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News

Students' Rights Protected

By Nick Zinzer
Broadside Staff Writer

Awareness of one's rights on campus is both critical and beneficial. Students who are aware of the legal rights protecting them will be able to recognize when they are being taken advantage of and be able to defend themselves accordingly.

Religion plays a prominent role in many students' lives and protecting the right to practice an individual's religion is an important part of George Mason University's policy. Numerous spiritual groups exist on campus and knowing how a student is protected is helpful. Most importantly, Mason cannot inhibit particular religious groups or advance any religious doctrine. Since Mason is a public institution, its actions are limited by the First Amendment. The Free Exercise Clause and Establishment Clause protect individuals from religious interference as well as being forced to adhere to a specific religion.

Protection of spiritual belief is not limited to mainstream or traditional religious groups. Christians, Muslims and Jews are all entitled to the same rights as smaller religious organizations whose beliefs and practices differ from larger religious organizations. According to a publication by the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, "[individuals] do not have to belong to a theistic religion to receive the protection of the religious clauses of the First Amendment; nor do you have to belong to an organized religious group." In other words, those who don't believe in God or gods are entitled to the same protections as those who do (theists). This applies to all religious groups on the campus.

Most, if not all, colleges have disciplinary proceedings. Mason has policies on topics ranging from academic dishonesty to sexual assault. Students are not arbitrarily tried and convicted of an offense; rather, there are established procedures. Since Mason is a public university, its disciplinary procedures are governed by the U.S. Constitution. This entitles students to the privileges of the Fifth and 14th Amendments that ensure no citizen is denied "life, liberty, or property, without due process of law."

In general, the more serious the offense is, the more rights a student possesses. The first

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thing a student is entitled to be notified of is the charges filed against her. Knowing what one is being charged with allows an individual to adequately prepare a defense. Second, one is entitled to hear a description of the evidence mounted against one. These protections provide legitimacy for the trial and potential punishment as well. Should a trial take place within Mason, the student has the right to have the case heard under regular procedures used for comparable cases. The panel deciding a student's fate should also be impartial. However these laws cannot be applied to every case. In cases regarding poor academic performance, these rules could be voided. The state is generally reluctant to second-guess the grading policies of instructors and the university as a whole.

Public institutions and private employers alike are prohibited from discriminating against an employee's "race, color, religion, sex, or national origin," which is based on the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Mason's policy takes this one step further by barring discrimination based on veteran status, disability, sexual orientation and age as well. Private employers actually do have the right to discriminate based on certain aspects they feel would be detrimental to their business or work environment, such as sexual orientation; however, that is quite uncommon.

Weekly Poll

Are you ready for the fall semester?

Yes

No

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