think the school is wound up in a conservative mindset, and there’s a misperception of what the group is actually about. It’s not a group strictly for gay people; we’re trying to promote equality for students and provide a safe place to discuss gay-straight issues.”

Smith said that every time the group’s president asks the administration to explain its decision not to recognize the group, she receives the same non-answer. The interim director of student activities who informed the group of the decision did not return calls for comment on Friday.

According to a statement from the university, SPEAK was denied official status because of a moratorium on new organizations except when there is a vacancy — in other words, when a group becomes inactive. When there is that opening, a panel of student affairs staff, faculty and students evaluates applications beginning with the first group that requested official status, the statement says.

After being turned down by the university two years ago, students in the group — which then went by a different name — revised the proposal to make clear that they planned to be inclusive, according to Smith. Under Hampton rules, once a group is denied recognition it must wait another two years before reapplying.

The university’s [code of conduct](#) states that the university will “support equal rights and opportunities for all regardless of age, sex, race, religion, disability, ethnic heritage, socio-economic status, political, social, or other affiliation or disaffiliation, or sexual preference.”

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Greg Lukianoff, president of the nonprofit Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, which was contacted by SPEAK, said Hampton has a pattern of squelching free expression. In 2005, students there [faced expulsion](#) after being accused of violating university policy by handing out fliers focused on Hurricane Katrina, homophobia and other issues. They eventually were allowed to remain enrolled.

Lukianoff said that Hampton's mission statement and its practices are inconsistent.

"If a college is clear when you enter that you don't have certain rights, then that's there for students to see," he said. "But Hampton likes to hold itself out as a school that promotes freedom of speech. If you make that promise, you have to deliver."

FIRE has sent a letter to Hampton urging the university to change its mind, but Lukianoff said his organization has yet to receive a response. SPEAK's 15 or so members are looking into an appeal, Smith said.

— [Elia Powers](#)

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