

From: James Wagner, President
Sent: Wednesday, April 27, 2011 8:41 AM
To: All-Emory@emory.edu
Subject: To the Emory Community

Dear Emory Community,

In the wake of the arrest of four Emory students and three students from other universities representing Students and Workers in Solidarity (SWS) on Monday evening, I write out of concern for the spirit of community that has long engaged Emory--a spirit of inquiry after the truth, determination to act on ethical principles, and respect for human dignity and diversity. Above all it is a spirit that treasures academic freedom (including the freedom to dissent) combined with respect for the rights of all members in our community.

Of all the actions that I have authorized in my professional life, the decision to have students removed from tents in the Quadrangle was among the most difficult. No one involved in the events of Monday evening could have felt that the incident was anything but disturbing. On the other hand, for the ninety minutes that preceded the arrests and throughout the rest of the evening, the administrators, campus services staff, and police officers who talked with the students, who first asked for their cooperation, and, in the end, removed them and their tents from the Quadrangle behaved with commendable restraint, respect, and professionalism.

Given these events and the incomplete and sometimes inaccurate information circulating about them, I feel compelled to share with you what transpired. The student group had requested use of the Quadrangle to hold a rally for five hours on the afternoon of April 20. They had followed procedures required of any members of the Emory community wishing to use the Quad for organized purposes, and they had been instructed on and acknowledged the guidelines to be followed regarding use of tents, tables, amplification, and other matters. Many of these guidelines are in place in order to respect the academic classes and administrative activities carried out around the Quadrangle.

The students gathered on April 20 to continue demanding the termination of Emory's contract with Sodexo, the University's food service contractor. I had responded to that demand the previous day in a letter available at <http://shared.web.emory.edu/emory/news/releases/2011/04/emory-statement-on-food-service-issue.html>.

During that afternoon of the 20th, some two dozen students, along with members of the Atlanta community, entered the Administration Building and sat in the fourth floor hallway and board room until the building was locked electronically for the evening, as it is at 6:30 pm on every work day. Despite the disruption caused by the group's presence during more than five hours, staff members on the hallway behaved courteously as they went about their work. At 6:30, the students were informed by a member of the University cabinet that the building was now closed, and that only authorized persons were permitted within; the students were asked to leave. After two repeated requests over some twenty minutes, those who remained were informed that Emory Police would be called to advise them of the consequences of trespassing. When the police arrived, they made three further requests, at intervals, for the students to leave. Only when arrest teams arrived, at 8 pm, did the students gather their things and leave, to congregate on the Quadrangle.

The group set up tents, tables, chairs, and other gear on the Quadrangle last Wednesday night, and some apparently camped out over the weekend. They did not follow the usual procedures for use of the Quad, and they had declared their intention of not leaving unless Emory terminated its contract with Sodexo. In the meantime, on Monday morning, preliminary work to set up for Commencement had begun, and the students' presence would mean disruption of the University's regular business in preparing for the end of the academic year and honoring our graduates.

Following the protocol used the previous Wednesday, the students were given every invitation on Monday evening to move their tents and other belongings on their own. A little after 6:30 pm, they were told that they were in violation of the policy that they had previously received when they made their reservation for use of the Quad on April 20 (they were given another copy at 6:30), and were told to leave. It was not until later, after repeated requests for them to leave their tents and dismantle them, as well as declarations that they would be arrested if they did not, that police approached them individually, informed each that it was their choice to leave their tents or risk arrest, and then, at around 8 pm, arrested those who elected not to comply. This was a clear choice on the part of the students who determined to remain in the last tent. In view of preparations for graduation that were under way, the situation needed to be resolved.

Although public arrest as a consequence of civil disobedience has been used historically to raise awareness about many causes, few can be happy about this outcome. Still, it must be clear that at no time was the group's ability to state its message put at risk. No censorship was involved, no squelching of the claims they wanted to put before the public. Indeed, through many editorials in the *Emory Wheel*, through public forums and information sessions, and in rallies of various kinds, the message of SWS has had a full, open, and public hearing. Most recently, of course, the students were given extraordinary liberty to occupy one end of the Quad for nearly five days. At least ten times over the past year administrators have met with SWS representatives in dialogue; I myself have met with them twice, most recently last Thursday for an hour.

What is at stake is the right of members of our academic community to hear from each other, determine the validity of what they hear, and then respond in a way that guarantees that their own response will be respected. That right to come to a conclusion and live by it, even when differences cannot be fully resolved, is violated when one side in an argument insists that only its perspective is correct, and that it is worth disrupting the life of the community in an attempt for its perspective to win out. That represents its own form of coercion, which shouts down every reasonable counter-argument rather than allowing room for either debate or the resolution of debate--even if the resolution is to agree to disagree. Those who employ such coercive practices deny to others the privileges of engagement in the academic community and risk the consequences of losing those privileges for themselves.

This has been an unfortunate moment in the life of Emory. It is one, however, that we can learn from as we all continue to seek to act ethically, responsibly, and appropriately in behalf of our community. Those values remain of utmost importance to me and to the entire University.

Sincerely,
Jim Wagner