10-1-2011

Letter to (Un)Occupy Albuquerque

David Schmidly

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When I first addressed the University community in October of 2007, I noted that “a great University should never be a quiet and peaceful place.” Rather, I believe that it should “be alive with the vigorous exchange of ideas strongly held and passionately debated.”

“But it should – it must – be a place where we listen to one another.”

I was reminded of this when, Wednesday afternoon, I met with members of (Un)Occupy New Mexico in my office, including Sebastian Pais, a UNM alumnus who had undertaken a hunger strike.

I was encouraged by our meeting, enjoyed it and learned from it. It was a productive and respectful exchange of views – one in which, as I said 5 years ago, both sides expressed themselves vigorously and listened respectfully in a civil exchange.

I told the group that as an academic, a scientist and a biologist, I cherish the free exchange of ideas, tested by vigorous debate and questioning. That’s what great universities are for.

Our best hope in this challenging and difficult time is for men and women of goodwill to reason together in an atmosphere of mutual respect, and there is no better place for it than a public University like UNM.

In order for us to facilitate University-wide discussion on a diverse campus such as ours, everybody has to play by the same rules. As long as (Un)Occupy New Mexico respects the policies we have established to assure the freedoms of all members of the UNM community, I told them, they are welcome here.

I have responsibility to protect the University itself, its students, faculty and staff – and to fulfill our principal mission of giving every member of the faculty and student the opportunity for undisturbed research and a learning experience worthy of a great University.

UNM maintains an authorized police staff of 36 officers who must protect almost 29,000 students and over 16,000 faculty and staff. Our officers must patrol a 600-acre campus with over 300 buildings including a major urban hospital and significant research facilities.

In light of our limitations, I’m especially grateful to the attorneys at the American Civil Liberties Union of New Mexico for helping us negotiate a reasonable middle ground that will provide a secure environment for (Un)Occupy Albuquerque in a way that balances the greater needs of the rest of the UNM community.

While we cannot permit camping on our grounds, we are happy to make space available to (Un)Occupy New Mexico at Yale Park, (just as we do any other group or point of view), according to a reasonable schedule of hours that has allowed both sides to find consensus. All personal property must be removed each night; we can’t protect it against theft, and our grounds and maintenance crews can’t work around it.

(Un)Occupy New Mexico’s signs, banners and other expressions of First Amendment rights are welcome, but must be removed at night along with temporary structures, tents and personal effects. We would obviously appreciate their exercising self-discipline with respect to noise, litter and recycling.

Food can’t be served, because the University could be held liable for safety and sanitary standards. This is consistent with what we’ve told other groups.

(Un)Occupy New Mexico is welcome to our University for as long as it wishes to honor our agreement, and you will have our full and earnest cooperation in renewing your scheduling requests on a week-to-week basis, for as long as you wish to remain here.

D. J. Scholz