

November 17, 2017

The Honorable Pete Ricketts
Governor of Nebraska
Lincoln, NE 68509-4848

The Honorable Jim Scheer
Speaker of the Nebraska Legislature
Lincoln, NE 68509-4604

Dear Governor Ricketts and Speaker Scheer:

The University of Nebraska has produced the enclosed emails in response to records requests we have received regarding the August 25 incident at UNL in which a student was mistreated by a graduate teaching assistant. These documents will be made public soon and I wanted you to receive them from me directly rather than hear about them from another source. You will note that I have copied the Nebraska Legislature in an attempt to be as transparent as possible.

I am surprised and embarrassed by what we found in the documents. Some of the emails reflect unprofessional behavior by our employees and I apologize. I want to let you know what we are doing about this—both in the short-term regarding the August 25 incident and our long-term plan to address important issues related to freedom of speech and inclusiveness on our campuses.

First of all, the teaching assistant involved in the August 25 incident will not be teaching at the University of Nebraska.

One of the attached emails, from a former UNL administrator, includes the statement that she is worried the campus is not safe for conservative students. Her full explanation to Chancellor Green and Executive Vice Chancellor Plowman about this email is enclosed. In her three-plus decades at UNL, she never worried that a student was physically unsafe because of their political views. She should have been clear that she was talking about the “safety of ideas,” and she regrets that.

For my part, Chancellor Green and I have met with hundreds of students, of many backgrounds and beliefs, and not one identifying as conservative has told us they felt threatened. UNL has a reporting line that allows any member of the campus community to report incidents, anonymously if they wish. No student identifying as conservative has filed a report.

Nonetheless, I know there are concerns about bias on our campuses. We have heard from a number of Nebraskans in recent months who are asking whether their university is welcoming toward all. I take these questions seriously. Our 53,000 students are too important not to investigate when we are made aware of concerns regarding our climate.

Therefore, I have taken the following steps:

1. Some of the other enclosed emails reflect serious errors in judgment. We are holding employees accountable.

2. Chancellor Green has directed Executive Vice Chancellor Plowman to develop a plan to ensure that no inappropriate political bias exists in our classrooms or anywhere on campus. The plan will build on work UNL is already doing to reiterate to students the importance of open conversation that respects each others' differences, like the recent "Husker Dialogues" listening sessions that took place on campus.
3. I am having conversations with a range of stakeholders, including students, faculty and staff, and external constituents, about matters related to free speech. I am asking them to carefully review our existing policies and give me their candid advice. One key deliverable is a set of recommendations to be brought to the Board of Regents in January for improved clarity and consistency in our policies. Once these are drafted, I will welcome your input.
4. I am engaging Gallup to conduct an assessment of the campus environment for students, faculty, and staff of diverse political backgrounds. Gallup will assess all four NU campuses. We will develop an action plan for any weaknesses identified in the survey.
5. I directed Chancellor Green to write to all UNL students to remind them of our commitment to free speech and provide them with specific options for recourse if they feel they have been treated unfairly. He has done so.

Balancing our vigorous defense of free speech with our standards for tolerance and respectful treatment of others can bring challenges, as we—and universities around the country—are finding. But we are going to keep having these conversations, because the results—a campus where every individual feels welcomed, respected, and heard—are worth it.

I welcome your advice moving forward on how the University can do the best possible job of serving all Nebraskans. We have work ahead, but as you have said, Nebraska can be a model for how to have robust, respectful, productive dialogue that makes us all stronger. Together, we can continue to advance your goal to grow this state and build the future we want for our students and citizens.

Please feel free to contact me anytime with questions. Thank you for all you do for Nebraska.

Sincerely,



Hank M. Bounds
President

Enclosures

cc: Nebraska Legislature

Donde Plowman

From: Weissinger, Ellen [REDACTED] >
Sent: Thursday, August 31, 2017 7:58 AM
To: Donde Plowman
Subject: Re: Voicemail referencing Turning Point USA Incident

Categories: Yellow Category

Sure

On Aug 31, 2017 7:46 AM, "Donde Plowman" <dplowman2@unl.edu> wrote:

Agreed. Hal D met with the student, gave two interviews on radio demanding action. All elevated to Hank now.....Need your advice. No damn time. Maybe this weekend?

Sent from my iPhone

On Aug 31, 2017, at 7:42 AM, Weissinger, Ellen [REDACTED] > wrote:

This will pass. But the real issue is that we've got to do more to advance civility on campus. And frankly campuses have to become more tolerant and welcoming to conservative students and faculty. This has worried me for years. I don't think it is " safe" to be conservative on our campus. Too many faculty espouse their personal political views as gospel in classes where there views have no relevance.

Let me know if an emeritus Senior vice Chancellor can help as you unfold this.

On Aug 31, 2017 6:35 AM, "Donde Plowman" <dplowman2@unl.edu> wrote:

Thanks for your advice. [REDACTED]

This is what we are dealing with now. Very ugly.

<image001.jpg>

<image002.png>

From: Danielle McReil

Sent: Wednesday, August 30, 2017 8:40 AM

To: Ronnie Green <rgreen@nebraska.edu>; Donde Plowman <dplowman2@unl.edu>; Ann Reese <areese2@unl.edu>; Teresa Paulsen <teresa.paulsen@unl.edu>; Steve Smith <ssmith13@unl.edu>; Owen Yardley <oyardley2@unl.edu>; Lori Brandl <lbrandl7@unl.edu>

Subject: Voicemail referencing Turning Point USA Incident

Hello everyone,

Last night, our main office line received 2 foul voicemails from the same man commenting on the Turning Point USA incident on campus. I wanted to share with you each of you in case he calls back. I did Google his phone number [REDACTED], and it looks like it is [REDACTED] : [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Please, let me know if there is anything specific we do in these types of situations.
Danielle



Danielle McReil

Events and Outreach Coordinator

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Donde Plowman

From: Teresa Paulsen
Sent: Thursday, August 31, 2017 3:20 PM
To: Steve Smith; Donde Plowman; Ronnie Green
Subject: RE: Ruggles story --

Expires: Wednesday, November 29, 2017 12:00 AM

Categories: Yellow Category

Good point. At the very least we should push harder on stories for them not related to this. Hurricane response is not particularly news worthy without an angle, but maybe we can devise one. What other topics are the newsrooms sitting around talking about that we could take advantage of?

