

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Concerning the University of Massachusetts

Public higher education matters to me. As a native Midwesterner, I grew up knowing my state university was the best school in Kansas. Now that I am in Massachusetts, I have supported the University of Massachusetts and watched with pride as it produced a Nobel Prize winner as well as champion sports teams. At the same time it continues to educate new generations of students at the Amherst flagship campus.

Its reputation continues to grow, though has spent years in the shadow of our state's private academic bastions of Harvard and MIT. That's why I was concerned to read a recent Associated Press story about our university. It stated that a chaplain e-mailed students saying how important it is to elect Barack Obama president. He went on to inform them that a certain instructor would approve two credit hours to students if they would become campaign volunteers for the Obama campaign in New Hampshire.

At some level, this story simply confirms the stereotype of academia as a bastion of liberalism. Additionally and more seriously, it exposes publicly a mindset among some members of the school that fails to recognize that it is inappropriate to use a tax-supported institution to support a candidate in a partisan election. Taxpayers are already reluctant to send money to the state. Reading this story feeds that reluctance.

The university has taken minimal action so far as I know, so I have written the following letter to the chancellor:

Dear Chancellor Holub:

I am writing in response to recent news accounts concerning comments made by a chaplain at UMass Amherst. According to those accounts the chaplain, Ken Higgins, told students by e-mail that a faculty member would grant them two hours of university credit for independent study in return for working as campaign volunteers for the presidential campaign of Senator Obama.

Although the chaplain is identified in newspapers, no instructor has been identified as the source of the offer. In response to publicity of the e-mail, the university has stated that such credit will not be given. I have seen no documentation that students who may have sought that independent study credit before it became public have not taken advantage of the offer.

The news reports paint our university throughout the country as a partisan entity, and I believe the administration owes Massachusetts taxpayers assurance that the perpetrators have faced disciplinary or other administrative sanctions. The chaplain uses a UMass e-mail account. If chaplains serve with university approval, that approval should be removed from Ken Higgins. The identity of the instructor should not be shielded. Prospective students in his or her courses are entitled to know of the improper partisan activities.

I am aware of no comment from the University concerning professional consequences to the chaplain or the unnamed instructor. Please inform me of the actions you have taken concerning the two individuals.

I will let you know what I hear from Chancellor Holub.