



September 18, 2020

Lindsie Rank, Program Officer  
Individual Rights Defense Program  
The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education  
510 Walnut Street, Suite 1250  
Philadelphia, PA 19106

Dear Ms. Rank:

The Office of the President forwarded your letter of September 11 to me and asked me to respond. The University of Virginia has been a “green light” institution since FIRE awarded us that rating in October 2010 (at that time one of only 13 such schools in the United States), and we take seriously our commitment to providing students, faculty and staff the freedom to express themselves on matters of importance.

You have asked us to clarify the policy of Housing and Residence Life with respect to the right of individual student staff members (Resident Advisors) to speak to the media on matters of concern. There is no “categorical prohibition against speaking to the media” for our student staff. Rather, the University requires Resident Advisors to refer media requests for comment on behalf of the program to the student co-chairs of the program, who are authorized to speak as official representatives of the program. Resident Advisors are free to speak with the media so long as they make clear they are doing so in their individual capacity. On September 6, prior to our receipt of your letter to President Ryan, a professional staff member in HRL responded to a Resident Assistant seeking clarity, explaining that the Resident Advisor was free to speak in “a situation in which you will not be representing the Resident Staff program, but sharing your personal views.” This has been our position for many years.

In terms of your request for training materials or documents, the current Resident Staff program agreement states, in pertinent part: “The Chair(s) of the Resident Staff program represents Resident Staff to the University, the press, and the public. Any inquiries by the press or other media outlets should be referred to the Chair(s).” As noted, this directive pertains to media inquiries seeking the official position or comment of the program. However, to remove any possible misunderstanding, we will revise this language to state: “The Chairs of the Resident Staff program represent Resident Staff to the University, the press, and the public. Any inquiries by the press or other media outlets seeking a statement by, or the official position of, the Resident Staff program should be referred to the Chairs. Individual Resident Staff members may speak to the media or public in their individual capacities, making clear they are not speaking on behalf of or for the program.”

I trust this is responsive to your questions and hopefully alleviates your concerns. We are always open to discussion with you on any matters of interest.

Sincerely,



Allen W. Groves  
University Dean of Students

cc: James E. Ryan, President  
Gay Perez, Executive Director, Housing and Residence Life