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Akron pastor to head UA panel: Commission to explore how school disciplines students, Plinton fallout

BYLINE: Carol Biliczky, The Akron Beacon Journal, Ohio

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Mar. 23--University of Akron President Luis Proenza has named an Akron pastor to head a panel looking into student disciplinary policies and law enforcement practices on campus.

The Rev. Ronald Fowler of the Arlington Church of God will be among a half-dozen community and campus members on the independent commission, Proenza said at Wednesday's UA board of trustees meeting.

The rest of the panel is being named and could be announced at the end of next week, Proenza said.

The commission is being formed in response to a series of Akron Beacon Journal articles this month about UA graduate student **Charles Plinton**.

Although Plinton was acquitted in criminal court of drug trafficking, he was found "responsible" for the crime in a UA disciplinary hearing by a 3-2 vote.

The evidence against Plinton came from a felon, Richard "Hulk" Harris, whom police had paid to live in UA student housing and set up drug deals with students.

Suspended for a semester, Plinton never returned to UA and committed suicide in December. He always denied the allegations.

As for Proenza, he said he was "deeply distressed" by the case.

He said the commission would be looking at how to improve the situation.

"The question that needs to be asked is, 'Is this appropriate for the campus? And if not, how can we address serious problems?' " Proenza said.

The president said he did not receive much feedback about the death of the graduate student -- about a half dozen e-mails from faculty and staff members and possibly one parent, and one phone call. "All were happy with the responses," he said.

He said trustees were helping him set up the commission.

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No trustee spoke publicly after Proenza's brief remarks in the meeting, but some later spoke in favor of the plan.

Ann Amer Brennan said the president is on the right track.

"Being an urban university, I'm not naive enough to believe we don't have it (drugs). You hear of it in middle schools," she said. "I believe the university did the best it had with the information it had at the time."

John Fink, board chairman, said the board "feels strongly" that the commission should look at the best practices and prevalent practices at other universities to see how UA compares.

"I'm not an expert in these types of things," he said, declining to comment further.

"It's a very thoughtful way to react to the situation," said Trustee Richard Pogue.

UA spokesman Paul Herold said university officials did not bring the issue of the multiagency task force to a trustees meeting.

Although a handful of university officials knew that an informant had been planted in UA housing to spy on students, Proenza wasn't one of those informed, he said.

On Wednesday, Proenza declined to say whether he should have been informed; he referred questions to the budding commission, which might be able to complete its work by the end of the spring semester in May.

As for Fowler, the pastor said that Plinton's story "has impacted the minority community."

He said he didn't seek the appointment to head the panel, nor did he contact Proenza about Plinton's death.

"I've got to play this one carefully so that we can learn as much as we can from a very difficult set of problems," he said. "Everyone's concerned."

Carol Biliczky can be reached at 330-996-3729 or cbiliczky@thebeaconjournal.com

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