From: Steve Smith
Sent: Thursday, August 31, 2017 2:47 PM
To: Teresa Paulsen <teresa.paulsen@unl.edu>; Donde Plowman <dplowman2@unl.edu>; Ronnie Green <rgreen@unl.edu>
Subject: Re: Ruggles story --

Sorry to be the bearer of bad news. Fair to assume the story will run during the long holiday weekend. I've also spoken to Aaron Sanderford, an editorial writer for the OWH, who had queried me about the "free-speech zone" misconception.

Early next week, we might consider more aggressive counter-measures. I've worked this week to try to soften some of the more inflammatory aspects of the mainstream stories, but we may do well, for example, to have a surrogate(s) submit op-eds to the OWH and LIS to start peeling away at the right wing's central narrative that has unfortunately been parroted by the mainstream media. TPUSA is continuing to keep things inflamed with a story every day on its website regarding "HuskerGate," but that kind of choir-preaching stuff is generally containable. It's more concerning if Ruggles and Dunker keep repeating the narrative.

Steve

From: Teresa Paulsen <teresa.paulsen@unl.edu>
Date: Thursday, August 31, 2017 at 2:14 PM
To: Donde Plowman <dplowman2@unl.edu>, ssmith13 <:ssmith13@unl.edu>, Ronnie Green <rgreen@unl.edu>
Subject: RE: Ruggles story --

I didn't know about it. Thanks for the heads up.

From: Donde Plowman
Sent: Thursday, August 31, 2017 2:11 PM
To: Steve Smith <:ssmith13@unl.edu>; Teresa Paulsen <teresa.paulsen@unl.edu>; Ronnie Green <rgreen@unl.edu>
Subject: RE: Ruggles story --

Great.....just when it felt like the story was losing some steam.

Donde



Donde Plowman
Executive Vice Chancellor & Chief Academic Officer
University of Nebraska-Lincoln
@DondePlowman

Excellence. Community. Impact.

From: Steve Smith

Sent: Thursday, August 31, 2017 2:09 PM

To: Teresa Paulsen <teresa.paulsen@unl.edu>; Ronnie Green <rgreen@unl.edu>; Donde Plowman <dplowman2@unl.edu>

Subject: Ruggles story --

FYI – Hearing from friends at UNMC that Rick Ruggles is writing a thumbsucker based on the Friday incident, about how tough it is to retain state support in a red state; then, throwing something like this on top of it, how much tougher it becomes. Sounds dreadful. UNMC declined to participate in the story.

Maybe this is something you've been asked about already. Maybe not. But figured I'd be safe and make sure we all knew this was coming.

S.



Steve Smith

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From: Ellen Weissinger

Sent: Friday, November 17, 2017 7:20 AM

To: Ronnie Green <rgreen@unl.edu>; Donde Plowman <dplowman2@unl.edu>

Subject: civility

Dear Ronnie and Donde,

I've heard that my note to Donde of a few weeks ago has caused some confusion, and maybe some consternation. Let me try to explain my e-mail. When I wrote to Donde in August, I was offering support about UNL's response to the unfortunate incident in which an undergraduate student was confronted by other members of the campus community. And I was trying to be reassuring about the terrible threatening voice mails that had been received in her office. I told her "this too shall pass." She responded that she agreed.

I went on to offer personal opinions about broader issues that I had mulled over often during my faculty and administrative career. I probably shouldn't have voiced my personal two cents worth in that e-mail, in great part because I know that Donde has a different and more current understanding of these issues. But also because I was writing in a very emotional moment that didn't lend itself to nuanced sentences.

To be honest, that day I was recalling the feeling of advocacy and protectiveness I felt about students and faculty during my administrative career. It has always been the chief academic officer's job to "worry" about whether every member of the campus community can speak their mind. During my administrative career, I did worry that conservative students might feel less welcomed about expressing their view points. I worried about international students and first-generation students, too. Maybe most of all I worried about students involved in the Black Lives Matter movement. I always felt that it was my job to do what I could to assure that our campus was a place where all viewpoints were drawn into the conversation and considered. In a meritocracy of ideas, everyone needs a chance to talk and every idea needs a fair chance to win the day. As the world around us becomes more polarized, universities need to work even harder to foster open and civil discourse. That principle is a centerpiece of my personal vision for all campuses.

Don't get me wrong - in the 31 years I was a faculty member at UNL, I never once worried that any student was physically unsafe because of their political or social or intellectual perspectives. "Safety" in an academic community is about feeling invited to express your argument. Really effective faculty members create classrooms and labs and studios in which that invitation is at the forefront. There are a small number of faculty members on any campus who don't share that vision of college teaching. Even one is too many for me.

The current divisiveness of our national conversation creates a positive reason for campuses to focus on rational and civil discourse. And it looks to me like UNL is leading the way. I have seen already how much good has come from our campus conversation over the last few weeks. I'm proud of both of you, and the faculty and staff, for your thoughtful responses. I'll do whatever I can to support you both as you continue this process. I hope the confusion about my e-mail isn't a distraction as you move forward. I certainly could have expressed my strongly held personal opinions more thoughtfully that day.

Best,

Ellen