

NEWS

FIRE criticizes honor

society

by Benjamin Jones

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The Philadelphia-based Foundation for Individual Rights in Education criticized the honor society Phi Beta Kappa Tuesday, citing the society's inconsistent policies regarding freedom of expression.

In a nine-page letter, FIRE program director Samantha Harris referenced several possible constitutional free-speech violations by seven universities in which Phi Beta Kappa chapters are present.

"Nearly all of Phi Beta Kappa's member institutions maintain speech codes of some kind, many of them unconstitutional or an unlawful violation of contractual promises made to students and faculty," Harris said in the letter. "Policies such as [these] pose a real and imminent threat to academic freedom at these and other Phi Beta Kappa member institutions."

Phi Beta Kappa first captured FIRE's attention with its denial of a George Mason University group's chapter application.

According to Phi Beta Kappa Director of Public Relations Kelly Gerald, the controversy started when a professor at the university made comments claiming the denial was a result of the university not allowing Michael Moore, a controversial left-wing filmmaker, to speak on campus.

Phi Beta Kappa has denied its decision to reject George Mason's chapter application was influenced only because Michael Moore was not accepted to lecture on campus.

It asserts its decision was based on a number of factors and that it cannot accept every application it receives.

"The society continues to be haunted by accusations that the chapter at George Mason University was declined because of the decision to cancel Michael Moore's appearance there," Gerald said.

Phi Beta Kappa will not release the reasons for its decision, saying that would be "unethical."

Phi Beta Kappa maintains that it remains committed to free speech.

"Freedom of expression and freedom of inquiry are essential values in Phi Beta Kappa," John Churchill, secretary of the society, said. "They are part of our fundamental commitment as an institution champion of liberal arts and sciences."

While Phi Beta Kappa asserts it is committed to promoting free speech, it does not see itself as responsible for the policies of institutions in which it has chapters.

"Phi Beta Kappa does not [seek] to police and control the activities and policies of institutions where chapters are located," Churchill said. "Obviously, we trust that our presence will be a constructive factor at the local chapters at the colleges and universities."

Churchill does not believe this letter will influence Phi Beta Kappa policy, but said he will take it into

consideration.

“I certainly would not be happy to be understood as saying that Phi Beta Kappa doesn’t take these issues seriously,” he said. “We do, but taking them seriously is a different matter from attempting to construct a response to every occasion that may arise locally or around the country.”

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