

Risk Management Case Study: Free Expression

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Free Expression

Arkansas River College is located in Petit Jean, Arkansas, on the Arkansas River. Petit Jean is a rural farming community and the college attracts mostly regional residents, many of whom are first generation college students. In recent years, the student enrollment has expanded significantly under diversity recruiting initiatives championed by Ida Bates, the first black and first female president at ARC. In just over two years, the institution has grown from 1100 to 1600 students. In the same period, the number of students identifying as persons of color has grown from around 5% to over 18%, and well above the county population average of 12%.

On a beautiful October homecoming weekend, the campus art gallery hosted an exhibition of faculty and local community artists. Among the pieces exhibited was a sculpture crafted by a tenured full professor on campus, Nel Worthington. The piece entitled “CRT” featured a bronze bust of Martin Luther King with a bucket of white paint dumped over it.

A board member, Leo Dalton, upon visiting the exhibit complained to the museum curator and insisted that he take it off display immediately. Dalton was an ARC alumnus who had just finished serving in the Arkansas State Legislature for over a decade. He was well known on campus and in the community as a champion of higher education but a staunch conservative increasingly worried about the state of “wokeness” in Arkansas. He was among a group of state senators who had advocated for the banning of Critical Race Theory and discussions of “white privilege” in K-12 schools. He stated that one “should not be ashamed to be white” and that “our young students must not be taught to believe they are evil just because of their race.” Shaken by Dalton’s vehemence, the museum director removed the sculpture from its pedestal and called President Bates’s office. A student attending the exhibit filmed the removal of the sculpture and posted it on social media.

Response and Risk Management

Q1 Identify the Problem and First Steps Needed/Triage

Q2 Identify Stakeholders and Response Teams

Q3 Communicate a Plan

Q4 Get Feedback and Assess Results

Q5 Reflect on Preparations

Scenario Changes

1. President Bates immediately told the museum director to return the piece to its place in the exhibit, but by that time, the student video had spread and calls from students and parents flooded in. The next day, Bates received demands from black student groups to fire the museum director at the same time she received calls from alumni, several state legislators, and the governor to close the exhibit in its entirety.
2. Bates declared to the local press that she will meet with board members and consider the appropriate course of action that afternoon. In the meantime, she received a call from the director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art to discuss an educational collaboration.
3. You get news from the state police that a strange virus is quickly spreading and turning people into zombies.

Q&A Session



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