



Upholding Campus Order: A Tale of Three UNC Chancellors

By Maggie Horzempa

The role of the University Chancellor extends beyond administrative duties. The Chancellor plays a vital role in shaping the strategic direction, reputation, and success of the university, both internally and externally. The Chancellor is also entrusted with safeguarding the values of free speech and peaceful assembly while ensuring campus safety: all in relation to recent theatrics surrounding chanting, protesting, counter-protesting, encampment building, and vandalism. The actions—or inactions—of three UNC chancellors—Carol Folt, Kevin Guskiewicz, and Lee Roberts—amidst protests showcase the staunch differences in their ability to maintain order, recognize the rule of law, and respect their students’ fundamental rights to assembly.

During Carol Folt's tenure, the campus was embroiled in controversy over the campus’ Confederate statue, [Silent Sam](#). Tensions peaked when protestors forcibly toppled the statue on [August 20, 2018](#), following the escalation of protests and even vandalism, including an incident where a graduate student defaced the statue with her own blood and red ink in [April 2018](#), resulting in criminal charges. Folt's response to this unrest was criticized for its lack of decisive action. [Text messages](#) were later released in which Folt supposedly gave Chapel Hill Police the order to “stand down” and not engage with the protestors. In addition, it took her over ten days to release a [statement](#) after the statue fell, which seemed more focused on deflecting attention and addressing the statue's racist history rather than addressing campus security issues. Her resignation announcement and order to remove the remaining pedestal of Silent Sam on

[January 14, 2019](#), further fueled perceptions that she was avoiding the campus's problems and instead pacifying the anti-Silent Sam protestors.

Subsequently, Kevin Guskiewicz became interim chancellor on [February 6, 2019](#), and officially became UNC's twelfth Chancellor about ten months later. His post began against the backdrop of the aftermath of the Silent Sam incidents, presenting a complex situation to navigate. However, it wasn't until October 2023 that another contentious issue arose on campus during Israeli-Palestinian conflict [protests](#), testing university leadership once again. Guskiewicz released a [statement](#) condemning the acts of terror in Israel by Hamas and offered resources to the Carolina community. A few paragraphs into his statement, he expressed his commitment to allow groups to express their opinions under the First Amendment without suppression and condemned the acts of violence which already took place on campus without hesitation. Arguably, his response lacked clarity, particularly in addressing individual acts of violence on campus, and also potentially overstepped UNC's commitment to institutional neutrality based in the [Kalven Report](#) by taking a stance on the particulars of the conflict in the Middle East.

During the protests, [clashes](#) erupted between UNC's Students for Justice in Palestine and pro-Israel students, resulting in an incident where a professor was pushed and had a drink thrown at him. The professor, not the aggressor, was escorted away from the scene, and questions arose regarding the handling of the situation and the accountability of those involved. Several months later, there has been no indication of disciplinary action taken against the student who assaulted the pro-Israel professor. Guskiewicz's leadership during this period was marked by a cautious approach, possibly reflecting a desire to balance the protection of free speech with the need to maintain campus safety and order. A small step in the right direction, but there was room for reflection and improvement in how to handle similar situations in the future.

In stark contrast, Lee Roberts, appointed UNC's interim chancellor on [December 15, 2023](#), has shown decisive leadership amid campus unrest. Facing a [major protest](#) four months in, he upheld order while respecting protesters' rights. When tensions peaked on [April 30](#), as students replaced the American flag with the Palestinian flag, Roberts [swiftly intervened](#), returning the American flag to its pole and signaling that while dissent is welcome, actions disrupting order and property won't be tolerated. In keeping with the First Amendment, Roberts had allowed these protests to continue for several days, provided the protestors took down their tents to comply with university policy. Roberts did not intervene until protesters once again constructed tents in violation of the code - another great example of his careful balancing of free speech and UNC policy.

Roberts' proactive approach stands out as a beacon of sound leadership amidst the tumultuous landscape of student activism. By directly addressing the breach of policy, he reinforced the principle that the exercise of free speech must be accompanied by responsibility and respect for institutional norms. In doing so, he struck a delicate balance between upholding the university's commitment to free expression and maintaining a conducive environment for learning and dialogue.

Folt, Guskiewicz, and Roberts' time at UNC exhibits the nuanced challenges university leaders face in balancing free speech and campus security. University leaders must understand that ensuring safety doesn't mean compromising free speech, but rather requires proactive reinforcement of conduct boundaries while respecting all community members' rights. Moreover, they are also confronted with the delicate task of balancing the rights of student protestors with those of the broader community. This dynamic arguably limits and shapes their actions, as they must carefully navigate the complex terrain of competing interests and perspectives within the university environment.

But through this all, it is clear that Lee Roberts showcases the transformative power of decisive leadership in safeguarding higher education values, actions which put UNC on the path for continued free speech success.

Maggie Horzempa is a 2019 graduate of UNC-Chapel Hill and a proud UNC AFSA board member. She is a lifelong free speech advocate who has provided commentary on a variety of subjects to outlets including Fox News, Washington Examiner, and Townhall.

Twitter: https://twitter.com/m_horzempa