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UC Student Association Responds to UC President Napolitano's Dismissive Remark of Student Public Comment

Students demand the University respect student public comment as a democratic right

(Oakland CA) The comments made by President Napolitano in an unguarded moment caught on camera at the University of California Regents meeting Wednesday, March 18th, underline a disturbing disconnect with the students she serves. The president remarked to the Chair of the Board of Regents that they should depart the room during public comment because they “didn’t have to listen to this crap” as protesters chanted and denounced potential tuition hikes and little movement on community benefit agreement for the future Richmond campus. To make their point, a group of the protesters pulled their clothes off down to their underwear, showing the words “Student Debt” written on their bodies. In response, UC police, in full riot gear, arranged themselves in a threatening show of force, facing the protesters, who left peaceably. President Napolitano, along with the majority of the UC Regents present, departed the room before public comment ended.

After placing a massive tuition increase on the table and ignoring the rights of the Richmond community, The President has not offered an alternative opportunity for these students to discuss their grievances with her in a public space. On Thursday, President Napolitano apologized only for her use of a derogatory word, but did not apologize for the sentiment expressed that Regents did not need to be exposed to the students’ public comment.

“Her role as President has given her the opportunity to be a true champion for students and the future of public higher education, but the comments she made point to disrespect for public expression of the student interest,” said Jefferson Kuoch-Seng, President of the UC Student Association, “It takes a lot of courage to speak in public in front of figures of authority, and being vulnerable about concerns. To hear this come from the President of the University makes it even more challenging for students to come forward to share their thoughts with university administration, especially when it is accompanied by an intimidating police presence.”

As a result, students do not see President Napolitano truly championing free speech – in all its forms – as a valued feature of university life and measure of free society. Students should be able to demonstrate their concern peacefully – or noisily. Students need to hear a public apology that goes beyond the brief one made on Thursday. The students who sacrifice their time and money to come and speak to the Regents in San Francisco, away from their jobs, commitments and classes, deserve better.

About the University of California Student Association

The University of California Student Association is the official voice of over 240,000 undergraduate, graduate, and professional students from the eleven UC campuses. It is our mission to advocate on behalf of current and future students for the accessibility, affordability, and quality of the University of California system.

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