



Rutgers Council of AAUP Chapters

American Association of University Professors • American Federation of Teachers

Rutgers AAUP-AFT

11 Stone Street
New Brunswick, NJ 08901-1113

Phone: 732-964-1000
Fax: 732-964-1032

E-mail: aaup@rutgersaaup.org
Web: www.rutgersaaup.org

8 June 2017

Dear Governors of Rutgers University:

I write—on behalf of the 7000 members of the Rutgers AAUP-AFT faculty union—to oppose your recent restriction of political expression at Rutgers University. On 6 April 2017, the Board of Governors revised the University’s Policy on Disruptions (Policy 50.3.5) and rewrote the related section of the Student Code of Conduct (Policy 10.2.11). The BOG enacted these changes without the slightest discussion or consultation inside or beyond the University community. The resultant policy threatens to undermine political, religious, and other forms of speech on campus—and, thereby, to narrow the creativity and plurality of opinion characteristic of Rutgers.

As alumni, you will know of Rutgers long history as a site of political advocacy and dissent. During the Civil Rights movement, students held demonstrations on campus and in Camden, Newark, and New Brunswick. In 1984 and 1985, students and faculty called upon your body to divest from corporations doing business in Apartheid South Africa. The BOG acceded to that demand, making Rutgers the first public university to divest (a fact of which it is now proud). More recently, students and faculty have rallied for immigrants’ rights and against Donald Trump’s Muslim Ban. In the last instance, on 31 January 2017, President Robert Barchi spoke at the event and commended its organizers. In each one of these cases, peaceful and legal protestors obstructed public thoroughfares. Indeed, their actions would not have been successful otherwise. On 31 January, more than 100 Muslim students prayed on College Avenue—a blockage of traffic that gained national media attention and contributed to the suspension of the Muslim Ban.

Now, you have moved to repress and punish such non-violent and law-abiding forms of political and religious expression. The new Disruption Policy warns that: “Faculty, students, and all other personnel who intentionally act to impair, or obstruct the orderly conduct, processes, and functions of the University may be subject to appropriate disciplinary action by University authorities.” The policy further lists infractions that include: “obstruct[ing] vehicular, bicycle, pedestrian, or other traffic” and “obstruct[ing] entrances or exits to buildings or driveways.”

Such prohibitions will effectively silence expression. No large space on any of our three campuses is both central enough to attract attention and marginal enough not to interrupt people’s passage. You seem to imagine that Rutgers students might want to Take Back the Night or celebrate Earth Day by massing in the Gobi Desert.

At a deeper level, the new policy misconstrues the function of public spaces and public life at Rutgers altogether. Voorhees Mall has hosted Commencement ceremonies, Rutgers Day, and political protests. All of these activities constitute “functions” of the University. Yet the new policy suggests that open-air gatherings interrupt some true purpose of Rutgers. They do not, and you have misapprehended the multiplex quality of

learning, collegiality, and the student experience. Your ban seeks to reduce the public square—an essential quality of any educational institution—to nothing more than a transit corridor.

Finally, the timing of this decision is most unfortunate. Coming after five months of local and national protest against Trump's election, the new policy seeks to gag dissent. Your actions, thereby, lend implicit support to Trump's agenda. The swiftness of your response—undertaken, as I wrote, without consultation—also raises suspicions of partisanship within the Board. At the very least, the Board of Governors cast the Administration of Rutgers as a political player rather than as the neutral facilitator of ideas.

We are proud to work at a university festooned with banners celebrating Paul Robeson. We celebrate his legacy as an advocate of mass, disruptive dissent against inequality. Surely, you understand this too: you made Martin Luther King Day a university holiday. As a matter of principle, therefore, I urge you to rescind the policy revisions of 6 April at your next opportunity, that is, at the Board of Governors meeting on 15 June 2017.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "David M. Hughes". The signature is stylized and somewhat cursive, with a large initial "D" and "H".

David M. Hughes, President