

Public Comment Speech BOG – June 28

Good morning members of the Board of Governors. My name is Christina Drake and I am a Mechanical Engineering professor and the past faculty trustee at Florida Poly. Today I am speaking on behalf of the United Faculty of Florida.

As a state university, we have our foremost obligations to provide education and perform research. Also, as a public institution, we have an obligation as public servants to maintain the public trust through transparency and compliance, as well as through our state ethics mandate. Your function as the governing body of the SUS is why I am here to comment and request accountability.

Many of the faculty and academic support staff within Florida Poly have grave concerns over a series of 8 employee terminations that have occurred since the end of the spring semester. These terminations have added to a toxic work environment within the university and appears aimed at suppressing potential whistleblower complaints as well as eliminating key positions within the university because those positions belong within our union. We are now a university without our sole librarian, and also a university, on a remote campus, without a mental health counselor, as required by state regulation. In the official termination letters, several were told that we are a “growing university” and that is why it was necessary to eliminate these key academic support positions. I’m sure we are now the first university in the United States to not have a dedicated librarian.

The hostile manner with which these terminations were done add to the chilled environment of the university. Faculty and staff were not made aware of these terminations until yesterday. Supposedly, these were done as an organizational change though many of these “new” positions needed to fill these eliminated positions have no job listings on our website. These key changes were not brought to the faculty senate or the United Faculty of Florida, and our board was emailed about these changes yesterday. And while none of these employees were terminated for performance or disciplinary reasons, they were abruptly informed of their termination and escorted off campus, even though we are state owned and public property. In the case of our mental health counselor, she had contacted her supervisor to find out what the purpose of the meeting was where she was laid off. In an email exchange, our counselor was told it was a “check in” meeting and to provide a list of items to cover. In an ethical and properly functioning organization, there would be no need for such deceit. The termination was so abrupt there was no time or ability for the counselor to put into place a continuity of care for her patients, including those for which there is a concern for suicide.

Many of these terminations also appear aimed at staff who have spoken up about safety problems, legal and ethical issues, and other problems plaguing the university. An anonymous letter written to the university’s Board of Trustees, leveling several complaints against the university’s administration, resulted in an investigation that substantiated roughly half of the claims. These included raises for top administrators of 20-29% despite the university’s foundation requesting a write off of debt. Randy Avent, in a Lakeland Ledger article is quoted as

saying "Right now, my concerns are more around the group responsible for the letter." Yet despite these top raises for our administration, Randy Avent in an email stated that elimination of these positions was done for fiduciary reasons to strengthen education and research.

Many of these actions raise concerns about the true motivations behind these terminations. It is dangerous in an educational setting, when the administration retaliates against faculty and staff who bring forth concerns, in good faith, as a part of their job function. We have a responsibility to the public to do so. If we do not allow employees to speak up on issues, we run the risk of a student being injured in one of our labs, a student being sexually harassed (or worse), or a student committing suicide from inadequate mental health support and continuity.

Thank you for your time this morning.