

December 2, 2015

SGA President Jay Todd Richey Testimony on Behalf of John Winstead

Since I became aware of this situation, my views have been consistent: I strongly disagree with the Judicial Council's decision to investigate Senator John Winstead and wholeheartedly support his right to criticize the WKU administration for their actions. Our SGA members should be free to express their dissent concerning President Ransdell as they please without being threatened with censure.

When I first heard that the Judicial Council decided to investigate John over his “Impeach Gary Ransdell” sign and satirical Facebook profile picture, I immediately realized that SGA – an institution that I love and am proud to lead – would be caricatured as an organization that seeks to curtail freedom of speech and quell dissent against President Ransdell. No matter the intent of why the Judicial Council decided to do this, the perceptions of SGA have been overwhelmingly negative. To those students whose view of SGA has been darkened by this unfortunate instance, I urge you to reconsider. It is of paramount importance in my life right now to enhance SGA as an institution that works every day to make your college experience better, and I will never stop trying. It is for that reason that I testify in support of John today.

As Student Body President, I have two roles in this situation. On the one hand, I am bound to uphold the authority of the Judicial Council to conduct this investigation, as is their authority under our Constitution and Bylaws. By their own choice, the Judicial Council decided to investigate whether or not the actions specified earlier were professional and appropriate for an SGA member. I want to be very clear: I know all of these justices and appointed several of them. They are not a Gary Ransdell fan club by any means, and from conversations I have had with several of the justices, it has become clear to me that they did not foresee this becoming a major issue because they believed they were simply examining what his allegedly inappropriate conduct actually was. While I strongly believe that this investigation is unnecessary, I believe its motives were well-intentioned. In other words, determining what is professional behavior by a senator was the intention, but the perception is that a member of SGA is being put on trial for dissenting against President Ransdell. Much like the national model of government, the Judicial Council is its own branch of student government and acts independently of the actions of both the Senate and the Executive branches. They have the authority to respond to student concerns, conduct this investigation, and even censure an SGA member if the results of the investigation lead them to do so, regardless if I agree with it or not.

On the other hand, I, as president, lead the Executive branch and have the power to appoint senators, also with the confirmation of the Senate. In fact, I appointed John earlier this year. I knew him from our mutual involvement in local activist efforts and was deeply impressed with both his resume and intellect. I am well aware of John's activism on behalf of marginalized groups on campus, his Marxist-themed sense of humor, and his strong opposition to President Ransdell, and I was aware of that when I appointed him. To be honest, I wish we had more senators who weren't afraid to call out members of the WKU administration for their actions when it's merited. While I am not by any means calling for the impeachment of President

Ransdell, that does not eclipse my passionate belief that our members should be able to express views critical of the administration when they believe it is warranted. I, myself, have criticized the actions of President Ransdell on several issues and believe that any SGA member should have that same right.

Much of the Judicial Council's view on this seems to be that while they believe that John absolutely has the right to criticize President Ransdell, they are investigating whether his conduct in doing so was inappropriate. While I personally wouldn't have opted for such means to express my views, John did, and I have no problem with that. He hasn't undermined SGA. He hasn't committed a crime. And he hasn't done anything to warrant curtailing his right to be a free-thinking and outspoken member of the Student Senate. In the 18th century – and I'm sure John, as a philosophy major, will appreciate this – another provocative critic of authority named Voltaire may or may not have said, "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it."

The WKU Student Government Association is designed for two reasons: to represent the voice of the student body and to hold the WKU administration, including President Ransdell, accountable for their actions. This is a serious matter and I hope today we can uphold the values of WKU SGA. With that, I urge the Judicial Council to not censure John Winstead.

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